What can Green do for you? Examining the Impact of Societal Orientation on the Hearts and Minds of Fans

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Sport has long been recognized for its unique dichotomy as both an economic enterprise and a social institution (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). Recently, calls have come from prominent sport management scholars to rethink sport’s greater societal role (Chalip, 2006, Zeigler, 2007). A societal orientation, unlike the more common approach of gratifying a customer’s immediate needs and earning profit as a result, relates to the long-term impacts of goods and service provision on both individuals and society (Kang, 2004). Beyond the ethical and societal benefits, it has been posited that socially-oriented organizations possess more brand loyal consumers (Lachowetz & Gladden, 2002). Therefore, organizations need to examine strategies to enhance the image of their brand and loyalty among their consumers and adopting a societal orientation is one such strategy. Given the importance of spectatorship in the broader field of sport marketing, examining the societal orientation of sport brands and its impact on sport consumer attitudes and emotions is warranted.

It has been argued that the societal dimension of business practices for sport spectating brands may take on added importance due to the emotional connection of consumers to sport organizations (Walker & Kent, 2009). Furthermore, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) suggested that four unique factors in professional sport may enhance the importance and impact of societal initiatives on stakeholders: passion, economics, transparency, and stakeholder management. Of particular relevance in this study, passion and transparency may explain why adopting a societal orientation is important for sport organizations. Due to the intense passion and interest in the sport spectating product, it has been suggested that sport organizations’ societal practices may be more aptly communicated and received by their fans. The business practices of sport organizations are constantly under great scrutiny by a multitude of stakeholders (fans, media, community members, government). This transparency can be viewed as opportunity for professional sport organizations to “take the lead” on a number of important societal issues. Due to the passion for the product and transparency of business practices, it can be argued that adopting a societal orientation becomes increasingly important for sport organizations. To this point, empirical evidence regarding how a societal orientation impacts sport consumers’ thoughts and feelings regarding their favorite brand does not exist. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the impact of societal orientation on consumers’ thoughts and feelings toward their favorite brand.

Respondents (n=451) were intercepted by graduate students at a large southeastern university and asked to complete a questionnaire. The students approached community members in a variety of venues such as malls, workplaces and various locations around campus. Student questionnaire administrators were instructed to avoid sampling undergraduate students, collect from a variety of age groups and ensure an equitable mix of men and women. This sample ranged in age from 18 to 88, with a mean age of 33.6. Seventy-three percent reported themselves as white/Caucasian and 57 percent were males.

The societal orientation scale was adapted from Kang’s (2004) original SOC*QUAL measure, was comprised of 45 items, and measured sport consumers’ perceptions of their favorite team brands’ societal orientation. Societal orientation was operationalized with four dimensions: psychological, environmental, social, and economic. Brand superiority captures the uniqueness and differentiation that consumers perceive when they evaluate a brand in relation to its competitors (Keller, 2003) and was measured by five items. Brand affect represents the consumer’s emotional response to the brand due to the consumption experience or indirect exposure associated with the brand and was measured by four items adapted from Fuller, Matzler, and Hoppe’s (2008) brand passion scale.

The individuals responded to a questionnaire measuring the six latent variables described previously. First, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis to identify items that did not correlate with other items (factor loadings lower than .70). Any problematic items were eliminated and the model fit indices were reexamined. These fit indices
include Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Using the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), the criteria we use to demonstrate good fit is as follows: CFI ≥ .90, TLI ≥ .90, RMSEA ≤ .05, and SRMR ≤ .08. Finally, the full structural model with the above described relationships was examined using MPlus 7.0.

The data first had to be evaluated to determine if it were normally distributed. Bentler and Wu’s (2002) guidelines (a limit of 2 [positive or negative] for skewness and 7 [positive or negative] for kurtosis) for normality were utilized to determine the normality of the data. The skewness and kurtosis values of all the items were normal so the maximum likelihood method (ML) was used when running the data. Moreover, the histograms for each of the items were found to be distributed normally. All of this allowed us to use the ML estimation method.

When running the original confirmatory analysis, we discovered the model fit was poor. All the fit indices were outside of the acceptable range (CFI .80, TLI .79, RMSEA .07, & SRMR .07). Thus, all items with factor loadings .70 or below were eliminated from the analysis. This left us with a 34 item, six factor model. The model fit was significantly improved (CFI .92, TLI .91, SRMR .04, & RMSEA .06). After showing adequate model fit, we moved to the path analysis examination of the relationships between the latent variables. The results indicated that the psychological (β = .43; p < .001) and sociological dimensions (β = .39; p < .001) of societal orientation have positive direct effects on brand superiority. Further, the results indicated that the psychological (β = .40; p < .001), sociological (β = .38, p < .001), and economic (β = .26; p < .01) dimensions had positive direct effects on brand affect. Interestingly, the environmental dimension of societal orientation did not have a significant impact on brand superiority but did have a significant, negative effect on brand affect.

There were some clear implications from the results of this study. Sport brands that communicate the potential psychological (stress reduction, pride in team, attachment to team) and sociological (social interaction, enhanced relationships, sense of community) benefits can impact how fans view the superiority of the brand and their emotional response to the brand. An organization that is committed to these elements can capitalize on some coveted consumer outcomes. Organizational messages should focus on content-specific (cognitive) benefits or attempt to appeal to the hedonic (affect) benefits garnered from product consumption. Organizational messages that focus on the charitable contributions that sport brands make in the community should highlight the potential emotional and real life impact that those contributions can make on the benefactors and the community as a whole. Finally, and curiously, the focus on environmental sustainability was not found to affect consumers’ thoughts or feelings for the focal sport brand. Since the results do not mirror similar studies, it is important to test this relationship in other contexts to validate the findings here. Taken as a whole, sport brands that adopt a societal orientation can potentially impact the thoughts and feelings that their consumers hold regarding their brand. Focusing on and communicating the psychological and social benefits of product consumption can positively impact consumers’ thoughts and feelings toward the focal brand. Further, continuing to be a good community partner through charitable giving can impact the feelings that sport consumers hold for the brand as well.