Sport Team Brand Authenticity: An Exploratory Analysis

Donghun Lee, University of Houston
Chryostomos Giannoulakis, Ball State University
Demetrius Pearson, University of Houston
Whitney Breslin, University of Houston

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Introduction and Review of Relevant Literature

Concept of Authenticity. The meaning of ‘authenticity’ is socially constructed, which varies across contexts (Cohen, 1988). However, a common consensus is that authenticity is often perceived as ‘genuineness’ (Gundlach & Neville, 2012). The literature frequently indicates its usefulness as a cognitive cue to various consumptive behaviors (Beverland, 2006; Cohen, 1988; Litrell, Anderson, & Brown, 1993; Gundlach & Neville, 2012). Researchers have referenced authenticity across a wide range of product categories and industries including tourism (Cohen, 1988; Litrell, Anderson, & Brown, 1993), wine products (Beverland, 2006), beer (Gundlach & Neville, 2012), and skateboarding (Wheaton & Beal, 2003). It is vital for organizations to foster a culture that promotes authentic values (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2013). Likewise, there is a need for research that is context specific (e.g., team brands in sport context), because consumers tend to use different cues to evaluate authenticity based on their interest and/or knowledge (Grazian, 2003).

Brand Authenticity. The notion of authenticity has expanded over the years. Brand authenticity is defined as ‘originality’ and ‘genuineness’ of a brand and is known as an influential factor to brand choices and purchase of those brands (Gundlach & Neville, 2012). Authenticity has been suggested as a core element in branding especially when to establish brand identity (Aaker, 1996; Beverland, 2005). Gilmore and Pine (2007) emphasized that authenticity is a means of conveying a brand’s core values and traditions. One of the common findings amongst existing literature is that a brand that embraces its heritage is perceived as legitimate and authentic among consumers (Kates, 2004). This is imperative for premium brands selling products that are marketed as authentic via historic heritage, design, method of production, and craftsmanship (Alexander, 2009).

Several researchers have attempted to identify antecedents to brand authenticity. Gundlach and Neville (2012) created a collective view of contributing factors to brand authenticity while adding a new insight of ‘exclusivity’ in their framework. Gundlach and Neville’s research included the following 11 antecedents to brand authenticity: Heritage and Pedigree, Relationship to Place, Method of Production, Commitments to Consistency and Quality, Ingredients and Materials, Company/Craftsperson, Esthetics, Uniqueness and Originality, Experience, Genuineness/Prioritizing Craft Motives, and Exclusivity.

‘Team’ as a Brand. In the context of sports, “branding is a name, design, symbol, or any combination that a sports organization uses to help differentiate its products from the competition” (Shank, 2009, p. 206). Branding efforts may occur at various levels including product (tangible products and intangible services such sports game as an event), person (often players), institution (high school, college, minor league, and professional teams), community (e.g., Kentucky Derby), and country (e.g., ‘team’ USA). Likewise, branding efforts continue transcending across various entities. ‘Team’ is a brand as a separate entity that can create many reactions from the individuals who follow.

Team Brand Authenticity. The meaning and antecedents to ‘team’ brand authenticity is likely to differ by industry (i.e., tourism, wine, and beer industry) because, as claimed by Litrell, Anderson, and Brown (1993), “authenticity is a personally constructed, contextual, and changing concept” (p. 199). Even though authenticity has actively been studied within the last decade, its application to teams as brands has never been offered. Due to contextual variation in the meaning of authenticity, sport consumers will perceive features vital to authenticate a team brand and the respective products in their own right. As a result, their consumptive behaviors will be less predictive. Relatedly,
team brands that fail to embrace many of these tangible and intangible attributes in their products/services might be perceived as inauthentic among sport consumers.

The current study purports to investigate authenticity associated with team brands. In this study team brand authenticity is defined as a perceived evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a team as a brand by sport consumers. Using mixed methods, this research focuses on defining sport consumer-based authenticity on team brands and measuring attributes to team brand authenticity. The current study seeks to answer the following research questions:
(a) What is the meaning of authenticity in the minds of sport consumers who follow teams?
(b) Which traits constitute team brand authenticity among sport consumers?
(c) Does the level of identification with a team influence the meaning of team brand authenticity?
Findings from the current study will be useful for brand/team managers when they employ their marketing tactics with fans and followers, who often authenticate (or inauthenticate) team brands in miscellaneous ways.

Method
Using an open-ended questionnaire, we collected pilot data (additional data will be collected by the end of November, 2014) from a group of 35 college students attending a health and human performance class at a metropolitan University. In a screen question, subjects identified that they have frequently purchased sporting goods under a brand within the last three years. Sample questions included the following: “What does authenticity mean to you when you think of your favorite team?”, “Which team do you consider most authentic or inauthentic?”, “In your opinion, what makes you perceive/feel/think of a team as authentic?”. Data were content analyzed by researchers who have expertise in areas of sport management, sociology, and human performance. The majority of the participants were male (71.4%). The ethnic demographic breakdown was as follows: African-American (34.3%), Caucasian (31.4%), and Latino (20.0%). The mean age of respondents was 22.6 years old. Participants indicated that they consider themselves as a strong fan of team sports (6.0 out of 7.0; SD = 1.57).

Main Findings and Future Research
A total of 157 descriptors emerged that reflected each of the following dimensions of team brand authenticity: Team Spirit (17 items or 10.8%), Performance and Accomplishments (18 items or 11.5%), Communal Team Affiliation (23 items or 14.7%), Team Legacy (11 items or 7%), Organization and Management (32 items or 20.4%), Style and Branding (26 items or 16.6%), Individual Fan Experience (9 items or 5.7%), Socialization (5 items or 3.4%), and Tangibles and Trappings (23 items or 14.7%). This finding is generally compatible to Gundlach and Neville's (2012) 11 contributing factors to brand authenticity. Overall, the current findings of the study suggest that Gundlach and Neville's (2012) framework for brand authenticity can be expanded to 'team' brand authenticity as follows (Gundlach & Neville's original terms in parentheses): Team Legacy (Heritage and pedigree), Communal Team Affiliation (Relationship to place), Team Operations (Method of production), Team Spirit (Commitments to consistency and quality), Athleticism/Player Talent (Ingredients and materials), Team Ownership/Management (Company/craftsperson), Branding and Trappings (Esthetics), Team Origin and Essence (Uniqueness and originality), Fan Experience and Socialization (Experience), Professionalism/Sportsmanship (Genuineness/prioritizing craft motives), and Unexpectedness and Independence (Exclusivity). This type of finding could contribute to the literature, since academic studies have not paid particular attention to the empirical examination of brand authenticity in relation to team brands. Future research may be worthwhile in that a statistical procedure such as exploratory factor analysis or multidimensional scaling could be performed in order to examine factor structures among the overall descriptors of team brand authenticity, as well as to confirm its measurement structure using a confirmatory factor analysis. For the purpose of predictive validity, multivariate analysis such as regression analysis may be conducted to see what extent each of the emergent content categories predict sport consumer behaviors, including team athletic merchandise purchase.