Examining Fan Attitudes Toward Sponsor Brands Using Social Identity Frameworks

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Abstract

The majority of academic research has attempted to explain the effectiveness of sponsorship activities by focusing on individual outcomes (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). The current research builds upon the limited empirical studies that examine sponsorship outcomes using group behaviour theories (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000, 2001). Specifically, this study closely examines tenets of social identity theory (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) within the context of sports sponsorship to test effects of team identification on attitudes toward associated sponsor brands. 1,840 unique surveys were collected from fans of the Queensland Maroons and New South Wales Blues rugby clubs over four timepoints during the 2012 State of Origin series. The results suggest that social identity effects were present regarding ingroup bias toward sponsor brands. Local sponsors were rated higher than non-local sponsors, suggesting that local brands may benefit more from sponsorship.

Track: Tourism, Events and Sports Marketing

1.0 Background

Sponsorship has been defined as "an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity" (Meenaghan, 1991). Sponsorship falls under the category of "unmeasured media" that defines any marketing outside of major media, (television, print, radio, internet and outdoor advertising) and a true understanding of the effects of sponsorship has proven difficult (Cornwell et al., 2005). Recent studies posit and investigate a number of different theories on sponsorship that is focused on the individual; including sponsorship processing techniques(Olson & Thjømøe, 2003) sponsor-event congruity (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Speed & Thompson, 2000) and image transfer (Gwinner, 1997). Most of these theories are based on the associative memory model and the idea that secondary brand associations can be transferred from activities like sponsoring events (Keller, 1993). These theories and studies have advanced current knowledge and understanding of how the individual processes sponsorship activities. To date, there has been much less attention paid to the methods and theories that examine group behaviour in the sponsorship context.

There have been a few relevant studies that have investigated group behaviour in terms of sponsorship effectiveness (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Heere et al., 2011; Madrigal, 2000, 2001). These studies have found a positive relationship between identification with an organisation, event or team and cognitive, affective and behavioural sponsorship outcomes. They have employed the framework of social identity theory as a theoretical foundation for understanding group identification in the sponsorship context. While these studies have laid the groundwork for understanding social identity as a sponsorship processing mechanism, there is an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the link between sponsorship and the complex and nuanced theoretical principles that are found in social identity frameworks.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Social Identity Theory and Frameworks

Social identity is defined as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The foundation of this theory is the nature of relations between groups and the processes and outcomes involving identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) describe three principles that define the essence of the theory:

1. Individuals strive to achieve or maintain positive social identity.

2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the ingroup and some relevant outgroups: the ingroup must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from relevant outgroups.

3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or make their existing group more positively distinct.

Self Categorisation Theory was eventually added as an essential component of social identity and is understood as the need for humans to cognitively sort themselves as well as other individuals into categories based on similarities and differences (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The individual may belong to some groups involuntarily, such as race and geography, but the person must consciously begin to categorise themselves as part of a group and the related stereotypical traits and behaviours that are associated with membership (Turner, 1982, 1985; Turner et al., 1987)

There have been a number of significant contributions to this theoretical framework that have helped to understand intragroup processes (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987), the relationship between intra and intergroup behaviour (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) the internal struggle for balance between individuality and belongingness (Brewer, 1991, 1993) and identification with entities such as an organisation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), brand (Muniz Jr & O'Guinn, 2001) or sports team (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). These basic tenets and relevant contexts of the social identity framework lay the foundation to fully explore the possible explanations that social identity can provide in terms of sponsorship outcomes.

2.2 Social Identity and Sponsorship

The link between social identity and sports sponsorship is one that builds upon the relationship between fan and team to include the associations of sponsor brands. Cornwell and Coote (2005) found that intentions to purchase increased with the level of organizational identification. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) found that team identification had a positive relationship with sponsor recognition, attitude toward sponsor, sponsor patronage and satisfaction with sponsor. Madrigal (2000) surveyed attendees of a sporting event to assess level of identification and purchase intentions regarding a hypothetical sponsor and found that identification and purchase intent had a positive relationship. Another Madrigal (2001) study found that team identification moderated the effect of attitude on intention to purchase sponsor products.

Where other sponsorship studies have measured congruity between event/team and brand, these studies examined the levels of identification (or congruity) between fan and team as an indicator of purchase intentions. These studies, along with the previous literature on congruence, reveal that the entire picture regarding sponsorship effectiveness might involve a complicated web of relationships that includes brand and team/event and fan. The current study provides an opportunity to see how actual companies perform in a sponsorship situation. The final element of social identification and sponsorship that will be investigated is that of overlapping identities.

2.3 Overlapping Identities

The concept of overlapping identities can be explained through Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (1991) and is under the umbrella of social identity frameworks. Brewer (1991) identifies the perfect social groups for an individual to join through Optimal Distinctiveness Theory. This term is used to describe a group that is distinctive in a way that defines very clear boundaries for inclusion and exclusion and, therefore, very clear points for social comparison and ingroup biases.

Optimal distinctiveness is the point where the individual experiences a harmonious balance between assimilation within a group and distinctiveness between other groups

(Brewer, 1993). Brewer and Gardner (1996) conducted experiments that measured the level of inclusiveness in a group and found that participants sought to form sub-groups to increase differentiation when inclusivity is high. Participants felt if anyone could join the group then it was not unique enough – there needed to be some exclusivity. Brewer's (1991) own example of increased exclusivity is her employment at UCLA and as faculty in the Psychology department, which is more exclusive than membership at UCLA. She belongs to both groups, but the Psychology department is a more distinctive subset of the university. Another example would be a Queenslander and a Queensland Maroons fan. Maroons fans are not necessarily a subset of Queenslanders, but membership in both groups creates more exclusivity and distinctiveness. Identification reaches the highest levels when the individual feels the optimal balance between group assimilation and differentiation (Brewer, 1991, 1993; Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory sheds light on how overlapping identities can more clearly refine the boundaries of a group identity.

A recent study examined the effects of overlapping identities on team identity in a university setting (Heere et al., 2011). The survey of undergraduates revealed identification with a university identity as influencing team identification. The findings also showed that team identity strongly influenced self-reported merchandise sales, media consumption and attendance. This provides more evidence to support the idea of overlapping social identities as a way to increase identification. They also found city/state identity influenced team identity through university identity. (Heere et al., 2011). This concept will be discussed and tested using different brands to determine whether there is any significance to a brand identifying with both team (as sponsor) and state (as local brand) in a field setting.

3.0 Method

The experiment adopts a 2 (fans: Queensland Maroons, New South Wales Blues) x 3 (brands: Ingroup, Outgroup, Neutral) x 4 (Survey: Time 1, Time 2, Time 3, Time 4) mixed factorial design. This is a mixed factorial design in that it contains both within-subjects (brands) and between-subjects (fans, survey timepoints) factors (Field, 2009). The design identifies three independent variables of survey timepoint, brand and team affiliation. The main effects and interactions were studied through mixed design ANOVA and by comparing the changes in the dependent variable, brand attitudes.

The research was conducted during the 2012 State of Origin Series, which is a three-game rugby league series between the Queensland Maroons and New South Wales Blues. The four surveys were posted online on the respective team Facebook fan pages by team marketing personnel. Surveys were posted one week before the first game and the day after each game in the series. The survey measured respondent identification with team and state and rated ingroup, outgroup and control sponsor brands using validated brand attitude scales (Putrevu & Lord, 1994). The research yielded 3,586 unique completed surveys over the four timepoints with an incalculable response rate due to the nature of Facebook post samples (Brickman Bhutta, 2012). This sample was reduced to 1,840 to create equal groups of high and low identification and eliminate late respondents (Armstrong & Overton, 1977).

4.0 Results

The sample skews slightly male (59%), which is in line with other research in the context of sport (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000). The age bracket shows a very noticeable skew toward the 18-30 range of respondents (57%), which is an issue that is sometimes found in online survey responses (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003).

ANOVA was used to interpret the results and the categories of brand (beer, banks) were considered separately in discussing main effects and interactions. In the beer category there was a significant main effect of brand, $F(1.922, 3521.34)=546.05$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .230$. Repeated contrasts revealed ingroup was rated significantly higher than outgroup $F(1, 1832)=629.46$, , $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .256$ or control brands $F(1, 1832)=919.21$, , $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .334$ With banks there was also a significant main effect of brand, $F(1.959, 3588.11)=147.68$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .075$. Repeated contrasts revealed ingroup was rated significantly higher than outgroup $F(1, 1832)=204.72$, , $p<0.001$or control brands $F(1, 1832)=208.48$, , $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .102$

The interaction effects between fan and brand were also considered. In the beer category the interaction between brand and fan was found to be significant $F(1.922, 3521.34)=257.43$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .067$. This interaction shows that Queensland fans have more favourable attitudes toward the ingroup beer brand (XXXX) than New South Wales Fans have toward their ingroup beer brand (VB) regarding the beer category. As XXXX is a local Queensland beer while VB is not a local New South Wales beer, this finding lends support to the concept of overlapping identities.

The interaction between fan and brand was also found to be significant with banks $F(1.959, 3588.11)=26.48$, $p<0.001$, $\eta^2 = .014$. Again this interaction suggests that Queensland fans have more favourable attitudes toward the ingroup bank brand (Suncorp) than New South Wales Fans have toward their ingroup bank brand (ANZ). Suncorp was once owned by the Queensland government, is still headquartered in Queensland and can be considered a local bank. ANZ is headquartered in Melbourne and is widely considered a national bank.

5.0 Discussion

The ingroup brands received significantly higher ratings than either outgroup or control brands. These results support previous empirical research that found an ingroup bias toward sponsor brands of a sports team or competitor (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Madrigal, 2000, 2001). Furthermore, it shows evidence of sponsor brand preference in a field experiment involving actual brands, which provides further support to theory and more controlled experiments using hypothetical sponsor brands (Madrigal, 2000, 2001).

The findings can contribute to previous literature in the social identity framework. These findings are in line with studies that have found ingroup bias was highest in highly identified group members (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999) when intergroup comparison is stressed (Voci, 2006), and before rival groups meet in social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).
The CBBE model also is relevant in explaining the possible transfer of secondary associations from team to brand, as attitudes toward ingroup brands were obviously affected by ingroup bias toward the team (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Keller, 1993). The other

reasons for the extension of ingroup bias from team to brand would be the concept of image transfer (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) and team/event and brand congruence (Speed & Thompson, 2000). These different explanations for the transfer of team identification to brand preference are not necessarily mutually exclusive propositions (Cornwell et al., 2005), and are sometimes hard to pinpoint (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). That being said, the prevalent bias for ingroup sponsor brands justifies the concept that associations must exist between the brand and the ingroup fan base that surrounds the team.

Attitudes toward control brands were significantly lower than attitudes toward ingroup brands in all categories and similar between fan groups. This is across 1840 respondents representing two different fan bases over four different time points. This adds support to the argument that significantly higher attitudes toward ingroup brands are the result of ingroup bias and not other confounding variables. This also supports the choices for control brands considering the similarity of responses between groups.

The second major finding deals with overlapping identities. Brands that appealed to overlapping identities received significantly higher ratings than brands that had incongruent or conflicting identities. These results showed a stronger preference by Queensland fans for these ingroup brands. An explanation for this can be provided through the differences between the major sponsors.

XXXX beer is a local Queensland company that has affiliation with Queenslanders, rugby fans and Maroons fans. It leverages these associations not only through sponsorship, but through sponsorship-related advertising that targets all three groups.
Meanwhile, New South Wales respondents also identified highly with being a New South Welshman, a rugby fan and a New South Wales Blues fan, which should have the same effect as Queensland fans. Yet the mean scores are significantly different between the two groups. Victoria Bitter identifies with the Blues through sponsorship, but also identifies with Victoria through its brand name, head office and history. This identification with a different state creates a conflict in identity and lowers identification with the brand for New South Wales Blues fans (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). This example also holds true with the bank category with significantly higher ingroup brand ratings for Queensland fans for their local bank (Suncorp) than New South Wales fans for a national bank (ANZ).

This advances the theoretical concept of overlapping identities in terms of individuals and organisations or brands. The arguments put forth in the discussion draws on literature that posits the overlapping social identities create stronger bonds (Brewer, 1991, 1993; Deaux, 1993) and that organisations can appeal to multiple identities (Foreman & Whetten, 2002) which are subject to individual perceptions (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). The results in this study point to congruent overlapping social identities as a reason why some sponsors have significantly higher levels of ingroup bias transfer to brand attitudes. It also suggests that a conflict of identities can result in a significant decrease in the transfer of ingroup bias to brand attitude. This theoretical contribution builds upon other research that examines the relationships between congruent overlapping identities between brand and geographic community (Holt, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Sharma, Shimp, & Shin, 1995) team and geographic community (Kenyon & McPherson, 1973; Stevenson & Nixon, 1972) and team, geographic community and university (Heere et al., 2011; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996).

6.0 References

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