

# Sunday in the Steel city! Value and meanings in the consumption of team licensed merchandise

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## Aim of paper and research questions

Sport licensed items include articles of clothing or other products that carry the name and/or logo of a sport organisation. With revenues in 2004 ranging from \$3 billion for the NFL to \$2.6 billion for U.S. collegiate programs to \$1.5 billion for the NHL, licensing has become a significant revenue source in sport (Covell, 2007).

Despite the widespread presence and popularity of team licensed products, as well as their contribution to the bottom-line, research conducted specifically on sport licensing has not been extensive. The present study will attempt to build on existing literature by focusing not only on what items sport fans purchase but also on what value and meanings those items hold for fans. The Pittsburgh Steelers, a storied franchise of the National Football League, will serve as the unit of study.

## Literature review

The topic of licensing has been discussed as part of larger studies on sport consumer behavior (e.g., Trail, Fink & Anderson, 2003), behavioral loyalty (e.g., Mahony, Madrigal & Howard, 2000), even brand equity (e.g., Gladden, Milne & Sutton, 1998). The one factor that has probably been examined the most in relation to consumption of sport licensed items has been fan identification. Sport fans with high levels of identification have been shown to regularly display team licensed merchandise (Wann & Branscombe, 1993); to buy and wear team paraphernalia at games and on other occasions (Kwon, Trail & Anderson, 2006); and to be more prone to engage in impulsive purchases of sport licensed items (Kwon & Armstrong, 2002; 2006).

Surprisingly, one of the areas mostly unexplored is that of meanings attached to sport possessions, which, given the widespread presence of symbolic rituals and behaviors in sport, would be a natural line of inquiry. To our knowledge, the only research effort to date to explore meanings attached to sport possessions involved Olympic licensed products and identified, in addition to functional, a variety of self-symbolic and social-symbolic meanings in consumers' purchases (Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou & Damsiou, 2007). Mainstream consumer behavior literature, on the other hand, has paid considerable attention to this topic (Belk, 1988; Fournier, 1998; Holt, 1995; Ligas, 2000; Richins, 1994a; 1994b; 1997; Sheth, Newman & Gross, 1991).

## Research design and data analysis

The Pittsburgh Steelers have had a long history of success and fan support as evidenced by their six Super Bowl trophies, their 299 consecutive sell-outs, and the acclaimed "best fan base" in professional football.

Data collection for this research project took place at two home Steelers games during the 2008 NFL season. Study participants, who were displaying at least one licensed Steelers item, were selected randomly from the tailgating and 'Steelers Experience' areas. The instrument used was designed to capture information in four areas: (1) Sport profile of respondents; (2) Consumption of team licensed products; (3) Meanings attached to licensed items owned; and (4) Respondents' demographic profile.

Data collection efforts returned a total of 135 usable questionnaires. Descriptive statistics calculations and other analyses were performed.

## Results

The sample included mostly highly identified male Steelers fans. Well over half of the sample (63%) reported that they owned up to 20 licensed Steelers items. Interestingly, almost everyone in the sample (95%) agreed that they wore their Steelers gear on occasions other than game day.

Respondents felt strongly about the fact that wearing Steelers merchandise made their association with and loyalty toward the team visible to others. Furthermore, analysis of open-ended responses solicited by respondents showed that displaying Steelers merchandise allows fans to: (a) express their pride in the team; (b) identify as a fan of the team and feel a part of the 'Steeler Nation'; and (c) show their support for and allegiance to the team.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our findings point to the fact that team licensed merchandise is a source of pride for highly identified sport fans and a way for them to support their favorite team. Loyal fans' relationship with the team extends beyond game day. Their display of licensed items not only allows them to feel a part of the team as they go about their everyday activities, but it also makes their identity as a fan of the team visible and public.

Gaining a deeper understanding on sport fans' motives and also meanings could significantly assist the promotion of sport licensed items as well as the design and sale of other brand extension offerings intended to grow and revitalise sport brands.

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