The Impact of Sport Team Rebranding on Sport Consumers’ Response: A Case of Korean Professional Baseball League

Ari Kim, Towson University
Yoojung Rhee, Gallaudet University
Keunsu Han, Towson University

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Rebranding is defined as “the practice of building a new name representative of a differentiated position in the mindset of stakeholders and a distinctive identity from competitors” (Muzellec, Doogan, & Lambkin, 2003, p. 32). Rebranding can consist of changes to one or more brand elements (Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006). If the changes are only minor improvements to the brand (i.e., logo, slogan, imagery), they are known as evolutionary branding, whereas major changes (i.e., new name, core business philosophies) are known as revolutionary rebranding (Daly & Moloney, 2005; Muzellec & Lambkin, 2006).

Previous research in Minor League Baseball context has shown that successful rebranding strategies can result in increased attendance and merchandise sales, which we can likely attribute to increased interest and excitement in the local community (Wachter, 2010). Additionally, rebranding can result in generating new advertising and sponsorship opportunities (Dwyer, Le Crom, Tomasini, & Smith, 2011; Wachter, 2010). Conversely, rebranding might bring considerable, potential risks because it takes a while to build a strong fan base (Keller, 2002). However, previous academic efforts to examine rebranding outcomes of professional sport franchises heavily weighted on investigating short-term financial outcomes, not fan-brand relationship. To fill this gap in the literature, the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of evolutionary rebranding (minor improvement to the brand, such as changing logos or slogans) and revolutionary rebranding (major changes such as new names or core business philosophies).

Hypothesis 1: Evolutionary rebranding would lead to higher consumer-brand quality than revolutionary rebranding.

Hypothesis 2: Revolutionary rebranding would lead to higher willingness to pay for team merchandise than evolutionary rebranding.

Hypothesis 3: Level of team identification would moderate the effect of rebranding on consumer-brand quality and willingness to pay.

To test the three hypotheses, a two by two (level of novelty of rebranding: evolutionary vs. revolutionary x level of team identification: high vs. low) between-subjects experimental design will be employed in the context of Korean professional baseball league to test the three hypotheses. A pretest has been conducted on four fictitious news articles (i.e., two levels of rebranding novelty by two team brands) that included images to serve as stimuli in the experiment for a manipulation check. For the main study, participants will be recruited on sports blogs, fan sites, and social media pages that Korean baseball fans frequently visit to follow sports-related news, aiming to recruit 120 participants (30 participants per condition).

This proposed study will have following contributions: (a) academically, this study helps augment and extend the existing team rebranding literature by focusing on its effects on consumers’ psychological and behavioral responses; (b) practically, the study results identifying consumer response to rebranding strategies will serve practices guides that inform sport marketers of professional baseball teams’ development of long-term strategic marketing plans that better create and maintain relationships between themselves and their fans. Results as well as additional practical and theoretical implications of the findings will be addressed.