“If You Ain’t First, You’re Last!” The Impact of Advertising Losing Teams on Sport Fans’ Identity and Consumption Behavior

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What happens when a company spends copious amounts of money sponsoring a team that loses a pivotal game? Should the sponsor continue to advertise their brand with the team or should they disassociate in a new advertisement? What if the company tweaks their message to recognize the failure and shifts the focus to a more constructive action (e.g., “shaking off” the loss)? While these inquiries are all interesting, sport sponsorship researchers actually know little about advertising with a team that did not win a high-stakes game. Drawing from notions of self-identity threat and compensatory consumption, this study aims to (1) understand what consumers go through when their favorite team loses, and (2) determine the types of advertisement messages that receive favorable evaluations from fans.

People experience identity threat when an idea, value, or belief they hold is challenged (White, Argo, & Sngupta, 2012). Social psychology and sport marketing scholars also identify that fans perceive their favorite team as an extended self (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Therefore, when one’s favorite team loses, this triggers social identity threat, as well as negative self-conscious emotions such as shame. When individuals feel shame, or are ego-depleted, they seek to deny, hide, or escape from the situation (Tracy, Robins, & Tangney, 2007).

Method and Results

A series of pilot studies were conducted to confirm the deleterious effects of losing on fans’ identity. Our first pilot study of a general sample of sports fans revealed that fans who recalled a time when their team lost reported significantly higher identity threat on one measure (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2002) than those who recollected an overall game experience. A second pilot study, which incorporated a highlight video displaying a high-profile loss to a top rival in a sample of fans of a large Midwestern university, replicated the identity threat effect. Fans also reported feeling significantly more shame and less pride after a loss. A third pilot study added both a highlight video and a series of fictitious advertisements that manipulated the size of the vehicle from an automobile sponsor (Audi) and association with a sponsored team (Chicago Cubs). Results for our measures of identity threat, pride, and shame were reproduced. Generally, fans did not report any significant differences in social media intentions, brand sincerity, and sponsor fit. However, when considering team identification, we found that avid fans reported higher levels of each of these measures, and in several instances when considering the sponsor manipulations, than casual fans. To build off these notions, we conducted a fourth pilot study to examine the impact of different message types on advertisement evaluations in another high-profile loss situation involving the New York Yankees.

Discussion

The current investigation seeks to understand what sponsors should do in the midst of a sponsored team's devastating loss. Given that social media platforms allow sponsors to swiftly adapt to fluctuating situations prevalent in sport, our findings will provide practical insights, as well as theoretical explanations as to how sponsors should use different approaches in advertising.