Advertising Baseball to African Americans: Examining Perceived Match-Up Effects with the Theory of Reasoned Action

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African Americans are considered to have a powerful economic influence in the United States as they embrace a buying power expected to exceed $1.1 trillion by 2015 ("Black buying power," 2011). Yet, Major League Baseball (MLB) has witnessed a lack of consumption from the African American community. African Americans constitute less than five percent of spectators at some Major League ballparks (Ogden & Hilt, 2003). In 2002 only 9.5% of fans that watched baseball on television were African American; since this time, the percentage has only decreased (Armour, 2002; Livingstone, 2011). Due to such low consumption rates, it is important to understand the preceding factors influencing these consumption patterns.

Ogden and Hilt (2003) claim that baseball consumption by the African American community has regressed due to the sport lacking a means to identify with the African American culture. Moreover, Breckenridge and Goldsmith (2009) state that a change in culture by the sport (i.e., unidentifiable players and unidentifiable marketing campaigns), has allowed baseball to become less attractive to African Americans (Reilly, 2003). Therefore, this study seeks to ascertain the specific aspects of baseball that fail to embody these relatable traits, and thus deter baseball consumption amongst African Americans. In particular, we investigate the role of ‘perceived fit’ in relation to the theory of reasoned action in an effort to examine African American attitudes towards baseball consumption.

Theoretical Framework

Match-up Hypothesis

The match-up hypothesis posits that individuals are likely to have positive evaluations towards an advertisement if the advertisement portrays a “match” and/or “fit” between a product and the product’s endorser (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004; McDaniel, 1999). The match-up hypothesis proposes that as a consumer perceives a sense of similarity between oneself and an advertisement (or an advertisement’s endorser), the consumer will likely be satisfied with the advertisement, and will subsequently consider consuming the advertised product (Kamins, 1990; Khale & Homer, 1985). In addition, scholars have found that a conveyed message from an endorser will be evaluated in the same manner the consumer will evaluate the endorser her/himself (Cunningham et al., 2008; Pornpitakpan, 2003). In the current study, the match-up hypothesis is used as a guide to assess whether African Americans will perceive a “fit” between an advertised product’s attributes (i.e., similarity in physical appearance and similarity in racially relatable consumer needs), and how this fit affects their attitudes towards the product (i.e., baseball).

Research suggests African Americans are likely to consume sports that involve racially identifiable athletes and sports that portray racially identifiable motivational characteristics (Armstrong, 2002). Therefore, if African Americans perceive a baseball advertisement to contain (a) an endorser who upholds similar racial characteristics and (b) racially relatable consumer needs (i.e., racially relevant motivational factors), then they will likely consider the baseball advertisement to uphold a sense of perceived fit. In addition, several investigations involving social categorization suggest that individuals are likely to uphold favorable appraisals towards individuals who are perceived to be similar to themselves racially (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998). Therefore, the following hypotheses are put forth:

H1: When embedded in an advertisement, ‘excitement’ and ‘skill’ (racially identifiable motivational factors) will be positively related to perceived fit.

H2: When in an advertisement, an endorser's race will moderate the relationship between excitement and athlete skill and perceived fit.
Theory of Reasoned Action

The theory of reasoned action has been used in the sport management and marketing literature as a means to explain certain sport consumption behaviors (Funk & James, 2004), and posits that an individual’s attitudes and subjective norms (i.e., social support from friends and family) will influence behavioral decisions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). African Americans may choose not to consume baseball because of negative attitudes towards baseball, and because of a lack of social support towards consuming baseball. Therefore, if African Americans perceive a fit between themselves and baseball, there may be a relationship between this fit and their attitudes and subjective norms. As such, the following hypotheses are put forth:

H3: Perceived fit will be positively related to attitudes towards baseball.
H4: Perceived fit will be positively related to subjective norms.

Research has suggested that the components of the theory of reasoned action are positively associated with intentions (Cheng, Chen, Chen, & Lu, 2012). Therefore, in the current study, it is expected that those who carry positive attitudes towards baseball and positive subjective norms will have intentions to consume baseball. Thus, the following hypotheses are presented:

H5: There will be a positive relationship between attitudes and intentions to consume baseball.
H6: There will be a positive relationship between subjective norms and intentions to consume baseball.

Method

Participants

A random sample of 283 self-identified African Americans, ranging in age from 18-65 participated in the study. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of four advertisement conditions which varied by the race of the endorser(s) in the advertisement (Black, White) and the advertisement’s setting (inclusion of excitement and skill, non-inclusion of excitement and skill). Subjects were first asked to provide information about age, race and gender. They were then asked to view an advertisement and answer several questions in conjunction. Specifically, participants were asked to provide information about the advertisement’s ability to induce a perceived sense of fit, their attitudes towards baseball, subjective norms, and intentions to consume baseball.

Data Analysis and Results

Hypotheses were examined via the means of structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 19.0. Model fit was assessed using the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). We adhere to the sentiments of Kelloway (1998) who proposes that RMSEA values of less than .05 would indicate a close model fit, while values between .05 and .08 would indicate an acceptable fit. According to Bentler (1990), CFI and TFI values of .90 or higher will indicate that a model’s fit is acceptable.

Results of the structural equation model (SEM) indicate that the model was an acceptable fit to the data: \( \chi^2/df = 3.79; \) RMSEA (90% confidence interval: .07, .09) = .099; CFI = .933; TLI = .912. Hypothesis 1 was not supported at the .05 alpha level, as the results indicate endorser race was not significantly related to perceived fit (\( \beta = .061, p = .4 \)). Hypotheses 2 -6 however, were confirmed (\( \beta = -.178, p < .05; \beta = .697, p < .001; \beta = .667, p < .001; \beta = .248, p < .001; \beta = .751, p <.001 \) respectively). Implications of the findings will be discussed.