The Effect of Anthropomorphism on Sport Consumers’ Responses toward Team’s Performance

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Recently, marketers often anthropomorphize products by instilling human personality traits into nonhuman entities (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). One example are sports teams’ mascots. Sports teams frequently utilize anthropomorphic mascots to positively promote their teams to fans (Connell, 2013). While usage of anthropomorphic mascots have been significantly increased in both collegiate and professional sports, there is a limited understanding of how sport consumers respond toward teams’ communication strategies of using anthropomorphic mascots. Accordingly, the purpose of the current study is to examine the effect of anthropomorphic communication (i.e., using team mascots) of teams’ performance on sport consumers’ responses.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Social psychology and consumer behavior literature indicated that anthropomorphism benefits brands in several ways (Hur, Koo, & Hofmann, 2015). Research has found that when products are anthropomorphized, consumers more favorably evaluate (e.g., product quality; Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) and trust brands (Waytz, Heafner, & Epley, 2014), and form stronger relationship with brands (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Prior literature has also suggested that when a nonhuman entity (e.g., robot) is anthropomorphized, people are more likely to forgive unexpected accidents that were caused by that nonhuman entity (Salem, Lakatos, Amirabdollahian, & Dautenhahn, 2015). This is because anthropomorphism enables people to create beliefs and social expectations toward a nonhuman entity (Kim & McGill, 2011). As a result, people create a stronger emotional connection with an anthropomorphized product (Kim & McGill, 2011). In this regard, as people often forgive significant others’ (e.g., friends and family) faults, they also forgive accidents that were caused by an anthropomorphized product (Salem et al., 2015). By incorporating the previous findings, the current study proposes that anthropomorphized messages using mascots would help sports teams communicate negative information to their fans. Specifically, the authors hypothesized the following:

H1: When sports teams publicize performance reports in a losing season, anthropomorphized messages using mascot elicit more positive responses from fans including (a) less blame, (b) less cutting of reflected failure (CORFing) behaviors and (c) stronger supportive patronage behaviors, compared to a situation when an objective approach message is used.

H2: Perceived anthropomorphism would mediate relationships between different types of communication approaches and fans responses.

People enjoy narrative story (Merchant, Ford, & Sargeant, 2010). One effective way to make a story more enjoyable and engaging is designing the structure of a story as more suspenseful (Cheong & Young, 2008). Research has found that people perceive the story as more suspenseful when the main actor overcomes obstacles in the story (e.g., happy ending; Goldman & Varnhagen, 1983). This is because large variances (failures to success) in the structure of a story make experience more suspenseful and enjoyable; even more so than a story that only has success (Goldman & Varnhagen, 1983). Based on these findings, Experiment 2 proposes that when sports team overcomes past year’s poor performance through winning in the subsequent year, fans may create more positive perceptions toward the team compared to a situation in which the team had positive performances for two consecutive years. Importantly, such effect would be magnified when teams use anthropomorphized messages. Thus, the authors hypothesized the following:

H3: When sports teams announce performance reports, anthropomorphized messages elicit more positive responses from their fans including (a) positive sports team’s image, (b) greater basking in the reflected glory (BIRGing) behavior, and (c) supportive patronage behaviors when the team had a losing season in the previous year but had a
winning season in the subsequent year compared to a situation in which team had winning seasons for two consecutive years

H4: When sports teams announce performance reports, object messages would elicit more positive responses from their fans including (a) positive sports team’s image, (b) greater BIRGing, and (c) supportive patronage behaviors when team had winning seasons for two consecutive years compared to a situation in which team had a losing seasons in the previous year but had a winning season in the subsequent year

Experiment 1
Design and Procedures

Experiment 1 will employ a 2 (Communication approach: anthropomorphized message vs. object message) between-subject design. A total of 100 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. As suggested by anthropomorphism literature (e.g., Kim & McGill, 2011), different types of communication approaches will be manipulated by using either a first-person (anthropomorphized message) or a third-person (object message) perspective. Specifically, participants read the following performance report. In the anthropomorphized message condition, “Hi, I am Albert E. Gator, the official friend of Gator Nation. The Gators had a losing season in 2013…..We promise to have a better season next year.” In the object message condition, “The University of Florida football team had a losing season in 2013……We promises to have a better season next year.”

Blaming (e.g., 2-items: Louie & Obermiller, 2002), CORFing behaviors (e.g., 3-items: Trail et al., 2012), and supportive patronage behaviors (e.g., 3-items: Kim, Trail, & Ko, 2011) will be measured as dependent variables. In addition, perceived anthropomorphism (e.g., 2-items: Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) will be measured as a mediating variable, while team identification (e.g., 3 items: Kwon, Trail, & Lee, 2009), trait competitiveness (e.g., 4-items: Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998) and football involvement (e.g., 10-items; Zaichkowsky, 1985) will be measured as covariates.

Results

We are currently collecting the data and will ensure that we present the results and implications at the conference.

Experiment 2
Design and Procedures

Experiment 2 will use a 2 (Communication approach: anthropomorphized message vs. object message) x 2 (Performance level: positive performance and mixed performances) between-subject design. A total of 200 participants will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Both variables will be manipulated by researchers. Specifically, manipulation of different types of communication approaches will be consistent with Experiment 1. In terms of performance level, in the positive performance condition, participants will read a scenario where a fictitious target team had winning seasons for two consecutive years. Meanwhile, in the mixed performance condition, participants will read a scenario where a fictitious target team had a losing season in the previous year, but had a winning season in the subsequent year.

Sports team’s image (e.g., 5-items; Javalgi, Traylor, Gorss, & Lampman, 1994), BIRGing behaviors (e.g., 4 items; Trail et al., 2012), and patronage behaviors (e.g., 3-items; Kim et al., 2011) will be measured as dependent variables. Consistent with Experiment 1, team identification, trait competitiveness, and football involvement will be measured as covariates.

Results

We are currently collecting the data and will ensure that we present the results and implications at the conference.

Implication

The current study further develops our theoretical understanding of sport consumer behavior by applying and extending existing research paradigm of anthropomorphism. Specifically, it is anticipated that the result would demonstrates how anthropomorphized message could help the team communicate negative information to their
fans. The results of the current study would also provide effective communication strategies to sports organizations. More practical and theoretical implications will be discussed in the conference.