The Role of Relationship Benefits in Determining the Value of Fan Relationship with International Sports Teams

Yiran Su, Temple University
Thilo Kunkel (Advisor), Temple University

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The North American soccer market is growing. For example, an exhibition game between Manchester United and Real Madrid drew 109,318 fans to Michigan Stadium in 2015, representing the highest attended live soccer match in the U.S. (Reddy, 2015). To reap more revenue from this growing and lucrative market, the best soccer teams from Europe have prioritized the mission of expanding their American fan-base in their strategic marketing plans. However, they are entering a competitive market that is domestically dominated by Major League Soccer (MLS) teams. Therefore, building a strong relationship with American fans is vital for international teams. From a relationship marketing perspective, a strong and unique connection with consumers’ self-concept will lead to a competitive advantage compared to other teams, thus increasing consumption and avoiding brand-switching (Fournier, 1998). For example, sports fans are more willing to spend time and money on “their team” rather than other brands with which they have a low self-brand connection (Ferro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013). However, the relationship benefits that drive consumers’ self-brand connection and consumer share (i.e., time and money spent on brand) have received limited attention in the literature, although consumer share is of utmost importance to sports teams in a competitive environment. The current research aims to examine the causal relations between the benefits of relationships perceived by fans and relationship value (i.e., self-brand connection and consumer share) as the performance outcome of an international soccer team.

Literature Review

The current study is built on relationship marketing knowledge. Relationship marketing refers to an ongoing cooperative relationship between the marketer and the consumer that leads to various relationship outcomes favoring the brand (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). In the sports context, researchers found that the stronger the emotional attachment fans developed to the team, the more likely they are to engage in team consumption behaviors (Grönroos, 1996). Therefore, self-brand connection and consumer share as two relationship outcomes that are of particular importance to sports teams. Self-brand connection describes the consumer–brand relationship when a brand is highly connected to the consumer's self-concept and reflects the ideal self of the consumer (Cheng, White, & Charlin, 2012). It is an important driver of consumers’ emotional connection with the brand (Ferraro et al., 2011). Consumer share is another key indicator of fan relationship value, which captures the brand performance in a competitive business environment by taking the brand’s competitors into account. Fans’ share of wallet and time are two dimensions of teams’ consumer share, which are the percentage of a consumer’s spending within a given product category on a particular brand (Hickman, 2015).

Brands provide relationship benefits to consumers to develop and maintain a committed consumer relationship. It has been established that after receiving a benefit from the brand, such as entertainment derived from the performance of the team, people feel an ingrained psychological pressure to reciprocate, which results in various relationship outcomes favoring the brand (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). Therefore, we propose that relationship benefits provided by following an international soccer team will influence both fans’ self-brand connection and consumer share. Drawing knowledge from sports management literature and qualitative findings from previous research, we identified five relationship benefits fans received from following an international team: empowerment, entertainment, social opportunity, vicarious achievement, and uniqueness (Funk, Filo, Beaton, & Pritchard, 2009; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Su & Kunkel, 2016). Thus, we hypothesize,

H1: There will be a significant positive relationship between relationship benefits and fans’ self-brand connection with the international team they follow.
H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between relationship benefits and fans’ share of wallet with the international team they follow.

H3: There will be a significant positive relationship between relationship benefits and fans’ share of time with the international team they follow.

Method
We recruited American soccer fans, who follow European soccer teams, from social media channels and fan forums. The data collection is currently ongoing, and the results presented below are based on a preliminary analysis of 106 respondents. A multi-item questionnaire was used to assess the following six constructs: empowerment, entertainment, social opportunity, vicarious achievement, uniqueness, and self-brand connection. The measurement items were adapted from existing literature and qualitative findings (e.g., Funk et al., 2009). Individual items were totaled and divided by the number of items to obtain a mean score for regression analysis. In terms of share of wallet and time, we asked participants to report the amount of money and time they spent on the international team they followed as well as other sport teams. Share of wallet and time were thus the ratio between the international team spending and the total spending. The hypotheses were tested through the estimation of three multiple regression models using SPSS 23 (one for each of the dependent variables of the study).

Results
Cronbach’s alpha for the six variables ranged from .79 to .92, indicating high reliability of measurement. The results of the regression analysis showed that relationship benefits were significantly related to fans’ self-brand connection (R² = .70), share of wallet (R² = .14), and share of time (R² = .13). Empowerment (b = .42, p < .01), entertainment (b = .14, p < .05), social opportunity (b = .18, p < .01), uniqueness (b = .34, p < .01) were significant predictors of self-brand connection. Entertainment was positively related to share of wallet (b = .25, p < .05), and social opportunities was significantly related to share of wallet at the 0.1 level (b = .22, p = .057). With respect to share of time, vicarious achievement (b = .21, p < .05) was the key predictor.

Discussion
The findings confirm the positive relationship between relationship benefits and relationship value and extend them in a sport marketing context. Both the attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of the fan-team relationship are found to be influenced by the perceived benefits fans receive from their favorite international team. The results show that consumers’ self-brand connection with the brand is mainly determined by the perceived relationship benefits they receive from following the international team. This is consistent with previous research that argued that benefits deepen the relationship between the consumer and the brand (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2002). We advance this knowledge by showing which benefits influence fans’ self-brand connection with their teams. The results also highlight the importance of perceived entertainment and socialization benefits in determining fans’ share of wallet as well as the role of vicarious achievement in determining how fans spend their time. Given the limited sample size of this preliminary study, we expect to present a more profound examination at NASSM, with a focus on the (mediating) role of self-brand connection in the relationship between benefits and consumer share. This study will provide a foundation for future research regarding relationship marketing in a sport context and how sport teams can maintain strong and profitable relationships with their fans.

References available on request.