Empirical Examination of the Sport Brand Love Model in Professional Sports

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Brand love is not a new concept but is a newly defined and researched concept (e.g., Batra et al., 2012; Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). While sport is an industry where the phenomenon of brand love appears to be one of the most evident, the concept had not been applied to the sport context until recently (Tavormina, Byon, Baker, & Zhang, 2012). By incorporating the unique aspects of sport products, Tavormina et al. (2012) developed the Sport Brand Love model conceptualized as a higher-order construct that includes 12 factors. The Sport Brand Love model is comprised of the following factors: Current Self-Identity, Team Identification, Life Meaning/Intrinsic Rewards, Brand Prominence, Past Involvement, Intuitive Fit, Emotional Attachment, Positive Affect, Long-term Relationship, Anticipated Separation Distress, Attitude Valence, and Attitude Strength. Tavormina et al. (2012) also identified antecedents which are factors that create the Sport Brand Love for the consumers: Perceived High-Quality, Fan Reference, Team Uniqueness, and Team Nostalgia. The following consequences of Sport Brand Love were identified: Positive WOM, Team Loyalty, Switching Intention, Willingness to Invest Resources, Willingness to Pay Higher Prices, and Passionate Desire to Consumer.

Upon testing empirically, the Sport Brand Love would allow sport marketers to gain a better understanding of how sport consumers form the love for the team. The empirical validation would also assist sport marketers in creating a more strategic marketing plan to meet the needs of their consumer. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to test the Sport Brand Love model in the context of the professional sports of MLB, NBA, and NFL. More specifically, the objectives of this study were: (a) to examine the relationship that the antecedents and consequences with Sport Brand Love model and (b) to test if any differences exist for the three leagues based on the antecedents, core dimensions, and consequences of Sport Brand Love.

Method

This study was conducted on three professional sport teams franchised in the southeast region of the United States. We surveyed a total of 635 participants who were recruited in tailgating areas outside the sport facilities before games, on social media pages and sport team blogs, as well as in sport management and physical activity classes at a nearby university. The survey included a screening question, “Have you attended a [MLB, NBA, or NFL] game in the past 12 months?” Only the participants who answered “yes” were invited to participate in the survey, which instructed the participants to respond to the survey items based on their thoughts and feelings towards the professional team for which they have attended a game.

A questionnaire was generated that included a total of 63 items and represented the 22 constructs that measure the dimensions of sport brand love. The item response format for the following 12 constructs (3 to 4 items per each construct) used a 7-point scale with 1 = not at all and 7 = very much adapted from Albert et al. (2008), Batra et al. (2012), and Carroll and Ahuvia’s (2006) studies: Current Self-Identity, Life Meaning and Intrinsic Rewards, Brand Prominence, Past Involvement, Intuitive Fit, Emotional Attachment, Long-term Relationship, Anticipated Separation Distress, Attitude Valence, Attitude Strength, Passionate Desire to Use, and Willingness to Invest Resources. The next eight factors used a 7-point Likert-type scale with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree and were adapted from various existing scales: Team Identification (Kwon & Armstrong, 2004), Team Nostalgia (Gladden & Funk, 2002), Perceived Quality, Team Uniqueness, and Willingness to Pay Higher Prices (Netemeyer et al., 2004), Fan Reference (Cunningham & Kwon, 2003), Positive WOM (Alexandris et al., 2007), and Loyalty (Heere & Dickson, 2008; Trail et al., 2005). Lastly, Switching Intention adopted a 5-point Likert-type scale item (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) and a 5-point percentage response item (1 = 0% chance to 5 = 100% chance) from Burnham et al. (2003).
Results

After the pooled data set passed assumption tests concerning CFA, the data were randomly split into a calibration sample (n = 318) and holdout sample (n = 317). Following Anderson and Gerbing’s (1988) two-step approach, the CFA of the measurement model displayed good psychometric properties based on the size of the model for both the calibration sample ($\chi^2 = 4361.865, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.39; \text{RMSEA} = .066, 90\% \text{CI} = .064-.069; \text{SRMR} = .066; \text{TLI} = .89; \text{CFI} = .89; & \text{RNI} = .89$) and the holdout sample ($\chi^2 = 4195.893, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.30; (\text{RMSEA} = .064, 90\% \text{CI} = .062-.067; \text{SRMR} = .063; \text{TLI} = .89; \text{CFI} = .90; & \text{RNI} = .90$. Then, the structural equation modeling (SEM) using the calibration sample was conducted. The structural model’s goodness of fit showed reasonably good ($\chi^2 = 4593.523, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.49; \text{RMSEA} = .068, 90\% \text{CI} = .066-.071; \text{SRMR} = .078; \text{TLI} = .88; \text{CFI} = .89; \text{and RNI} = .89$). SEM revealed that the following antecedents of Perceived High Quality ($\beta = .229$), Team Uniqueness ($\beta = .183$), and Team Nostalgia ($\beta = .553$) were all found to have statistical significance with Sport Brand Love. However, it was found that Fan Reference ($p > .05$) was not related to Sport Brand Love. For the consequences, SEM revealed that all six factors were found to have statistical significance with Sport Brand Love with ranging from Switching Intention ($\beta = -.661$) to Willingness to Invest Resources ($\beta = .962$). For the holdout sample, the overall model fit was reasonably good ($\chi^2 = 4408.851, p < .001; \chi^2/df = 2.39; \text{RMSEA} = .068, 90\% \text{CI} = .066-.071; \text{SRMR} = .078; \text{TLI} = .88; \text{CFI} = .89; \text{and RNI} = .89$). SEM via holdout sample confirmed the results of the calibration sample with the exception of Perceived High Quality.

A multi-group SEM was also conducted to investigate if any differences exist for the three leagues (i.e., MLB, NBA, and NFL) based on the antecedents and consequences of Sport Brand Love. The statistically significant antecedents for the MLB team were Perceived High Quality ($\beta = .278$), Team Uniqueness ($\beta = .192$), and Team Nostalgia ($\beta = .533$), but for the NBA and NFL, only Team Nostalgia ($\beta = .510$ and $\beta = .658$, respectively) was statistically significant. The path coefficients for the six consequences were statistically significant for all three professional teams with varying magnitude. The results indicate that although Sport Brand Love model can explain various sport consumption behaviors for professional team sport consumers, and the magnitude of the explanatory power differs according to the professional sport team.

Discussion

In this study, the path relationships of the Sport Brand Love model were analyzed by means of CFA and SEM. The results indicated that the measurement models of the calibration and holdout sample were similar via cross-validation. For the path analyses, the results for the two samples were the same for the Sport Brand Love consequences but different for the antecedents. As hypothesized, the consequences were found to be positively influenced by the consumers’ Sport Brand Love, and this finding was consistent with previous related studies (Alexandris et al., 2007; Batra et al., 2012; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Swanson et al., 2007), and we found the sport consumers’ Switching Intentions decreased as hypothesized, which was in line with previous research (Burnham et al., 2003). Furthermore, there was evidence that Sport Brand Love predicted a favorable amount of the variance (e.g., Willingness to Invest Resources = 91% and Passionate Desire to Use = 85%) for these six dependent variables showing that Sport Brand Love can have a significant impact on consumption behaviors.

For the antecedent, the results are especially crucial for sport marketers because these are the factors that explain how or why this Sport Brand Love is formed. In this study, Team Uniqueness and Team Nostalgia were found to be significant antecedents for both samples as hypothesized which supported previous research (Albert et al., 2008; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Perceived High Quality was a statistically significant antecedent for the calibration sample but not the holdout sample which was not consistent with previous research (Batra et al., 2012; Byon & Baker, 2011). These differences were explained by the results of the multi-group SEM which provided evidence that Sport Brand Love differs according to the professional sport team. More detailed explanations concerning theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in this presentation.