Self-branding through NFL Team Fanship: Fans' Desired Self-Image and Its Implications for Branding Practices

Jerred Junqi Wang, University of West Georgia
Jessica Braunstein-Minkove (Advisor), Towson University
Thomas Baker (Advisor), University of Georgia
Bo Li, Miami University
James J. Zhang (Advisor), University of Georgia

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The rapid development of media technology has largely expanded individuals’ social network and empowered them to engage in self-branding activities at an unprecedented pace and level, in which each individual treats himself/herself as a brand and markets it to interested audiences in his/her social network (Marwick, 2010; Rampersad, 2008). Similar to the general brand, one’s self-brand is a cultural and ideological object that reflects cultural rituals and social dynamics. A thorough exploration of fans’ desired self-image, in conjunction with self-branding behavior, could help sport teams, corporate sponsors, and athletes understand their fans and further frame the match-up effect through branding practices.

In the process of self-branding, people are motivated to utilize symbolic consumption to sophisticatedly depict their desired self-image to facilitate their socialization (Epstein, 1983; Rosenberg, 1979). Given that NFL team fanship is widely noticeable, able to evoke certain specifiable reactions from others, and controllable by individuals, it is an effective medium that carries symbolic value. When appropriately managed, it could be used to sophisticatedly build one’s desired self-image. According to the model of motivation process (Funk, 2008; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004), unfulfilled needs, wants, and desires in the continuum of consumption would arouse psychological tension, which is an unpleasant psychological state or feeling. This psychological tension drives consumers to seek outside stimuli; consumption behavior is likely to follow if they perceive that a product stimulus is likely to satisfy their unfulfilled desires through reinforced provision. Building upon the aforementioned literature, this study explored what self-images are desired by NFL fans and the importance of these self-images in fan behavior. Through three research phases that integrated both qualitative and quantitative investigations including focus-group studies, expert reviews, and three cross-sectional surveys (N1=104, N2=559, and N3=304), a factor structure of desired self-image consisting of two dimensions (i.e., athletic image and social attractiveness) and 18 self-images were identified. Findings confirmed the importance of desired self-image in influencing fans' affective and actual behavior. Specifically, athletic image (social attractiveness) exerted positively (negatively) impacts team identification (βAthletic-Image = .487, p < .01; βSocial-Attractiveness = -.042, p > .05), game attendance (βAthletic-Image = .276, p < .01; βSocial-Attractiveness = -.465, p < .01), licensed merchandise purchasing (βAthletic-Image = .270, p < .01; βSocial-Attractiveness = -.319, p < .01), social media consumption (βAthletic-Image = .357, p < .01; βSocial-Attractiveness = -.452, p < .01), and television consumption (βAthletic-Image = .215, p < .05; βSocial-Attractiveness = -.268, p < .05), which could be attributed to the provision of related symbolic meanings in NFL team fanship (evidenced by negative or positive mean values of desired self-images minus team-images).

The specific desired self-images, underlying dimensions, and their impacts on fan behavior identified in this study depict fans’ self-branding behavior. As suggested by the framework of brand architecture (Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017), connected brands would be evaluated by consumers within a broader context instead of isolated unities. The findings about fans’ desired self-image could provide branding references for sport teams, corporate sponsors, and professional athletes that are naturally and strongly connected in the context of NFL consumption.