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Brand Extension Evaluation in Esports: A Case Study of the NBA and NBA 2K League

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Abstract

Professional sport leagues have created esports leagues and teams, which serve as brand extensions (e.g., NBA and NBA 2K League). These brand extensions can benefit the professional sports team brand by reaching various audiences in a different product category. The purpose of this study was to examine a traditional sport entity's (NBA franchise) esports brand extension (NBA 2K League team). In partnership with an NBA team and the affiliated NBA 2K esports team, a survey of 195 individuals assessed the brand extension on several variables, including extension awareness, perceived quality, image fit, categorical fit, innovativeness, and authenticity of the extension. Further, a cluster analysis revealed four distinct groups: (1) Gamers, (2) Traditional NBA Team Fans, (3) Crossover Fans, and (4) Low-Consumers. Discussion of the groups' brand extension perceptions and behavior are highlighted. Targeted marketing for these clusters may improve efficiency of sports marketing messaging, as well as provide an understanding of the extension's effect on the parent brand.

Keywords: *brand equity, brand extension, esports, cluster analysis, market segmentation*

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The esports industry is vast and impacts the sports industry in many ways. Traditionally, it was common for professional sports leagues to partner with video gaming companies for use of images and likeness in classic sport video games series, such as *FIFA*, *NBA 2K*, or *Madden NFL*. These games mimic their respective leagues and teams in the virtual world and serve as a brand extension. In the past 5 years, professional sport leagues (e.g., NBA and MLS) have ventured further into the esports space by developing their own esports leagues. These professional esports leagues, such as the NBA 2K League and eMLS League, feature professional gamers competing on esports clubs playing those league-based sport video games in competition. Similarly, many European football clubs have esports teams under the same name as their already established football brand (e.g., Paris Saint-Germain eSports, Manchester City eSports, AS Monaco eSports) in leagues for *FIFA Online*. These partnerships can serve as brand extensions, whereby the sport franchise is extending its brand into new categories (Aaker & Keller, 1990). One example of this brand extension is the NBA's partnership with Take-Two Interactive Software in the creation of the NBA 2K League. In this case, the NBA 2K League and the professional gaming clubs (teams) are an example of brand extension for the NBA and its basketball teams. The evaluation and effect of these brand extensions on the parent brand, as determined by various segments of the markets, has yet to be explored but would be meaningful for practitioners investing in and marketing the gaming clubs.

The NBA 2K League was established in 2017 by the NBA and Take-Two Interactive with 17 NBA teams; as of January 2023, 22 NBA franchises have NBA 2K League gaming clubs. In the NBA 2K League, NBA franchises (parent brand) operate esports gaming teams/clubs (brand extension), which compete against one another in the popular *NBA 2K* video game. These gaming clubs feature five professional gamers. The gaming clubs utilize similar brand marks as their NBA counterparts, including names, logos, and color schemes, which are reflected in the gear worn by gamers and merchandise sold. For example, the Philadelphia 76ers Gaming Club (GC) are affiliated with the Philadelphia 76ers, complete with the red, white, and blue colors and font logo with the white stars.

The consumer evaluation of these brand extensions may differ based on market subset, as basketball and gaming are distinct product categories. The effectiveness of these extensions as seen through consumer evaluations is important for NBA teams investing in NBA 2K League, as well as the marketing, sponsorship, and sales managers for the NBA 2K club and NBA team alike. If successfully implemented, sport brand extensions can positively impact an organization's revenue and provide an additional avenue to reach the consumer (Walsh & Lee, 2012). However, if a brand extension is implemented poorly, an organization's brand equity is at risk of being diluted (Ke & Wagner, 2022; Walsh & Ross, 2010). Factors that influence the evaluation of those extensions are goals of this study. The purpose of this case study was to examine the brand extension of a sport (NBA franchise) entity's esports extension (NBA 2K franchise). The focus on the extension was twofold: (1) explore market differences and (2) understand individuals' brand extension evaluation of a new NBA 2K club.

Literature Review

Brand extension is a strategy for organizations to appeal to current market segments and target new ones in new product categories (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Walsh & Lee, 2012). Because an existing brand is already well-known with its own level of brand equity, some associations are already built in the con-

sumer's mind (Fedorikhin et al., 2008). Ideally, if a brand extension is implemented properly by the parent brand, an individual's loyalty toward the parent brand will transfer to the brand extension (Walsh & Ross, 2010). Thus, positive evaluations of a brand extension indicate a successful brand extension in terms of brand equity of the parent or subbrand and behavioral intentions (Kunkel et al., 2017).

Brand extensions can be measured by and dependent upon how the extension is evaluated from the consumer's perspective (Aaker & Keller, 1990). Consumer reaction to brand extensions can, at times, be culturally dependent; some brand extensions that could be favorable to one market segment could be unfavorable to another (Tapp & Clowes, 2002). Because extensions introduce a brand into a new product category, the category may be drastically different than that of the parent brand. Thus, consumer evaluation should be investigated to understand a variety of attitudes about the brand extension, including the differences by market segments. To evaluate extensions, we can examine the brand equity via brand associations. Similarly, awareness and attitude towards the extension are common evaluations of the extension. Additionally, individuals' perceptions that the brand extension is genuine and sustains the unique essence of the parent brand, known as authenticity, is important (Spiggle et al., 2012). Traditionally, perceived fit (i.e., category fit and image fit) and perceived quality (i.e., strength) of the parent brand have also been considered to have an impact on evaluation of brand extensions (Papadimitriou et al., 2004). Originally, perceived fit referred to categorical fit, which is the similarity between parent brand product category and extension brand product category (Aaker & Keller, 1990), whereas brand image fit is the belief among consumers that the image/associations of the parent brand are similar to the extension brand. Based on schema incongruity theory, the innovativeness of an extension is another potential variable that may relate to extension evaluation (Chun et al., 2015). Cognitive and emotional aspects of team identification are noted as important influencing factors on evaluation of a brand extension (Apostolopoulou, 2002; Walsh & Lee, 2012; Walsh & Ross, 2010). Collectively, researchers have used these components to evaluate consumer attitudes toward brand extensions by using hypothetical extensions or fictitious brands (Chun et al., 2015).

Recently, scholars have begun to examine esports brand extensions. Ke and Wagner (2022) posited that esports extensions were successful during the COVID-19 pandemic with esports being a substitute for sports, but also noted these extensions could risk dilution and brand concept inconsistency. Bertschy et al. (2020) and Mühlbacher et al. (2022) explored AS Monaco football (soccer) fans and their esports teams (simulations of soccer, racing, and other popular video games). Through qualitative research examining online fan discourse, they revealed the team's soccer fans did not evolve into fans of the esports team and vice versa (Bertschy et al., 2020). They further determined the addition of an esports brand extension to the existing professional sport team did not hinder nor reinforce the current brand, assuming that the fans of the existing brand are not interested in the new product (Mühlbacher et al., 2022). These online fan discourse studies provide initial insight to the esports brand extension evaluation process. To build off these studies, we explored evaluation of esports brand extensions quantitatively via different factors of evaluation, including awareness of the extension, the extension's influence on individuals to play the video game, the brand evaluation of the NBA esports team, the perceived quality of the extension, the image fit of the extension, the categorical fit of the extension, the innovativeness of the extension, and the authenticity of the extension.

Summary

Esports brand extensions may influence the parent brand; in this case study, the NBA 2K gaming club may influence perceptions of the NBA team. The NBA 2K team examined was in its first year of operation at the time of this study, so brand extension evaluation by individuals was important to the parent brand (NBA team). The relationship between identities and consumer evaluation of an esports brand extension would improve understanding about the esports market overall. Sport organizations could improve their esports marketing efforts and know if it is positive or negative perceptions influence on the parent brand. Using an NBA franchise and NBA 2K gaming club as our subject, we examined the market segments for an NBA 2K esports franchise to determine how the segments evaluate brand extensions. As part of a large project, we partnered with an NBA/NBA 2K franchise to conduct the research. The NBA franchise owns the esports team, which participates in the NBA 2K League, and their marketing analytics staff desired the market perceptions of the extension and attributes of the parent brand. At the time, the team and league were in their first season, and there was overlap in the NBA and NBA 2K staff responsible for the public relations, social media, and marketing of the new brand. The results of this study would inform decision making strategies.

Method

The NBA team emailed the survey to their database of consumers and posted it via the NBA 2K gaming club and NBA franchise social media accounts to reach their followers. Additionally, we distributed it to esports college clubs, posted to relevant Reddit groups (e.g., gaming, NBA, esports groups), and the researchers' social media accounts. We offered gaming store gift cards and NBA 2K club incentives to random participants. A total of 195 participants provided usable responses. On average, participants were men (59.5%) aged 32.2 years old, and ethnically identified as 54.9% White, 31.2% Black or African American, 6.4% Asian, and 2.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Following past literature, the survey instrument included evaluation of the extension items, demographics, identification levels, consumption, and behavioral intentions. Extension evaluation items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale and included: overall brand extension/associations evaluation (7 items; Batra & Homer, 2004; Walsh & Williams, 2017), perceived quality (3 items; Carlson & Donovan, 2013; Martínez et al., 2009), image fit (3 items; Aaker & Keller, 1990), categorical fit (3 items; Dall'Olmo Riley et al., 2014), innovativeness (5 items; Chun et al., 2015; Pina et al., 2010), awareness, and authenticity of the extension (5 items; Spiggle et al., 2012). Six forms of self-identification were developed based on past scales (Trail et al., 2003) and measured Team Identification (NBA Team), Sport Identification, Sport Video Game Identification, NBA 2K Identification, Gamer Identification, and Esport Identification (10 items; 7-point Likert scale). Demographics (5 items), *NBA 2K* Video Game Consumption (1 item), Parent Brand Behavior Intentions (about the NBA team; 3 items; Kunkel et al., 2017) and Extension Brand Behavior Intentions items (about the NBA 2K club; 3 items; Kunkel et al., 2017) were included. All subscales were tested for their reliability, validity, and psychometric properties through a confirmatory factor analysis.

Descriptive statistics of the variables and correlations between identities and extension evaluation were calculated. We ran a K-Means Cluster Analyses using SPSS 27 software to empirically distinguish

respondents into homogeneous groups based on key variables (6 identification variables, 2 extension evaluation variables, and 1 NBA 2K consumption item). Descriptive statistics of the clusters were then described, including brand extension perceptions.

Results

Descriptive statistics for the demographic, consumption, and identification variables of the participants were calculated (see Table 1). We found four distinct clusters from the determining variables (see Table 2). Each will briefly be described in turn, and the perceptions of the brand extensions are discussed.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Brand Extension Evaluation and Identification

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Brand Extension Evaluations			
Authenticity of Extension	4.55	0.96	.70
Awareness of Extension (single item)	3.18	2.28	---
Categorical Fit of Extension	4.79	1.18	.698
Image Fit of Extension	5.16	1.15	.863
Innovativeness of Extension	5.30	0.99	.87
Perceived Quality of Parent Brand	5.46	1.18	.871
Extension Evaluation	4.79	1.35	.906
Extension Brand Equity (7 items)	4.06	1.24	.918
Identification Levels			
Team Identification	4.17	2.22	.961
Sport Identification	4.66	1.99	.896

The first cluster (Gamers) is comprised of participants who were fans of video games and esports. This group scored highest on Gamer Identification ($M = 5.85$) and Esport Identification ($M = 5.43$). On average, this cluster spent the highest number of hours per week playing non-sport video games ($M = 17.13$), while playing sport video games about 3 hours per week. Their focus seemed to be general gaming and not sport specific. They were not highly identified with the NBA team ($M = 2.30$) with limited NBA team intention to consume (low in merchandise, attendance, watching). Despite their identification with gaming, they are not identified with NBA 2K teams, reporting lowest on NBA 2K Identification ($M = 1.85$) and Team Identification ($M = 2.30$), and were relatively unaware of the brand extension ($M = 2.43$). The Gamers were mostly men and skewed younger ($M = 25.72$) than the overall sample.

The second cluster (Traditional NBA Team Fans) is comprised of participants who highly identify with the NBA team, but do not identify with the NBA 2K team nor esports. Traditional NBA Team Fans planned to attend the most NBA team games per season ($M = 11.37$) and watch the most televised NBA team games per season ($M = 30.01$). They intended to spend the second most on NBA team merchandise ($M = \$99.43$). They scored low on Sport Video Game Identification ($M = 2.09$), Esport Identification (M

= 2.53), and Gamer Identification ($M = 2.26$). This group was older ($M = 38.17$ years) compared to the full sample.

The next cluster (Crossover Fans) is characterized by participants who highly identify as NBA fans, NBA 2K fans, and general esports fans. Crossover Fans spend the most on NBA team merchandise each year ($M = \$293.16$) and attend ($M = 13.81$) and watch on television the most NBA games per season ($M = 37.53$). They also intend to spend the most on NBA esports team merchandise ($M = \$89.03$), attend the most esports team games per year ($M = 3.6$) and watch the most NBA esports team livestreams per season ($M = 5.51$). This group was majority 50.8% Black/African American ($n = 32$), followed by 25.3% White ($n = 16$), and averaged 31 years old.

The final cluster (Low-Consumers) is characterized by participants who are not highly identified in any of the categories (e.g., Team ID $M = 1.98$, Sport $M = 2.88$, Sport Video Games Overall $M = 1.75$, or Esports Overall $M = 1.33$). They also had low consumption levels and low awareness of the extension ($M = 1.85$). This group had little to no intention of consuming the NBA or esports team in the future.

Extension Evaluations

The Crossover fans reported the highest mean scores on every category of brand extensions. Interestingly, the remainder of the groups reported moderate to high (> 4.0 midpoint) on other evaluations of the brand extension, including perceived quality, image fit, categorical fit, innovativeness of the extension, and authenticity of the extension. This bodes well for the NBA team, as well as suggesting the brand extension and parent brand is strong in being perceived as high quality and good image fit and authenticity. However, awareness of the extension was low (< 4.0) for all groups except the Crossover Fans, indicating that the NBA and NBA 2K club need to improve their presence with the other groups. This result may be explained by the fact that it was the first year of the extension (first season for NBA 2K League and club), and although benefiting from the strong parent brand, should be addressed.

Discussion and Implications

We determined and explored four distinct clusters of potential consumers for the NBA 2K gaming club in this study. Gamers, Traditional NBA Team Fans, Crossover Fans, and Low-Consumers are unique in their identification and consumption levels, as well as their perception of the brand extension. Knowing these differences can be useful to the parent brand and the extension brand's marketers.

The clusters provide guidance to discern who will be the heaviest consumers of the pool. In this case, the Crossover Fans cluster is by far the most identified with both the parent brand and brand extension. This cluster's commitment to watching the highest number of games and buying the most amount of product makes them a key group to target marketing and sales efforts. The parent brand can capitalize on this identification in several ways. The parent brand could host a special "gamer night" at the NBA game. The team could sell gamer night tickets at an additional fee. Gamer night ticketholders could be admitted into the NBA game early to watch or participate in an NBA 2K esports tournament. Another example would be to host an NBA 2K tournament amongst traditional sport athletes on the parent brand's team. This may maximize the crossover effect; the NBA players could receive esports coaching from the NBA 2K League

professional gamers. The social media departments for the parent brand and the brand extension could collaborate in a promotional effort to livestream the event showcasing the connection between the two brands.

Table 2
Cluster Characteristics

	Gamers (n = 46) <i>M</i>	Trad. NBA Team Fan (n = 43) <i>M</i>	Crossover Fans (n = 63) <i>M</i>	Low Consumers (n = 40) <i>M</i>	Total (n = 195) <i>M</i>
Identification Levels					
Team Identification	2.30	6.00	5.66	1.98	4.17
Sport Identification	3.33	5.64	6.10	2.88	4.66
Sport Video Game (SVG) Identification	3.96	2.09	5.40	1.75	3.54
Esport Identification	5.43	2.53	5.03	1.33	3.80
NBA 2K Identification	1.85	3.23	5.46	2.38	3.54
Gamer Identification	5.85	2.26	5.29	2.28	4.13
Extension Evaluation					
Authenticity of Extension	4.54	4.19	5.15	4.03	4.55
Awareness of Extension	2.43	3.16	4.56	1.85	3.18
Categorical Fit of Extension	5.22	4.07	5.36	4.11	4.79
Image Fit of Extension	5.22	4.95	5.78	4.38	5.16
Innovativeness of Extension	5.33	4.92	5.81	4.87	5.30
Perceived Quality of Parent Brand	4.77	5.67	6.10	5.08	5.46
Extension Evaluation	4.84	4.38	5.61	3.87	4.79
Extension Influences NBA 2K Play	3.10	3.15	4.93	2.16	3.54
Consumption					
Avg. hours per week playing games (non SVGs)	17.13	3.05	7.68	1.89	7.58
Avg. hours per week playing SVGs	3.40	1.42	8.91	1.32	4.26
Avg. hours per week watching NBA	3.91	8.94	9.88	1.54	6.40
Parent Brand Behavioral Intentions					
Avg. number of [NBA team] games to attend this year	1.33	11.37	13.81	1.08	7.50
Avg. amount of money to spend on [NBA team] merchandise in the next year	\$11.25	\$99.43	\$293.16	\$3.71	\$120.06
Avg. number of [NBA team] games to watch on TV this year	4.42	30.01	37.53	2.88	20.38
Extension Brand Behavioral Intentions					
Avg. number of [NBA 2K esports team] games to attend if hosted at [the local arena]	0.64	0.77	3.60	0.83	1.65
Avg. amount of money to spend on [NBA 2K esports team] merchandise in the next year	\$4.22	\$8.85	\$89.03	\$0.14	\$31.74
Avg. number of [NBA 2K esports team] games to watch live online next season	2.17	1.17	5.51	0	2.55

Meanwhile, the Gamers and Traditional NBA Team Fan clusters show small interest in the brand extension, but for perhaps different reasons. Gamers are interested in esports as a sport, based on their identification and consumption levels. Gamers tend to identify with the competition of gaming that the NBA esports team represents. Although they are not interested in spending money on the product, they show a willingness to livestream NBA esports team matches more often than traditional NBA team fans. On the other hand, Traditional NBA Team Fans were disconnected from esports. They are represented by an older demographic that may be accustomed to consuming traditional sport, like NBA basketball. However, because they identify so highly with the NBA team brand, they are more receptive to supporting the brand extension because of its direct affiliation with the NBA team. Based on the results, NBA sport marketers should be less concerned with targeting “traditional NBA fans” for the esports brands, as they are older and less identified, with lower intentions, so ads during NBA games would be less effective than advertising on gaming streaming outlets, such as Twitch or YouTube.

Lastly, although Low-Consumers show minimal interest in the NBA team nor NBA esports team, their perceptions of how esports intersect with the parent brand are still relevant. NBA teams are interested in their perceptions of their brand overall because there may always be potential to establish new consumers or impact the community. Although these individuals may not be worth targeting in the early years of the brand extension, Low-Consumers could be targeted once the brand extension has matured beyond its infancy and/or as more in-arena opportunities present themselves, as watching live with friends may provide other motives or experiential benefits compared to streaming. The NBA esports team’s marketing department would likely see an elevated return on investment by targeting consumers who already identify with either the NBA team, the NBA esports team, or esports in general. These individuals are consumers who would be more inclined to adopt the brand extension.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study reaffirmed a few key details about the esports market. First, esports is distinct in its appeal and its reach to consumers. Bertschy et al. (2020) also found that the esports and sport consumers exist independently of one another. However, our research differed in its implication that there are some hybrid consumers who enjoy both esports and traditional sport (e.g., Crossover cluster). This cluster was highly identified in esports, traditional sports, gaming, and their NBA team. Overall, our data suggested there are two groupings of consumers who evaluate the NBA esports extensions most favorably—Gamers and Crossover Fans—which is beneficial for an NBA organization wishing to extend its brand. Marketers can promote the NBA 2K team to NBA fans because of the crossover group. An NBA team could develop branded merchandise with crossover logos, advertise NBA 2K league games at NBA games, or host co-branded events. These two segments represent the type of consumer that is the most likely to be influenced by their crossover marketing. This is useful information for NBA business office executives in idea generation in sponsorship, marketing, ticket sales, and fan engagement. For example, pure Gamers and Crossover Fans may be more interested in seeing co-branded marketing materials from the NBA team featuring athletes from traditional sport and esports. These create crossover media content between the teams (e.g., NBA player and NBA 2K gamer pair up in video content for social media accounts). From a sponsorship perspective, parent brand sales staff can utilize these findings to appeal to potential clients

who wish to target consumers in both spaces. Overall, these two clusters are vital for expanding the growth of traditional sport and esports franchises.

Finally, this research also adds to the budding lines of esports brand extension research (Bertschy et al., 2020; Ke & Wagner, 2022; Mühlbacher et al., 2021). As one of the first studies to quantitatively measure esports brand extension evaluation, this examination of a spectrum of consumers over multiple extension evaluation variables can provide a framework for future scholars. As esports and professional traditional sport leagues continue to partner, existing parent sport franchises should consider the potential opportunity and revenue of extending their brand into the market, from a brand extension perspective.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study examined new aspects of brand extensions, but also includes some limitations. We only assessed the brand extension of one NBA team in one NBA market. Future studies should look to expand their scope to other brand extensions across different leagues and different markets. Additionally, certain forms of identification matter more than others in relation to evaluation of an esports brand extension from a traditional sport organization. Future researchers could investigate the significance of other factors that may influence esports brand extension evaluation and determine how extension can be monetized and magnified to reach the broadest set of consumers possible. We recommended that scholars develop an esports extension evaluation scale to further test the identity factors that most influence extension evaluation, which in turn influences extension brand equity and behavioral intentions.

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