Cross-Cultural Examination of Soccer Brand Perceptions

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Marketing Abstract 2016-182
Friday, June 3, 2016
1:40 PM
Poster (Legacy North)

Soccer, popular in Europe and the rest of the world, is gaining popularity in the United States. It is the third most popular team sport in the nation and the second most popular sport for American youths aged 12-24. The general public is becoming more aware of its marquee players and competitions (SGMA, 2008; Bennett, 2012). International stars David Beckham, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo, for instance, rank among the top 50 most popular athletes in the United States (Bennett, 2012). The sport’s growing popularity has also seen American television networks pay over $420 million for the broadcasting rights to soccer-specific events such as the FIFA World Cup and English Premier League (Snyder, 2012). According to Bennett (2012), the United States is becoming a more favorable arena for soccer than traditional American sports like football, baseball, and basketball due to high levels of cultural diversification, an increasingly globalized outlook, and widespread availability of internet access. In addition, more than 15 million Americans play soccer every month of the year and more than $740 million is spent annually on soccer apparel and accessories (SGMA, 2008). When compared to other major 2015 summer sports events, viewership of the FIFA Women’s World Cup final (25.4 million) beat out the NBA Finals (19.94 million) and the NHL Stanley Cup Finals (5.5 million). From this evidence it is clear that soccer is more popular than it has ever been in the United States, holds a steady following of fans and participants, and has a multi-million dollar niche in the overall $74.2 billion American sporting goods industry (SGMA, 2011). Thus, an examination of consumer perceptions of soccer-specific brands is timely and important. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to investigate country and gender differences in brand perceptions and purchase intentions across soccer brands.

Related Literature

Belen del Rio, Vazquez, and Iglesias (2011) examined consumer response to brand associations and stated that people shape their perceptions of a brand based on what is acceptable to the people or societal groups they wish to identify with. Hence, consumers will value a brand that is positively perceived by those in their desired environment under the assumption of social identification theory. Aaker (1991) indicated that consumers evaluate brand extensions more favorably in cases where leading brands enjoy a solid reputation and are purchased by many people. If such an indication is true, it should serve as a predictive measure of success for Adidas and Nike, the two largest brands of the sporting good and soccer markets (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006). It should be noted that Koll and Wallpach (2007) suggested that not all consumers perceive brands in the same light. Brands mean different things to different people, and while management may strive to communicate a specific and consistent image to the market, consumers may still develop their own perceptions of a brand. Some consumers choose popular brands while others opt specific brands based on unique qualities. Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera (2001) investigated consumption symbols as carriers of culture and suggested that cultural variation effects commercial brand perception by influencing the content of marketing communications and the kinds of attributes individuals focus on when perceiving brands.

Method

A total of 178 male (53.9%) and female (46.1%) secondary schools soccer players from the United States (43.3%) and Sweden (56.7%) completed a self-administrated questionnaire. Their ages ranged from 14 to 18 years with an average of 16 years. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. In the first section, participants evaluated their time management between school and soccer as well as their intention to purchase across seven soccer brands by using a 5-point Likert scale and the scale was as follows: “1” – strongly disagree; to “5” – strongly agree. The second section assessed the perception toward the brand on three 7-point bipolar items anchored with “unpopular/popular”, “unreliable/reliable”, and “classic/stylish”. Lastly, demographic questions were included. Four mixed-design ANOVAs were performed to identify differences within-subject factors of Popularity, Reliability, Style,
and Purchase Intention, amongst seven brands (Adidas, Diadora, Lotto, Nike, Puma, Reebok, Umbro) and between-subject factors of Country (US and Sweden) and Gender (male and female).

Results

Mauchly’s test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated in all mixed-design ANOVAs. Therefore, degrees of freedom were corrected using Huynh-Feldt estimates of sphericity. With regards to the mixed-design ANOVA on Purchase Intention, a significant main effect was found in Brand ($F(5.010, 272.718) = 108.246, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .384$). An interaction effect was found between Brand and Country ($F(5.010, 272.718) = 24.394, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .123$). With regards to the mixed-design ANOVA on Popularity, significant main effects were found in Brand ($F(5.104, 888.055) = 14.021, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .075$) and Gender ($F(1,174) = 5.568, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .031$). An interaction effect was found between Brand and Country ($F(5.104, 888.055) = 14.235, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .076$). With regards to the mixed-design ANOVA on Reliability, a significant main effect was found in Brand ($F(5.410, 941.270) = 11.747, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .063$). Interaction effects were found between Country and Gender ($F(1, 174) = 13.917, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .072$) and amongst Brand, Country, and Gender ($F(5.410, 941.270) = 3.151, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .018$). In regards to the mixed-design ANOVA on Style, a significant main effect was found in Brand ($F(5.020, 873.407) = 12.112, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .065$) and an interaction effect was found between Brand and Country ($F(5.020, 873.407) = 11.710, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .063$).

Discussion

The results suggest that soccer brand purchase intention and brand perception may be different based on gender and the country where consumers live. With regards to purchase intention, for example, Americans were more likely to purchase Umbro soccer products compared to Swedes (MUS = 4.28, MSweden = 3.59), whilst Swedes were more likely to purchase Reebok soccer products than Americans (MMale = 4.25). There was gender effect in the perceived popularity of soccer brands; females rated soccer brands as more popular than males across brands (MMale = 6.40, MFemale = 6.52). In terms of perceived popularity of brands, Americans rated Umbro as more popular than Swedes (MUS = 6.51, MSweden = 5.91), whilst Swedes rated Reebok as more popular than Americans (MUS = 5.72, MSweden = 6.54). Americans considered Puma to be more stylish than Swedes (MUS = 6.53, MSweden = 5.93), and conversely, Swedes considered Lotto to be more stylish than Americans (MUS = 5.83, MSweden = 6.54). Main and interaction effect illustrations and a detailed discussion will be presented.