Rebranding in Sports: Examining Fan Response to Logo Redesign and the Role of Logo Evaluation and Fan Identification

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Rebranding is a ubiquitous phenomenon among contemporary branding practices. In the sport industry, this is a common occurrence, and it happens for a number of reasons, including a desire to increase merchandise sales or to rebuild an organizational reputation (Ahn, Seo, Lee, & Pedersen, 2012). In rebranding, logo redesign is the most frequently utilized strategy. A logo is the most salient visual brand element that acts as a key component of brand equity (Henderson & Cote, 1998), and has a crucial influence on brand image, loyalty, and recognition (Kohlia & Suri, 2002). Despite the significance of a logo in rebranding practices, there have been few academic efforts to examine logo design in relation to marketing. Particularly in the context of sport, few scholars have investigated how logo changes affect the relationship between fans and a sport brand.

While research is limited, what we do know is that a relationship exists between brand attitude and purchase intention. Walsh, Winterich, and Mittal (2010) claimed that a logo consequently generates brand associations, and a change in logo therefore significantly influences consumers’ attitudes toward a brand. Janiszewski and Meyvis (2001) also argued that attitudes toward a given logo serve as indicators for consumer attitudes toward a brand. Purchase intention is a key element, because logo redesign may impact merchandise sales. In the same vein, Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) attitudinal theory suggests that consumers’ attitudes toward a certain object elicits behaviors. For brands, these behaviors may come in the form of brand loyalty, which can be defined as a deeply held commitment to re-purchase a favored product or service in the future (Oliver, 1997). Previous research suggests that a positive relationship between consumer attitude and brand loyalty exists (Starr & Rubinson, 1978), and loyalty is an outcome of positive brand attitude (Keller, 1993). Moreover, several studies have demonstrated that brand loyalty directly influences purchase intentions (Mittal, Ross, & Baldasare, 1998; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002). In sport literature, fans’ attitudes toward sport brands have been researched along with the concept of fan identification. According to prior studies on identification, strongly identified consumers have stronger connections with the brand (Escalas & Bettman, 2003), and consider the brand to be a part of their lives (Fournier, 1998). Highly identified fans tend to demonstrate long-term brand loyalty and favorable attitudes toward team or league brands (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimmerman, 1997), sponsored brands (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001), team-licensed products (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002), and media consumption (Mahony & Moorman, 2000). Unfortunately, redesigned logos do not always garner positive responses from consumers, and empirical evidence regarding consumer responses to logo change is mixed. The previous literature on logo redesign suggests that strongly identified consumers evaluate logo changes negatively, and demonstrate negative attitudes toward the related brand, while consumers with low brand commitment do not regard logo change as meaningful (Walsh, Winterich, & Mittal, 2010, 2011). Within the degrees of logo change, some researchers have found that a higher degree of logo change increases the strength of brand associations and leads to a more favorable brand attitude as compared to the original logo (van Hooft & Das, 2015; van Riel & van den Ban, 2001). Van Hooft and Das (2015) argue that though logo changes may not be favored at first exposure, they have a positive impact on brand evaluation. Other researchers, however, argue that logo changes evoke more negative brand attitudes (Walsh et al., 2010). In sport marketing literature, Ahn et al. (2012) found that highly identified fans reacted negatively to logo changes. Recently, Walsh, Clavio, Blaszka, and Phillips (2017) found that initial response is mixed, and is not necessarily as negative as previous research suggested. The research outcomes may differ due to various degrees of logo redesign. Today, some sport brands introduce new logos with subtle changes, which are very similar to the original logos (e.g., Pittsburgh Penguins, the National Football League), while others reveal new logos with substantial changes in both color and shape (e.g., Minnesota Timberwolves, the English Premier League). These
variances are driven by the different types of rebranding strategy. According to Muzellec and Lambkin (2006), evolutionary rebranding carries a minor change in positioning and marketing aesthetics while a major change represents revolutionary rebranding. Thus, an inconsiderable logo modification embodies evolutionary rebranding and a substantial logo redesign symbolizes revolutionary rebranding. Consequently, fans’ responses and the extent to which their attitudes change may vary when fans are evaluating different degrees of newly introduced logos.

This study aims to investigate the effect of logo redesign on brand attitude, purchase intention, and brand loyalty, and the role of logo evaluation and fan identification. To this end, the logo of the National Basketball Association (NBA) will be redesigned based on the concepts of evolutionary and revolutionary rebranding. Additionally, stimuli will include a logo change in color for further in-depth analysis. Data will be collected from a sample of the NBA fans derived from Amazon’s MTurk through an online survey program (Qualtrics.com). Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the three logo redesign conditions (minor/major/color changes). First, the participants will view the original logo of the NBA and will be asked to complete survey questions related to fan identification (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), brand attitude (Ahn et al., 2012; Bruner & Hensel, 1992), purchase intention (Dodd, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007), brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978), and logo evaluation (Henderson & Cote, 1998; Walsh et al., 2010). Additionally, attitude toward rebranding will be measured using 4 items. Next, participants will be exposed to one of the redesigned NBA logos, and they will be asked to respond to survey questions on brand attitude, purchase intention of merchandise featuring the redesigned logo, brand loyalty, and evaluation of the redesigned logo. This research measures brand attitude, purchase intention, brand loyalty, and logo evaluation twice (before and after exposure to the logo change) to investigate changes that may occur after participants have been exposed to the redesigned logo.

Examining the ways various degrees of logo redesign affect the consumer is beneficial for both theoretical and practical implications. The results will provide a theoretical contribution on the academia of sport rebranding and logo design. It will extend previous findings by underscoring the importance of a critical component of brand aesthetics in the sport industry. The findings will also contribute to professionals by providing significant insights on effective design utilization for sport rebranding practices.