The Relationships between the CSR, Social Identities, Brand Equity, and Consumer Loyalty of Sport Consumers: A Study from Cross-national Perspectives

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Aim and Literature Review

In Major League Baseball (MLB), 24 of 30 teams have faced decreasing attendance over the last decade (ESPN, 2016). In Taiwan, the most popular professional sport league, the Chinese Professional Baseball League (CPBL), has also faced fluctuating attendance and a shrinking market. Although running a professional CPBL baseball team may be an unprofitable business, the new owners of the two professional teams aimed to give their firms a positive image by adopting corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies (Hu, 2016). The relationship between perceived CSR and brand equity is well understood in the marketing and business areas (e.g., Torres et al., 2012). However, it was only recently that sport management scholars confirmed the relationship (e.g., Gordon & Oja, 2016). By extending Heere and James' (2007) multiple group identity model, we examined the relationships between local city, team, and corporate identity; based on Underwood et al.'s (2001) social identity-brand equity model (SIBE), we examined how the three identities influence brand equity; based on Ross' (2006) Spectator-based Brand Equity (SBBE) framework, we examined brand equity and team loyalty. Thus, we aimed to test the relationships among team and corporate CSR, social identities, brand equity, and consumer loyalty in a path model in professional team sport contexts in Taiwan and the United States. The moderating role of 'country' is also addressed.

Methodology

In total, 467 and 351 valid responses were collected from CPBL and MLB fans respectively via an online survey in December 2017. The scales measure corporate CSR (Berens et al., 2005; Du et al., 2007), team CSR (Chang et al., 2016), city identity (Chang et al., 2016;Yoshida et al., 2015), team identity (Yoshida et al., 2015), corporate identity (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Pérez & del Bosque, 2015), and brand equity (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). All items are evaluated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). A multi-group approach was used to test the moderating effect of country. All composite reliability values (> 0.7), AVEs (> 0.5), and discriminant validity were examined, and all achieved the suggested criteria. The fit indices results showed an acceptable fit with the model (CPBL, CMIN / DF = 3.88, CFI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.07; MLB, CMIN / DF = 3.88, CFI = 0.88, and RMSEA = 0.08). Measurement invariance was established based on Cheung and Rensvold (2002).

Results and Discussion

For both CPBL and MLB, the following statistically significant influences were found: corporate CSR on corporate identity (β= 0.55/ 0.66, $p < 0.001$); team CSR (β= 0.33/ 0.29, $p < 0.001$) and city identity (β= 0.21/ 0.57, $p < 0.001$) on team identity; team identity on corporate identity (β= 0.31/ 0.45, $p < 0.001$); corporate CSR on brand equity (β= 0.26/ 0.11, $p < 0.05$); corporate identity on brand equity (β= 0.51/ 0.87, $p < 0.001$); and brand equity on team

loyalty (β= 0.55/ 0.42, p < 0.001). For the CPBL only: corporate CSR on team identity (β= 0.12, p < 0.05); and team CSR (β= 0.25, p < 0.001) and team identity (β= 0.23, p < 0.001) on brand equity. There were no significant relationships between Team CSR and corporate identity (β= 0.05, p > 0.05), or between city identity and brand equity (β= 0.04, p > 0.05). For the MLB, no significant relationships were found between corporate CSR and team identity (β= -0.06, p > 0.05), between team CSR and brand equity (β= 0.07, p > 0.05), or between team identity and brand equity (β= 0.03, p > 0.05). The results further identified differences in all connections, except for the relationship between corporate CSR and brand equity. They collectively indicated not only the shared but also the culture-based disparity values of sport consumers (Cho, 2016; Stahura et al., 2014).

Conclusions

Corporate CSR initiatives are confirmed as an effective strategy to enhance corporate identity, attract more baseball fans, and increase corporate brand equity. By identifying that enhancement of corporate identity can contribute to corporate brand equity and team loyalty, team sponsors can work with team managers to achieve this by strengthening the connection between fans' city and team identities. For corporations seeking an increase in their brand equity in a globalized market, professional sports teams can offer effective and mutual benefit avenues. While corporate CSR and social identity routes toward an increase in corporate brand equity are considered appropriate in both the CPBL and MLB markets, CPBL consumers seem to emphasize it more than the MLB consumers do. This study advances our understanding of the multiple group identity model, SIBE, and SBBE, and validates the notion that the antecedents (i.e., CSR and social identities) of spectator-based brand equity and its consequences (i.e., team loyalty) may vary by culture.

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