Self-Congruence in Professional Sports: Exploring Congruity between the Personalities of Sports Fans and Their Favorite Teams

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Introduction
Individuals can become fans of a sports team for any number of reasons, but convincing them to stay with one team throughout their fandom lifetime may prove a more difficult task. One way to connect with sports fans at a deeper level is by showing individuals how association with a team can enhance their own self-image through the team’s establishment of a brand personality (Aaker, 1997; Belk, 1988; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Sirgy, 1982; Tsiotsou, 2012, 2013). While consumer behavior literature does indicate a relationship between perceived product and consumer personalities (Sirgy, 1982), sports marketing literature has not explored this topic in the context of sports teams. Using Tsiotsou’s (2012) five-dimension sport brand personality scale, the study’s purpose is to examine the potential relationship and effects between the brand personality of professional sports teams and the fans that attach themselves to these teams.

Theoretical Framework
Aaker (1997) defined brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (p. 347). Brands can be used to reinforce an individual’s self-image, as purchase choices are dependent on previously held associations and self-perceived personality characteristics (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1989; Sirgy, 1982). Consumers can justify their actual and desired image through the consumption of specific brands they find to personify who they are and who they wish to be.

Sport consumers can emulate this process through consumption patterns toward their favorite team. It is important to distinguish sport team personalities from non-sport brands due to the multiple aspects that consumers use to evaluate a sport team image, including fans of the team (Tsiotsou, 2012). Thus, perceptions toward sports fans are directly involved in the creation of the overall image of a team, indicating that individual personalities are likely to have a direct influence on the perceived personality of a team. In order to explore this idea, the study will use self-congruence and social identity theory to explain why individuals become deeply involved with sports teams. In the sports realm, fans can establish their perceived in-group and the remaining out groups through associated fandom with a “favorite team” (Tafjel & Turner, 1986). When taking into account an individual’s desire to emulate behaviors appropriate for an “in-group,” it can be suggested that sports fans perceive their favorite team to hold congruent personality characteristics to their self.

Along with this, it is predicted that congruence between consumers’ perceived individual personality and the personality of their favorite sport team will significantly impact both behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty aspects. Loyalty is an important outcome of both sport and non-sport related products, as many industries are interested in establishing loyal and lasting consumers (Anisimova, 2007; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Freling & Forbes, 2005; Kim, et al., 2001; Kressman, et al., 2006). The relationship between personality congruence and sports team loyalty can be strengthened when consumers’ exhibit higher levels of involvement with their favorite team (Tsiotsou, 2013). The following hypotheses and research question were proposed from this evidence:

H1: Sports consumers' reported personality traits of their favorite sports team are positively correlated with their reported self-image.
H2: Sports consumers who report higher levels of self-congruency with their favorite sports team will report higher levels of brand loyalty.
H3: Sports consumers’ involvement levels with their favorite team will moderate the relationship between self-congruency and brand loyalty.
RQ1: Which individual characteristics and/or associations are more likely to influence self-congruity with a favorite...
sports team (i.e. gender, age, league fandom)?

Methodology
This study will test the three hypotheses using an online survey method to test for consumer/team personality congruence, along with brand loyalty and team involvement factors. The independent variables are sports team brand personality and consumer individual personality. The dependent variables are brand loyalty and team involvement. Participants will be self-identified sports fans, as they will be required to indicate their favorite professional sports team at the beginning of the survey.

Sports team brand personality and consumer personality will be measured using Tsiotsou’s (2012) sport team brand personality scale on a seven-point Likert scale. It will be adapted to “I” statements for the individual personality section. For example, the item “The team is self motivated” can be adapted to “I am self motivated” in order to connect with the consumer’s perception of self. Loyalty and involvement items will be measured using a series of seven-point Likert scales adapted from the literature (Tsiotsou, 2013; Zaichkowsky, 1994).

Implications
This study starts by expanding the literature on presence and effects of self-congruence in the professional sports marketing realm. By applying Sirgy’s (1982) ideas about enhancement of self-image through consumption, positive self-congruity between the self-reported personalities of a sports fan and their favorite team can indicate a greater likelihood for consumption behaviors supporting teams. Through loyalty and involvement outcomes, the results will be able to highlight the importance of connecting with consumers through brand personality. Along with this, this study seeks to explain self-congruence patterns based on demographic and psychographic measures with the final research question.