Branded for Success: Examining the Impact of Communal Brand Associations on Team Identity of a New Sport Brand

Henry Wear, Deakin University
Bob Heere (Advisor), University of South Carolina
Dorothy Collins, University of South Carolina

Saturday, June 3, 2017
Room: Princeton

Marketing - Branding (Professional Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2017-325

As the sport industry has matured over the last decade, the competition for the sport consumer has intensified (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016). While presenting a winning on-the-field product is often a guarantee for financial success, sport organizations cannot always count on their teams to continue their winning ways. To combat this issue, and form a competitive advantage in the sport industry, many sport organizations are beginning to think of their organizations as not simply a collection of players, coaches and managers, but as brands to be managed (Ross, 2006). From a sport marketer’s perspective, it is difficult to rely on success or team composition based characteristics to promote a sport brand due to the unpredictable nature of the sport product. Conversely, brand characteristics regarding the logo, color scheme, or communal nature of the sport organization and its consumption can be guided and manipulated by sport marketers. Ultimately, from crafting and building these associations organizations hope to create a community of consumers that are attached to, and identify strongly with their brand. These brand communities have received increased attention within the sport management literature as, organizations are seeking to build meaningful relationships with their consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Through the establishment of a brand community, organizations can create a sense of empowerment amongst their consumers, allowing for a more positive perception of the brand (Cova & Pace, 2006).

However, there remains a gap in the literature that examines how brand associations, as individual components, contribute to a larger sense of brand community, and how these components can then shape a shape broader consumer behavior processes such as team and organizational identity. The ramifications for such understanding are quite important, and could provide sport organizations with pertinent information that could inform brand management strategies that drive consumer behavior through the establishment of brand communities. From this, the purpose of this study was to: 1) analyze the impact individual brand association components hold on team identification to a new sport brand, and 2) to investigate how these impacts changed throughout the team’s inaugural season. While these strategies could be valuable for numerous sport organizations, they could be particularly important for new sport organizations, as it could provide marketers with the insights into how individual brand associations create identified fans that contribute to long-term success.

To effectively examine the way brand associations develop and impact consumer identification over the course of a new sport brand’s inaugural season a longitudinal, quantitative research design was employed. Using multi-level model analysis, changes in impact of brand associations and consumer identification were measured. In this case, a new professional minor league baseball organization was targeted. Data collection occurred in lead up to the team’s first home game (T1), at the conclusion of the team’s final home game (T2), and the final data collection will occur at the end of November 2016 (T3). To extend the literature, combat any potential single item measurement issues, and further the understanding of community oriented brand associations, an adapted brand associations instrument was used. The adapted brand associations measure was developed based on the work of Gladden and Funk (2002), Underwood et al. (2001), and Muniz and O’Guinn (2001). The scale incorporated brand associations that are traditional sport team product oriented (Gladden & Funk, 2002), but also brand associations that are based upon the typical characteristics of a brand community (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Underwood et al., 2001). While past literature has regarded brand association constructs as parts to a larger brand associations score (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006), in this research the authors examined each brand associations component individually as drivers of consumer outcomes (Biscaia et al., 2015). To analyze team identification, Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) instrument of organizational identity (OID) was used to allow for enough predictive strength to analyze the direct effect of each brand association on team identity.
Prior to multi-level model analysis, a measurement model was tested to examine the reliability and validity of the measures. Reliability analysis of the scale and its application to the second sample provided Cronbach's alpha values of the constructs ranging from .80 to .85, with the scale's overall Cronbach alpha score of .93. Inter-item correlations ranged from .51 to .76, while item-to-total correlations ranged from .62 to .84. A confirmatory factor analysis, or measurement model was then developed to further analyze the scale. The resulting model provided evidence of an adequate fit of the data ($\chi^2$/df = 2.68, $p < 0.01$; NFI = .92; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .05) and each item loaded on their respective construct with values ranging from .53 to .92. Composite reliabilities of the constructs ranged .81 to .96, while Average variance extracted values exceeded the recommended cut-off value of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

While brand associations have been examined numerous times in the sport management literature, the researchers' goal was to synthesize the concepts of branding and brand associations with the understanding of brand communities. Through examining a new sport brand, it was found that brand associations grounded in the communal nature of consumption held the greatest impact in fostering identified fans. While the research will be comprised of three data collection points, preliminary analysis of the first two rounds of data collection provide some interesting findings. In T1, the brand associations of shared group experience ($\beta = .60$, $p \leq .05$) and rituals ($\beta = .44$, $p \leq .05$) were found to hold the largest impact on team identification, while brandmark ($\beta = .36$, $p \leq .05$) and rivalry ($\beta = .31$, $p \leq .05$) were also significant influencers of team identity. In T2, the brand associations of rituals ($\beta = .85$, $p \leq .05$), shared group experience ($\beta = .71$, $p \leq .05$), and social space ($\beta = .28$, $p \leq .05$) held the greatest impact, while brandmark ($\beta = .25$, $p \leq .05$) remained as a significant positive driver of team identification.

Though the preliminary analysis provides some interesting results, there may still be some change following the third data collection. Upon completion of this study in November 2016, the results may further showcase the intricacies of brand management, and how brand associations impact the development of team identity. In the preliminary analysis, it was the communal-oriented brand associations that held the greatest impact both prior to and after a new sport brand’s inaugural season. The authors will present the results of all three data collections, and implications and insights will be drawn from the full longitudinal multi-level analysis.