The Impact of Socially Responsible Acts on Fans’ Behavior Intentions in Professional Sports: The Mediating Effect of Authenticity

Suhan Ku, Texas A&M University
Matthew Walker (Advisor), Texas A&M University

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Social responsibility (SR) has drawn attention in the business context for the past few decades. Researchers have noted that CSR is an important mechanism for both corporations and societies to gain mutual benefits (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Madrigal & Boush, 2008). From this viewpoint, organizations seize an opportunity to develop competitive advantages through differentiating themselves through SR, which can positively influence on society (Porter & Kramer, 2002). However, firms need an additional effort to acquire customers’ positive assessment to gain the competitive advantage since there is a gap between the intention of socially responsible acts and the perception of consumers (Lichtenstein et al., 2004). This research seeks to bridge this gap by applying the attribution theory based on customers’ perspective.

The purpose of the study is to examine the role of perceived SR authenticity as a predictor of sport consumer behavioral intentions. Accordingly, three research guide the investigation: (1) what precursors (i.e., impact, fit, transparency, responsiveness, reparation, and motive) influence perceived SR authenticity and behavioral intentions; (2) does authenticity mediate the precursor/behavioral intentions link; and (3) are there perceptual differences if the SR initiative emanates from league, team, or players?

As in general business, increasing attention has been paid to SR in the field of sport management. Especially, given that “… sport possesses the power to captivate and unite individuals within communities and create environments for contributing to social capital” (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007, p. 52), SR has become an viable research domain. With classification of different subjects, researchers have investigated the outcomes of SR among professional teams (Chang, Kang, Ko, & Connaughton, 2017; Walker, Hills, & Heere, 2017), leagues (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Trendafilova, Babiak, & Heinze, 2013), non-profit organizations (Walker & Kent, 2013; Walker & Mercado, 2016), and players (Agyemang & Singer, 2013; Babiak, Mills, Tainsky, & Juravich, 2012; Kim & Walker, 2013) although there is little research to compare the effectiveness of SR in accordance to different level of sport segments.

However, not all the social programs arouse good impressions from stakeholders and consumers. Although customers tend to reward firms that engage in SR (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004), there are segments of individuals that question SR motives and behaviors (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). This line of research explains why consumers would negatively perceive companies despite their philanthropic acts (Alhouti, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016; Walker, Heere, Parent, & Drane, 2010; Webb & Mohr, 1998). The discrepancy between SR intentions and public awareness can mar the effects of SR since the underlying motives are questioned (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Therefore, it is important to bridge the awareness/attitude gap in SR scholarship to reveal the psychological mechanisms through which SR judgments are assigned.

As a part of this process, researchers have investigated perceived authenticity (Alhouti et al., 2016; McShane & Cunningham, 2012), which is centered on honesty, genuineness, and actuality (Beverland, 2006). Further, the concept of authenticity helps establish the criteria to accept values and beliefs as appropriate (Eagly, 2005). In other words, once people deem an object authentic (or inauthentic), they perceive the object as worth (or worthless). Given that consumers utilize the judgment on authenticity for various purposes, such as decision-making and building relationship with others (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), authenticity can be effectively exploited as a predictor to explain attitude and by extension. In spite of the importance, little research has been conducted in the field of sport management (Heinze, Soderstrom, & Zdroik, 2014), which underscores the necessity to further address the relationship between SR and authenticity in the field. Research solely conducted in qualitative standpoint also reflects on the scarcity of reliability and objectivity that hinders the generalization of an idea that can be fully fulfilled by a
Authenticity can be examined in the basis of attribution theory because the theory offers a central idea to explain how people know and/or feel about a certain organization (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Such associations play an important role to help individuals perceive the real traits of organizations, which leads to a variety of organizational responses (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). According to the persuasion knowledge theory (Friestad & Wright, 1994), customers are likely to utilize their knowledge about the cause and the work of acts to solve the problem so that they identify the meaningful difference of the acts. In this regard, various attributions have been investigated in the business literature, including (1) the impact of SR acts (Alhouti et al., 2016), (2) the fit between the product and the SR acts of an organization (Alhouti et al., 2016), (3) the transparency of decision-making, the practice, and the outcome of SR (Heinze et al., 2014; Waddock & Googins, 2011), (4) responsiveness of a company toward social issues (Carroll, 1979; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015), (5) reparation of a corporation as the rectification of its misbehavior (Alhouti et al., 2016), and (6) the motive of a firm on SR (Alhouti et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2010). These attributions will be examined to explain the reason of the attitude and behavioral intentions of consumers.

In order to fulfill the goal of this study, the data collection is currently in progress through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (mTurk). This experimental research will randomly select respondents to read manipulated article concerning one SR activity operated by the National Football League, the Houston Texans, or J.J. Watt. The articles are based on the 2017 hurricane Harvey disaster in Texas, which resulted in more than 88 fatalities and billions of dollars of property damage. Furthermore, the SR acts, which are in actual response to the catastrophic disaster by each level of football context, are manipulated in the amount of money and ways of contribution to ensure internal validity. Fundraising participation and NFL segments (i.e., league, a team, and a player) identification level are also controlled. Perceived authenticity and other predictors, including impact, fit, transparency, responsiveness, reparation, and motive, are gauged, and purchase intentions and word-of-mouth are dependent variables. The causal relationships among predictors, authenticity, and behavioral intentions, including purchase intention and word-of-mouth, will be tested by structural equation modeling (SEM) and the model will report the mediating effect of authenticity. Furthermore, this model will indicate moderating effects of different levels of professional sport initiatives on behavioral intentions.

The research is expected to address a meaningful contribution to academic and practical fields. In academia, the results should provide the bridge among stimulus-attitude-behavior context in the basis of behavioral science, which broadens our understanding of discourse between SR and authenticity in the professional sport context. The research will also contribute to sport practitioners with helping them understand how fans respond to authentic SR and how differently consumers react to distinct sport segments, such as leagues, teams, and players, which leads to new directions to find the way of higher SR effectiveness.