

BRAND PERSONALITY OF PROFESSIONAL SPORTS TEAMS

Ashley Stadler Blank, Joerg Koenigstorfer, and Hans Baumgartner

Marketing Doctoral Candidate, Smeal College of Business, The Pennsylvania State University, Full Professor and Head of the Department of Sport & Health Management, Technische Universität München, Smeal College of Business, Pennsylvania State University

joerg.koenigstorfer@tum.de

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Aim of the study

Professional sports teams are commonly described using human characteristics. For example, teams are often characterized as being 'successful,' 'ambitious,' or 'uncompromising' (Tsiotsou, 2012). Such associations can help teams increase their fan base and attract sponsors, as both individuals and sponsors seek partnerships with brands that express their identity. While previous research has established a variety of scales to reflect products' brand personalities, these scales do not transfer directly to sports teams which have distinct attributes and both compete and cooperate to ensure the success of teams and leagues. Competition often leads to the creation of team rivals which increase fans' fervor. The current work seeks to explore and identify the key dimensions that form the brand personality of sports teams, which to date remain unclear, and assess whether brand personality differs for individuals' perceptions of favorite versus rival teams.

Literature review

Several brand personality scales have been identified in past research, beginning with Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale (BPS), which included five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. While prior work has attempted to apply and extend the BPS to sports contexts, several studies were unable to replicate the BPS dimensions for sports teams (Braunstein & Ross, 2010; Rosenberger & Donahay, 2008; Ross, 2008). This is not surprising, since the traits applicable to brands in general may not be relevant for sports teams and may not capture the sports-specific elements characterizing team personality. Furthermore, attempts to create sports-specific scales have admitted psychometric shortcomings (Braunstein & Ross, 2010).

Methodology, results, discussion and conclusions

We implemented a series of mixed-method studies to derive a list of traits that describe the personality of sports teams. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with seven highly involved, self-identified fans which resulted in 198 distinct traits. Next, we identified 248 traits from existing human and brand personality inventories that were not generated in the interviews. Three expert coders eliminated overlapping traits and traits that were not applicable to sports teams, resulting in 235 items. To reduce the list of items further, 216 students were asked to rate the applicability of the items in describing the personality of sports teams. Traits were retained for the next study if they had a mean applicability score of at least 5.0 (on a 7-point scale). In addition, we retained traits that students wrote in and that did not already appear on the list of 235 items. In total, 113 items were retained.

To test the dimensionality of the items, 45 students were asked to classify the 113 items into distinct groups. A cluster analysis was performed to identify homogenous groups of traits. Based on the results of the clustering, we eliminated 51 items that did not cluster well or that had very similar semantic meanings within a cluster, resulting in 62 items. Next, 702 students were asked to rate the extent to which each of the 62 traits could be used to accurately describe the personality of their favorite, least favorite, or a neutral team, depending on condition. Responses were analyzed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Traits with low target loadings or high cross-loadings on other factors were eliminated. Traits that received little support from existing theory to form sports team-specific dimensions and items that were vague and had the potential to represent more than one dimension were eliminated. Thus, 36 items were retained for the final study.

In the final study, 589 participants responded to an online MTurk survey. Participants rated either their favorite team or the team's biggest rival in their most preferred league, depending on condition. After some further scale purification (partly driven by the desire to develop as compact a scale as possible), confirmatory factor analyses revealed a factor structure consisting of six first-order factors measured by three items each, which loaded on two nearly uncorrelated higher-order factors. The first higher-order factor captures a performance-related dimension and consists of the sub-factors 'success,' 'talent,' and 'dedication.' The second higher-order factor is a character-related dimension and consists of the sub-factors 'admiration' and 'care.' The sub-factor 'entertainment' loads on both higher-order factors. Interestingly, ratings of favorite teams were not consistently higher than ratings of rivals on the performance dimension. However, consistent with self-serving biases, participants evaluated favorite teams more positively on the character dimension compared to rivals.

In conclusion, this study offers a parsimonious professional sports team personality scale consisting of two higher-order factors and six first-order sub-factors. Future research can apply this scale to help discern which sports teams and leagues are most attractive.

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