

Assessing the Impact of Brand Community Integration in Niche Sports: A League-Wide Examination of Online and Offline Community Members

Clinton Warren, Eastern Illinois University
Eric Brownlee, Gannon University

Marketing

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Soccer in North America is often considered a niche sport. Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) define niche sports as those that do not attract mainstream media attention or large scale live audiences, and Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, and Greenwell (2011) state the term “mainstream sports” generally refers to professional football, professional basketball, professional baseball, and potentially professional ice hockey, golf, and auto racing. Additionally, Greenhalgh, et al. (2011) found sport consumers identify MLS as a niche sport league. Despite recent growth in MLS attendance and the overall growth in popularity of soccer in the United States and Canada, the sport should still be defined as a niche sport in the American sporting lexicon. Furthermore, while MLS may be gradually moving toward mainstream status, consumption of lower division soccer is truly driven by a small sub-segment of sport consumers in North America.

A growing body of literature explores the concept of developing brand communities around specific product and service brands with the goal of focusing on an individual’s lifetime value to an organization rather than that person’s transactional worth (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). Brand communities are defined as non-geographically bound groups of people who admire a given brand and share in a structured set of social relationships (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Consumers of niche sports can be said to exhibit these behaviors.

The emergence of technology as a primary means of involvement in brand communities and the recognition that brand communities need not be geographically bound (McAlexander, et al., 2002) has created a specific area of interest within this body of literature examining the concept of spatial involvement with brand communities. Spatial involvement refers to the tendency of brand community members fitting on a continuum based on their physical and virtual participation with a brand (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). The relatively low cost of creating online, virtual areas for brand community members to integrate themselves with the organization could provide niche sport properties an opportunity to enhance brand loyalty without the need for significant publicity or a massive marketing budget. However, the concept of brand community has yet to be examined in a niche sport context. As a result of the importance of brand community integration and the emergence of online brand community participation, the purpose of this study is three-fold: (1) To determine if distinct spatial groups exist among brand community members of a niche sport. (2) To examine the relationship between spatial groups and brand community integration in a niche sport. (3) To examine the relationship between brand community integration and behavioral intentions between spatial groups of a niche sport.

The population of interest in this investigation is brand community members of the niche sport of soccer in North America. To access the population of interest an online survey was delivered via email to a minor professional soccer league’s consumer database. This database included brand community members of eight different clubs across the United States and Canada. In total, the survey link was sent to 2,256 unique email addresses resulting in 890 usable responses. This represents an approximate response rate of 39.5%. A questionnaire was developed from existing literature using scales that have previously shown validity and reliability in similar contexts. The spatial dimensions of physical involvement and virtual involvement defined by Devasagayam and Buff (2008) were each measured with 3-items. McAlexander, et al.’s (2002) brand community integration scale was adapted for use in a spectator sport setting and resulted in a total of fourteen unique items measuring the four dimensions of community integration. Specifically, product integration utilized a 3-item subscale, brand integration a 5-item subscale, company integration a 2-item subscale, and other spectators a 3-item subscale respectively. Finally, behavioral intentions were measured using a 3-item scale. The resulting questionnaire consisted of 23 items comprised of 7-point Likert scales anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” The following three steps were taken to analyze the data and address the three primary purposes of this study: k-means cluster analysis, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), and two multiple regression analyses.

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The k-means cluster analysis of spatial involvement revealed the feasibility of two distinct clusters for further examination. The first cluster was “online members” and included approximately 54.8% of the sample, while the second cluster was “offline members” and included approximately 45.2% of respondents. There were statistically significant differences between online members and offline members with respect to virtual ($p < .001$) and physical ($p < .001$) involvement with the brand community. The MANOVA supported the distinct classification of online and offline community members. Specifically, the main effect from the multivariate null hypothesis of equality of the means over the online and offline member clusters with respect to brand community integration indicated statistically significant differences [Wilks' $\lambda = .717$, $F(4, 885) = 87.519$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .283$]. The results of the univariate analysis lends further support to the differences in brand community integration between online and offline community members. Specifically, brand community integration through personal connections to the product, brand, and other community members indicated statistically significant differences ($p < .001$) and company ($p = .001$). Online members indicated higher levels of integration with the brand community among each point of integration. Results of the regression analysis indicate brand community integration is a significant predictor of behavioral intent to attend future games for online members ($p < .001$) and offline members ($p < .001$). Adjusted R² values indicated that among online brand community members, brand community integration predicted approximately 67.3% of the variance in behavioral intention to attend future games and approximately 73.0% among offline community members. Additionally, integration via the product ($t = 12.04$, $p < .001$), brand ($t = 3.90$, $p < .001$), company ($t = 3.13$, $p = .002$), and other members ($t = 2.52$, $p < .012$) were all significant predictors of behavioral intention to attend future games among online members. Among offline members, integration via the product ($t = 13.16$, $p < .001$), brand ($t = 3.185$, $p = .002$), and company ($t = 4.52$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of behavioral intention, while integration via other community members was not a significant variable.

This investigation provides niche sport marketers with initial evidence in support of the importance of facilitating brand community integration as a means of influencing intentions to attend future games. Additionally, this study suggests brand community members of niche sports can be distinctly grouped as either involved with the brand in an online or offline manner, and online involvement appears to be a more powerful predictor of community integration and future intention to attend games. The results of this study suggest niche sport marketers should focus their efforts on developing online brand community membership to enhance spectator attendance.