

A LONGITUDINAL EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORT TEAM BRAND ASSOCIATIONS AND LOYALTY

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Keywords

Sport Team Brand Associations, Fan Loyalty, Sport Fans
New Teams

Aim

This research aimed to examine the competency and capacity of brand associations in predicting loyalty at three points early in a sport team's lifecycle.

Literature review

Sport organisations are increasingly adopting brand management approaches to facilitate long-term, multi-faceted relationships with fans (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). Such activities are important, as teams must develop strong and unique brands that differentiate them from alternate offerings (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler, 2008). Brand associations represent diverse predictors of sport team loyalty and provide a theoretically sound method to identify the points of attractiveness linked to sport teams. Previous research has linked brand associations with sport team loyalty and identified areas for future research (Doyle, Filo, McDonald & Funk, in press; Gladden & Funk, 2001). The current research aimed to extend present understandings by examining the predictive ability of brand associations on loyalty over a longitudinal period early in a team's lifecycle.

Method and analysis

Quantitative data were gathered from fans ($N = 169$) of a new Australian professional sport team. Data were collected using three online surveys. The first survey collected data six months before the team's first game (October 2010). The second survey collected data during the team's first season (April 2011). The third survey collected data during the team's second season (April 2012). Four seven-point Likert scale items measuring respondent commitment and purchasing intentions were included to assess loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Eleven single-item measures taken from the most cited team brand association scale (Gladden & Funk, 2001) were also included. Items represented the associations Head Coach, Logo, Management, Peer Group Pressure, Pride in Place, Product Delivery, Stadium, Star Players, Success, Escape and Fan Identification. Two associations (Tradition and Nostalgia) were not included due to the new team context. Multiple Linear Regression (MLR) tests were utilised to determine the relationship between the associations (IV) and loyalty (DV) across the 18-month period in question.

Results

Results indicated that the 11 brand associations significantly predicted loyalty across all three data collection points. The adjusted R-squared statistic demonstrated that the associations at Time 1 could explain 37% ($R^2 = .37$) of the variance in team loyalty. In regards to Time 2 and Time 3 data, the associations accounted for 40% ($R^2 = .40$) and 45% ($R^2 = .45$) of the variance in loyalty respectively. Inspection of the standardised beta weights revealed three brand associations contributed significantly to team loyalty at each assessed period. The significant associations were Fan Identification ($b = .36; .36; .39$), Product Delivery ($b = .26; .20; .18$), and Logo ($b = .17; .18; .16$). No other brand association reported a significant relationship with loyalty at Time 1, Time 2 or Time 3.

Discussion

Findings illustrate the utility of brand associations in predicting loyalty, even at early stages of a team's establishment. The explanatory ability of 11 associations is comparable with previous established team brand research, which found that 13 associations predicted between 47% (Gladden & Funk, 2001) to 57% (Doyle et al., in press) of the variance in team loyalty. Similarly, previous research on established teams has found five to eight associations act as significant predictors of US and Australian sport team loyalty (Doyle et al., in press; Gladden & Funk, 2001). Within the current research context, only three associations acted as significant predictors of team loyalty. These associations were significant predictors of loyalty at all three data collection points and their capacity in explaining more of the variance increased over time.

Implications

Findings have implications for sport researchers and practitioners and highlight the usefulness of adopting a brand management perspective. Theoretically, findings illustrate that brand association perceptions can predict team loyalty in formative stages of a team's development. The associations Fan Identification, Product Delivery and Logo acted as significant predictors over an 18-month period. The explanatory power of these associations increased as the team matured. As these associations were significant predictors of team loyalty before the team had even played a game, early marketing efforts should focus on promoting positive images of these attributes and benefits. Marketing campaigns should visibly display team logos and illustrate that the team strives to play in an exciting style. Additionally, fans should be acknowledged as an important part of the team to instill a sense of ownership and capitalize on the importance of Fan Identification in fostering team loyalty.

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