Assessing the Role of Fan Community Attachment in Building Brand Equity

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Researchers and practitioners in the field of sport marketing have constantly sought to develop mechanisms to develop the relationships between the sport team and sport consumer (i.e., fan). The development of the relationship between sport consumers and sport organizations has been conceptualized in a number of forms such as team identification (Heere & James, 2007; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), psychological commitment (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004), and fan community attachment (Katz & Heere, 2013). Yet, the least researched construct (i.e., fan community attachment) appears to have the most promise for those seeking to understand the behavior of sport consumers (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015).

Broadly, fan community attachment is the concept that sport fans become connected with other sport consumers that they attend the sport contest with, meet at the event or even connect virtually in online brand communities. Katz and Heere (2013) explained that college football fans are more likely attend games due to their attachment with fellow fans as opposed to any team identification that was created. This stance was validated by the findings of Yoshida et al. (2015). Thus, it behooves sport marketers to have a greater knowledgebase of the fan community attachment construct as it has shown the ability to predict actual behavior and the variable appears to be more explanatory than team identification.

This study extends the knowledge of the fan community attachment (Katz & Heere, 2013; Yoshida et al., 2015) construct by examining its effects on brand superiority, brand passion, and behavioral intentions of sport consumers. The criticality of the current research is due to the findings of Yoshida et al.’s (2015) longitudinal study of sport consumer behavior. The scholars examined the effects of fan community attachment on team identification and actual attendance of sporting contests of season ticket holders. While team identification was found to predict sport consumers’ intentions to attend sporting contests, the construct failed to predict actual attendance at either of the following data collection points. However, fan community attachment predicted actual attendance at both of the data collection points.

In addition to fan community attachment, the effects of two branding constructs on the behavioral intentions of sport consumers were examined: brand superiority and brand passion. Although the importance of brand equity has been posited, the manner by which the hypothesized drivers of brand equity impact consumers’ behavioral intentions has rarely been the focus of empirical investigations (see Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001 for exceptions). It is important to empirically assess how drivers of brand equity such as brand superiority and brand passion impact consumers’ behavioral intentions for numerous reasons. First, sport organizations spend millions each year on activities to enhance their brand. Advancing our understanding of how to build brand equity can help sport organizations become more efficient in their brand management strategies. Further, there has been a tenuous link established between consumers’ behavioral intentions and a firm’s increased financial performance. Sport brands with high equity have been found to sell more brand-laden merchandise as well as have consumers that are willing to pay a higher price for tickets to the sporting events (Boone, Kochunny, & Wilkins, 1994; Gladden & Milne, 1999). Such findings illustrate the importance of understanding how organizations can influence consumers’ behavioral intentions through the strategic implementation of brand management activities. The reasons cited above provide a good case as to the importance of investigating the relationship between the drivers of brand equity and behavioral intentions.

To better understand the role of fan community attachment plays in building brand equity, a two-step approach was utilized to test the hybrid model via MPlus 7.31 (Kline, 2005). A hybrid model refers to a model that has measurement and structural components (Kline, 2005). Evaluation of the model involves two steps where the basic principles of analyzing a CFA and structural model apply. The goal of the analysis was to assess how fan community
attachment affects brand passion and brand superiority and to test the relationship between the two branding variables and behavioral intentions of sport consumers. The study included data collected from a sample of sport consumers (N = 785) residing in a southeastern city.

The measurement model consisted of four latent variables: fan community attachment, brand passion, brand superiority, and behavior intentions. Fan community attachment was measured with four items from Yoshida et al.’s (2015) instrument. Brand superiority had five items from Keller’s (2003) measure. Brand passion was measured via five items from Fuller, Matzler, and Hoppe’s (2008) work. Lastly, behavioral intentions was measured by a four-item scale from Parasuraman, Ziethaml, and Berry (1985). Behavioral intentions was a measure of if the sport fan intended to act (e.g., pay a price premium for tickets, spread positive word of mouth, recommend to a friend, etc.). The model was found to have adequate fit statistics according to Brown’s (2006) guidelines. Both the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) were an acceptable fit at .92 and .91 respectively. Further, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMSR) was a close fit at .04. These statistics support the closeness of the hypothesized model to the observed model. The Chi-Square Test of Model Fit was significant, $\chi^2(131, N = 785) = 950.20, p < .001$. Convergent and discriminant validity was assessed with Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) average variance extracted (AVE) method. Convergent validity was supported as fan community attachment (.74), brand passion (.75), brand superiority (.66), and behavioral intentions (.75) were all above .5. The discriminant validity evidence between brand passion and fan community attachment as well as behavioral intentions was mixed. Lastly, each factor had a Cronbach’s reliability level greater than .90.

Once the measurement model was assessed for construct validity and purified, the hypothesized relationships were tested via structural modeling via MPlus 7.31. The structural model tested the relationship between fan community attachment and brand superiority and brand passion. Further, the relationship between brand superiority, brand passion, and consumer behavioral intentions was tested. All paths were significant at the p .001 level. Fan community attachment significantly impacted brand superiority ($\beta = .83$) and brand passion ($\beta = .99$). Brand passion ($\beta = .89$), and brand superiority significantly predicted behavioral intentions ($\beta = .12$).

The results of the study provide a significant contribution to the literature related to sport consumer behavior. As with Yoshida et al. (2015) and Katz and Heere (2013), this study supports the notion that fan community attachment is a critical variable for sport marketing practitioners to understand and utilize. As consumers become more connected and attached to their respective fan communities, their perceptions of brand superiority toward their favorite team brand increase. Further, their emotional connection to their favorite team brand strengthens as well. Interestingly, brand passion also appears to have a strong relationship with the behavioral intentions of sport consumers. Taken as a whole, this study provides more evidence of the importance of building the horizontal communal-team connection. Strengthening this connection is a crucial and effective method to build sport team brand equity. This study also answers the call from the marketing field (as evidenced by the latest Marketing Science Institute’s latest research priorities) as well as sport marketing scholars regarding the importance of understanding sport consumers and specifically, the role that emotion plays in their decision-making (Dwyer, Murdick, Greenhalgh, LeCrom, and Drayer, In Press). Future endeavors need to further our understanding of the power of fan community attachment as well how emotion acts as a mechanism to trigger sport consumer behavior.