

The Impact of Identity Signaling and Uniqueness Needs on Sports Team Apparel

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Thursday, November 3, 2016

11:00-11:25 AM, Circle Center/West

25-minute oral presentation

(including questions)

Sport consumers communicate with other fans of their favorite team through team merchandise consisting of signaling cues about who they are. Team merchandise has symbolic meanings in a product-fan relationship. Retail sales of sports-related licensed merchandise were approximately \$14 billion in 2014, with a 5.0% increase in North America (Licensing Letter, 2015). From an organizational perspective, the sales of team merchandise have become a synergistic business for generating profits, and licensing teams' logos has been a salient revenue source. Consumers' preference for team merchandise is useful in understanding the situations and circumstances in which all sports entities (e.g., teams, leagues, manufacturers, or sponsors) provide differentiated apparel to meet all individual needs. Sport consumers make choices that are consistent with in-group members in the process of team identification at the collective level. Conversely, they own or use unique or distinctive team merchandise to ensure independent self-images at the personal level (e.g., Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012; Moon & Sung, 2015; Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001). Sports marketers can consider different situational effects and figure out how these conflicting consumption motives λ for group identity signaling and uniqueness λ combine to drive purchase decisions. Thus, this research examines (a) the role of a logo on team apparel in order to signal social identity associated with a team and (b) how in-group members' needs for team identity signaling and uniqueness influence team apparel choice.

Theoretical Framework

Signaling theory provides an opportunity to integrate symbolic communication and social benefit (Bliege Bird & Smith, 2005). This theory articulates how a signal is relevant to the meaning it represents to both the sender and the receiver, and what are the reliable elements of the identity signal in product evaluation. Sport consumers prefer to purchase team merchandise for their status-signaling importance. Based on a social status account, signaling theory can be useful for describing conspicuous consumption behavior. Conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899) and signaling theory (Spence, 1973) illustrate that consumers demonstrate their social position by belonging to favorable in-groups whose members obtain similar products. Moreover, when social visibility of consumption is public, display of a brand logo can facilitate social status because the visible logos communicate to the onlooker the desired characteristics of the owner, such as prestige and status (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2012). Therefore, a logo on team apparel signal affiliation with a sports team over the apparel's other attributes (e.g., color, design/style, and fabric quality). However, prior literature in sports marketing has focused on the fan-team relationship in purchase likelihood of team merchandise. By adopting conspicuous consumption behaviors through signaling theory, this study contributes to understanding how sport consumers signal their identity through merchandise preferences associated with their favorite team.

Consumers choose similar products as other in-group members to facilitate communication of desired group identities (Berger & Heath, 2007; Chan et al., 2012). At the same time, consumers counterbalance needs for distinctiveness. Optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) articulates that individuals struggle to balance two conflicting motives; the desire for assimilation by group membership and distinctiveness satisfied by individuality (Brewer, 1991). However, initially, ODT overlooked that the need for uniqueness occurs within groups. Therefore, this study will provide a new insight of how sport consumers resolve the opposing identity motives in a public consumption setting. Fans associated with a sports team vary in their degree of need for group identity and uniqueness. They will conform on team identity cues that signal an in-group membership, while higher needs for uniqueness will attenuate the impact of assimilation on team apparel preferred by a majority of in-group members. Thus, the following research hypotheses were derived.

2016 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XIV)

H1: A logo on sports team apparel is a relatively more influential apparel attribute than other attributes in public consumption.

H2: Highly identified sport consumers will choose team apparel with a large size logo compared to smaller logos.

H3: The interaction of in-group members' need for group identity signaling and need for uniqueness will influence individuals' apparel choice preferred by the majority of group members.

Methods

To validate H1 and H2, 93 Philadelphia Eagles fans were recruited from Amazon MTurk. All participants were asked to read a hypothetical scenario about going to the stadium with friends on an Eagles game day to create a public consumption effect. Identity signaling was measured by three items of team identity by Trail and James (2001) and a median split was used to categorize participants into either high or low groups. Participants were asked to complete the relative importance of apparel attributes and preference of larger team logo on sport team apparel.

The results confirmed that fans perceived a team logo on team apparel as the most influential factor vs. other attributes. The results of ANOVA showed that fans in the higher team identity perceived that a team logo on team apparel at the stadium with friends on game day was the most important attribute for team apparel preference, compared with fans in the lower team identity condition ($M_{high}=5.63$, $M_{low}=4.83$, $F(1, 91)=7.73$, $p<.01$). In addition, fans in the higher team identity chose a team apparel with a larger team logo than fans in the lower team identity condition ($M_{high}=5.50$, $M_{low}=4.78$, $F(1, 91)=6.27$, $p<.05$). Thus, H1 and H2 were confirmed.

To test H3, 58 Eagles fans were recruited. This study employed a 2 (identity signaling: high vs. low) x 2 (need for uniqueness: high vs. low) between-subject using a watch-party with friends scenario. Group identity signaling and need for uniqueness were measured (Tian et al., 2001; Trail & James, 2001). All participants were asked to evaluate team shirts preferred by either 70% or 10% of fans.

ANOVA yielded a significant interaction effect between identity signaling and uniqueness needs ($F(1, 54)=3.06$, $p<.10$, $\eta^2=.055$). Further analyses revealed that in the lower identification condition, there was a significant effect of uniqueness needs on team apparel preferred by 10% of fans ($F(1,29)=6.15$, $p<.05$, $\eta^2=.175$); Lower need for uniqueness makes fans wear a team shirt preferred by 70% of the fan members, and higher need for uniqueness makes them wear a team shirt preferred by 10% of the fans. However, within the high identification condition, the effect on team apparel preference was not significant. Thus, H3 was supported.

In summary, this research demonstrates that higher affiliation with their favorite team leads sport consumers to choose team apparel with a large logo, confirming the importance of a team logo. Furthermore, the empirical finding provides that self-expressive team apparel would be affected by a variation in the dynamics of team identity signaling and need for uniqueness in the development of optimal distinctiveness. In practice, this study provides an important managerial insight by highlighting the role of the size-to-status relationship of an assortment of team apparel items in consumer preference. Also, this study illustrates how marketers offer differentiated team apparel according to consumers' complex identity processes and individualized demands.