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Brand Love and Purchase Intention: Does a Sports Team Name Matter?

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2020, during the height of COVID-19 global pandemic, many businesses struggled economically due to enforced lock down by state and local governments in the United States. Concurrently, as protests for social justice regarding race, gender and sexual orientation swept the world, some consumer segments demanded firms to become leaders for social equality and inclusion (Pleyers, G., 2020). In light of consumer sentiment toward social justice, several businesses, including sport teams, with controversial names, logos mascots and images reflecting racism, evaluated their branding strategy to examine potential risk to revenue and brand image.

While several media outlets and consumer segments heeded a call to cancel culture, a phenomenon that suggests some points of view are being excluded from discourse (Bouvier, G., 2020), the National Football League (NFL) announced in July 2020 that the Washington Redskins would review options for a potential mascot team name change in response to racial concerns (Washington Post, 2020). At the time of this submission, the team name is known as the Washington Football team. Most recently, the Cleveland Indians announced a name change to the Cleveland Guardians (Waldstein & Schmidt, 2021).

Historically, a strong brand image has established several critical components to a firm's success including character and personality (Gardner & Levy, 1955). Through marketing activities, firms attempt to establish and maintain a strong brand image to sustain generations of customers. A challenge for business is to ensure their brand's meaning aligns positively through shifts in social, cultural, political, and economic states of society.

The construct of brand love suggests there are distinct consumer segments that align their allegiance to brands through a strong emotional connection (Batra et al., 2012). Yet, several questions remain regarding a firm's decision to change a well-known brand name and its impact

to brand loyalty (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006; Fournier 1998). Further, the willingness for consumers to continue to purchase brands at a premium-price falls into question (Bauer et al., 2009).

This study aims to explore the relationship between the construct of brand love, the strength of fan allegiance to a sport team brand name, fan past purchase behavior, and future purchase intention should a team change its controversial name. The overall research question that bounds this study is: How does consumer brand love and a change to a sport team name impact fan purchase behavior?

This research extends knowledge in the construct of brand love for academia and professional practice. As brand love is a relatively new concept in marketing and sport literature, focus appears to be on the development and measurement of brand love as a construct and scale validation (Batra et al., 2012). To date, little research is explored in brand love related to consumer brand love for sport teams and the willingness of consumers to purchase team branded products; particularly when a firm is exploring a brand name change related to social justice.

METHODOLOGY

The target population for this study was sport fans over the age of eighteen who reside in the United States within a market with a potentially controversial sport team name or mascot based on indigenous, immigrant, settler, colonial, or marginalized group. There were fifteen total markets measured including sport teams representing Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League, the National Football League, and the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Sport fans were reached through social media groups such as Facebook team and fan pages, and Twitter posts using team relevant hashtags, team specific imagery, and recruitment messages. Drawing from the field of consumer behavior, a survey instrument using validated scales for brand love (Batra et al., 2012) and purchase intention (Chang & Wildt, 1994) was used for measurement. The survey was active for three days and yielded over 5,600 respondents.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

A variety of tests including confirmatory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, mediation and structural equation modeling was used to test a conceptual model and hypotheses to provide insight into the relationship between brand love, fan strength, past purchase behavior, and willingness to purchase various types of team merchandise should a team change a controversial name.

Results suggest that although negative discourse is prominent in mainstream and social media toward a sport team changing a controversial name or mascot, there is little relationship between brand love and a sport team name. Research also suggests that should a team change its controversial name, there is a positive, strong relationship between purchase intention for jerseys, clothing, memorabilia, equipment and the construct of brand love. Other variables such as fan strength and importance of winning mediate purchase intention of merchandise with a new name. Research indicates ninety-four percent of consumers surveyed are likely to purchase team branded merchandise in the next twelve months should a controversial sport team name change.

The results suggest positive indicators for brand managers considering a name change from a controversial sport team name.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

For academics, the finding that there is little relationship between the construct of brand love and controversial sport team names, yet there is a positive relationship between brand love and future purchase intention for branded merchandise of a new, non-controversial team name provides a positive contribution to the fields of branding and sports marketing. Limitations of this study include additional variables that may influence purchase intention including player loyalty, fan longevity, and manufacture brands of merchandise. It is suggested that further research is completed to address these limitations.

This research provides insight for practitioners as there appears to be a disconnect between negative discourse in social and mainstream media outlets about brands who seek to change controversial names and consumer willingness to purchase merchandise from teams who have or are considering changing its team name or mascot. Additionally, results from this research lend itself to better understand through future analysis the implications of other product categories, such as consumer package goods, related to controversial product name changes, brand love, and purchase intention.

Keywords: *Brand love, sport team name, fan strength, purchase intention, social justice, cancel culture*

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristy C. Grayson, DBA is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Utah Tech University. She received her DBA from Creighton University. Her research interests are brand love, consumer behavior in sport marketing, and marketing ethics. Dr. Grayson has over thirty years of marketing experience from start-up to Fortune 50 firms. She was the Direct to Consumer Leader for Honeywell International's residential homes division where she developed and launched its first consumer e-Commerce channel.

Katie Kamachi, PhD is currently working at University of Nevada Las Vegas and has over ten years of experience in higher education. She first found her drive for student-focused, faculty-led partnerships as a visiting faculty member and finds joy in actively researching within several areas of competitive athletics & sport. Her love of the game has kept her on the playing field while she supports initiatives and causes focused on leadership and outcome attainment, underrepresented populations, and heart-based entrepreneurship.

David Olsen, PhD has been a professor since 1993. He received his Ph.D. in Management Information Systems from The University of Arizona in 1993 and taught at The University of Akron accounting department in accounting information systems for five years. Dr. Olsen joined the MIS department at Utah State University in 1998 and served as the MIS department head from Fall 2012 to Summer 2019. Dr. Olsen started as a professor at Utah Tech University in Fall 2020 with a mission to make the best business analytics program in the country and is utilizing SQL, Python and Tableau to do so.