The Role of Emotion in Impulse Buying of Sport Team-Licensed Merchandise

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The retail sales of sport team-licensed merchandise grew four consecutive years to $26 billion in 2014. The Marketing Science Institute reports that 60% of all purchases are made impulsively and sport represents a category that consumers tend to buy impulsively (Bellenger et al., 1978). Given the potential revenue source generated from merchandise sales, sport organizations should understand what psychological factors direct impulse buying tendencies. Drawing upon the Appraisal-tendency framework, the current research examines how sport consumer emotions influence impulse buying of sport team-licensed merchandise.

Impulse buying refers to purchasing behavior that is triggered by a sudden and irresistible buying urge that precludes thoughtful and deliberate consideration of the consequences (Kacen & Lee, 2002). Impulse buying takes place when the urge to purchase overrides the ability to control that urge (Vohs & Faber, 2007). Consumers who are more susceptible to emotions are more likely to engage in impulse buying (Youn & Faber, 2000). As a result, impulse buying results from the reliance on emotional heuristics in consumers' judgment and decision making.

Sport management research on impulse buying has neglected the role of emotion. Previous research reports team identification and interpersonal relationships are correlates of team-licensed merchandize purchase decisions (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; Chen et al., 2013). However, these correlates represent personal traits and group behavior which fail to capture the interaction between environment and the emotional state of the sport consumer at time of purchase. Sport consumers are highly susceptible to contextual stimuli as spectator sports generate intense emotional reactions (Cottingham, 2012) and the pursuit of emotional arousal is one of the key motives to attend events (Funk et al., 2009). As a result, the sport experience would have a direct effect on intention to purchase team products (Biscaia et al., 2012) and warrants the necessity to integrate emotion into studying impulse buying of team merchandise.

The Appraisal-tendency framework (ATF) is used to examine how specific emotions experienced by sports consumers influence their impulse buying decisions. According to ATF, emotion is elicited when an individual appraises his/her experience along six themes: certainty, pleasantness, attentional activity, control, anticipated effort, and responsibility. Emotion influences behaviors in that one’s judgment and decision will be made in line with the core appraisal themes that characterize his/her emotion. For example, anger is characterized by high levels of certainty and control such that an angry person tends to be risk-seeking and optimistic regarding risky and uncertain events (Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

The current study proposes that the emotions elicited from watching sport will influence purchase behavior and sport consumers will evaluate impulse buying decisions in line with the six appraisal themes. Since impulse buying is essentially a risky event (Levy, 1976) and judgment of risk is determined by perceived certainty and control (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), the certainty and control appraisal themes are likely to influence impulse buying of team merchandise. Specifically, emotions of anger, sadness, and happiness differ markedly in the appraisal of certainty and control. Although both negative in valence, anger is associated with higher certainty and control appraisals than sadness. Such difference induces angry people to exhibit more risk-seeking behaviors and optimistic thoughts than sad people (Small & Lerner, 2008). In addition, happiness should influence purchase behavior in a similar pattern to anger because both emotions are high on the certainty and control appraisal themes (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Since the three emotions are commonly experienced by fans when watching sport (Madrigal, 2003; Biscaia et al., 2012), the current research proposes that anger, sadness, and happiness will exert different influences on impulse buying of team merchandise through appraisals of certainty and control and leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: Fans who experience anger and happiness from watching the game will engage in more impulse buying of sport team-licensed merchandise than fans who experienced sadness.
H2: Fans who experience anger and happiness from watching the game will perceive impulse buying of sport team-licensed merchandise as less risky and uncertain than fans who experienced sadness.

An experimental design will be used to study the influence of emotions on impulse purchase of sport team-licensed merchandise. Three short videos of sport contest will be developed and pilot tested to elicit emotional states of happiness, anger, and sadness (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). A sample of sport consumers will be recruited to participate in the main study. Subjects will be randomly assigned to watch one of three videos. After watching, impulse buying behavior will be examined by having subjects choose from a range of sport team-licensed products. Based upon previous research, items to measure perceived risk and uncertainty will be used to examine the two appraisal themes. In addition, a team identification measure will be used to examine the personal connection with the team (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002). Data analysis will be conducted using MANOVA to compare purchase behavior among the three emotional state groups. Path analysis will be used to analyze the mediation role of perceived risk and uncertainty. Data will be collected in January 2016, and results will be presented at the conference.

Theoretically, this study will offer new information to help understand the relatively role of emotion as a state and team identification as a personal trait for impulse buying decisions. Specifically, this study will determine whether emotional states could boost the urge to purchase team-incensed merchandise. Practically, this study will help sport organizations determine when to provide access to merchandise in order to optimize revenue from merchandise sales. Although sport consumer emotions are hard to manage, understanding the behavioral consequences of specific emotions will help managers strategically design their sales efforts.