

Influencing factors on consumers’ reaction to a professional sport team’s CSR activities

Cindy S. Lee, Ph.D, West Virginia University , USA Hyejin Bang, Ph.D, Florida International University , USA Boyun Woo, Ph.D, Endicott College, USA

INTRODUCTION

- Initially viewed as a charitable and philanthropic activity, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic tool for organizations to protect their reputation, develop brand loyalty, and foster competitive advantage (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006).
- Considering that sport team’s performance level fluctuates and game quality is hard to control, sports teams have even more reasons to be involved with CSR activities to induce brand loyalty and fan support.
- Consumers have very high expectations for professional teams to be involved in their local communities (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2016). This high expectation might be due to the professional sport teams’ geographical exclusivity which protects team’s rights within the region.
- Examples of pro teams’ CSR initiatives include the NFL’s Play 60 Campaign, NBA’s Hoops for Troops, Memphis Grizzlies’ Get Fit with the Grizzlies, Philadelphia Eagles’ Go Green program, and NFL and NBA partnerships with the United Way and Read to Achieve (Inoue, 2015; Graham, 2020).
- Consumer reactions to these types of CSR initiatives are important because sport spectators are increasingly more discerning about their fan experience, more critical of the entertainment value of games, and more attuned to corporate policies (Morrison, Misener, & Mock, 2018).
- Therefore, communicating their involvement with CSR activities to their constituents is critical and almost a requirement (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006) for organizations that engage in CSR activities to enjoy various economic outcomes and commercial benefits (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007; Walters & Chadwick, 2009).
- fan identification is one of the most influencing factors in determining fan behavior (e.g., Wann & Branscomb, 1993), and different communication vehicles (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009) influence how a company’s CSR activities are conveyed to customers.

PURPOSE

- The purpose of this study is to investigate how an individual’s team identification and team’s chosen communication vehicles for their CSR activities, influence consumer attitude change and behavioral intentions toward the engaged team.

METHOD

- To examine the influence of 1) a sport team’s chosen media vehicle to communicate their CSR activity and 2) individual’s identification with a pro team related to their CSR activities on individual’s attitude and purchase intention toward the pro team, a 2 (facebook vs local newspaper) x 2 (high identification x low identification) experimental study was designed.
- A scenario was developed illustrating a local professional Major League Baseball (MLB) team’s CSR activity (i.e., visiting a local children’s hospital). At the end of the story, the source (i.e., either the team’s facebook homepage or local newspaper) was cited to indicate the source of the story.
- Data were collected from the graduate and undergraduate students in the sport management program at a university in the USA. One of the two versions (e.g, facebook post or newspaper article) of survey was randomly distributed to the agreed participants.

RESULTS

- A total of 237 surveys were collected. After deleting twelve surveys (seven incomplete and five incorrectly answered manipulation question, 225 usable surveys (newspaper= 109; facebook: 116) were left for data analysis.
- The respondents were classified into two groups using their identification level (consumer-specific factor) with the subject sport team: The individual who scored below four were classified as “low” (n= 171, 76%), and the individual who scored four or above were classified as “high” (n=54, 24%).
- Two sets of multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were conducted: First MANOVA was conducted with the independent variable of the team’s chosen media vehicle (i.e., facebook post or newspaper article) with two dependent variables of changed attitude and purchase intention toward the pro sport team. Second MANOVA was conducted with an independent variable of individual’s level of identification and two dependent variables of the respondents’ changed attitude and purchase intention toward the pro sport team due to the CSR activity.
- The first MANOVA showed that the chosen media outlet for their CSR activities did not have any main effect on respondents’ changed attitude ($M_{\text{facebook}}=5.11, M_{\text{newspaper}}=5.06$) nor purchase intention ($M_{\text{facebook}}=3.98, M_{\text{newspaper}}=3.59$) toward the team ($F(2, 220) = 1.81, p >.05$)

RESULTS (cont.)

- The result of the second MANOVA confirmed that individual’s level of team identification has a main effect ($F(2, 220) = 17.02, p <.05, \eta_p^2=.13$) on both attitude ($M_{\text{low}}=4.93, M_{\text{high}}=5.57; F(1, 221) = 10.92, p <.05, \eta_p^2=.05$) and behavior intentions ($M_{\text{low}}=3.43, M_{\text{high}}=4.89; F(1, 221) = 34.11, p <.05, \eta_p^2=.13$) due to the team’s CSR activity.

Table 1. MANOVA results

Variable	Overall			Attitude			Purchase Intention		
	F	p	η_p^2	F	p	η_p^2	F	p	η_p^2
Chosen Media Vehicle	1.81	>.05		.07	>.05		2.92	>.05	
Team Identification	17.02	.00	.13	10.92	.00	.05	34.1	.00	.13

DISCUSSION

- Regardless of the types of media vehicle used, the respondents showed more favorable attitude and increased purchase intention after reading the sport team’s CSR activities. This result suggest that organizations should be diligent to let people know their CSR activities through various available media vehicles which includes social media platforms.
- This result is different with Jahdi and Acikdilli’s (2009) argument that source credibility and reliability have major influence on consumers’ acceptance of CSR messages and communication effectiveness as they become more concerned about the quality and reliability of web-based information in the absence of gatekeepers or watchdogs. However, the result is on the same line with Bhattacharya and Sen’s (2004) argument that consumers’ awareness of companies’ CSR activities elicits favorable responses.
- The benefits of CSR which can be enjoyed by sport teams are not equally coming from all individuals. Compared to low-identified fans, highly identified fans’ attitude and purchase intention changed much more favorably after reading the sports team’s CSR activity. This result suggest that sports teams might need to focus on their fan base in communicating their CSR messages to get tangible benefits (e.g., increase ticket and merchandise sales) rather than communicating it to the general public.