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Antecedents of Brand Authenticity in Cause-Related Sport Marketing Campaigns

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Abstract

Cause-related sport marketing (CRSM) is a popular managerial technique in today's business landscape. There is a perception that for CRSM to be effective, consumers must perceive the sponsoring brand to be authentic in its actions. Minimal empirical research has analyzed the antecedent factors that lead consumers to perceive a brand as authentic in CRSM. Using multiple linear regression, six antecedent factors' impact on brand authenticity were tested. Perceptions of the brand's motives and brand transparency were found to have a statistically significant impact on brand authenticity.

Keywords: cause-related sport marketing, brand authenticity, team identification, multiple regression

Sport organizations continue to engage and invest in cause-related marketing (CRM). CRM is “the process of formulating and implementing marketing activities characterized by an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). This paper places particular emphasis on consumer responses to these programs and the role of CRM in consumers’ perceptions of brand authenticity. Brand authenticity is defined as “a subjective evaluation of genuineness ascribed to a brand by consumers” (Napoli et al., 2014, p. 1091).

Because it is generally accepted that perceived brand authenticity is an important component of a successful CRM campaign, it is therefore crucial to understand the antecedent factors by which consumers perceive a brand utilizing CRM to be authentic. The authors found relatively little empirical research analyzing the specific factors leading consumers to perceive a sports organization using cause-related sport marketing (CRSM) to be (in)authentic. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify these factors that lead consumers to perceive a brand engaging in CRSM to be authentic and to test a relevant outcome (brand image) of perceived authenticity.

In this work, the authors studied the Green Bay Packers, a sport organization, who partnered with the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation, a charitable cause, to sell a knit hat as team/cause cobranded merchandise.

and (b) examine the relationships between co-creation and attendees’ attendance frequency, arrival time, and merchandise spending. The subsequent section details literature informing the study. This is followed by the study’s hypotheses, methods, results, and discussion of how the findings can benefit sport practitioners.

Literature Review

Perceived Brand Authenticity

There is a general perception that for a CRSM campaign to be effective, the brand should be perceived as authentic in deciding to undertake a given campaign. Indeed, the authenticity of a brand has become increasingly important to consumers (Fine, 2003) and has been shown to impact consumer behavior (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Accordingly, in this study, the authors tested the influence of six antecedents on brand authenticity (see Figure 1). Although each of these antecedents has been shown to influence brand authenticity in prior research (e.g., Alhouti et al., 2016; Joo et al., 2019; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), to our best knowledge, little to no research has tested these antecedents simultaneously. Further, because consumers often have biased, positive perceptions of teams with which they identify, team identification was included as a moderator for these six antecedents.

Antecedents and Consumer Perceptions of Brand Authenticity in CRSM

Perceived Brand Commitment. Perceived commitment is defined as stakeholder perceptions of organizational steadfastness and/or dedication to a given initiative (Joo et al., 2019). Perceptions of both commitment and stability have been found to influence authenticity perceptions from consumers (Joo et al., 2019; Moulard et al., 2016).

Perceived Fit. Although research has yielded mixed findings as to the role of fit (Ellen et al., 2000), the vast majority supports the idea that high-fit cause partnerships are perceived more positively

than low-fit partnerships (Alhouti et al., 2016; Bloom et al., 2006; Lafferty et al., 2004; Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013; Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). The constructs of perceived fit and perceived authenticity are natural complements, as Spiggle et al. (2012) stated regarding brand extensions: “researchers widely assume that the fit of the extension is primary determinant of positive reactions to proposed brand extensions” (p. 979).

Perceived Cause-Consumer Congruence. When consumers identify with a cause, they will perceive a brand sponsoring that cause in a more positive light (Goldsmith & Yimin, 2014). Malär et al. (2011) emphasized that fit between a brand’s communication strategy and an individual’s self-image influences perceptions of brand authenticity.

Perceived Motives. Firms can undergo cause campaigns for many reasons, and the literature regarding CRM provides various motivations and potential rationales. Consumers’ perceptions of firm motivation have been shown to impact their perceptions of brand authenticity (Cinelli & LeBoeuf, 2020). Furthermore, consumers perceiving the brand’s motives as altruistic evaluate these campaigns more positively (Moosmayer & Fuljahn, 2013).

Perceived Reliability. Consumers are more educated than ever before, and therefore brands must fulfill their promises (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). Perceived reliability is defined as customers’ perceptions that a brand delivers on its cause efforts (Alhouti et al., 2016). In Alouti et al. (2016), the authors found that when a business has a tangible impact, consumers perceive the brand more authentically.

Perceived Transparency. Perceived transparency is defined as the ability of stakeholders to glean information regarding organizational action (which for the purpose of this study, regards CRSM practices) as open and available (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Brands perceived to be transparent by consumers also experience higher levels of perceived authenticity (Joo et al., 2019).

Team Identification

An important factor that must be considered is team identification as this psychological construct has been shown to influence consumer behavior (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Heere (2016) defined team identification as: “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from membership in a community anchored around a sports team, based on the emotional value attached to that membership and the knowledge of, engagement with, and evaluation of the community itself” (p. 203).

A few ways in which team identification has been shown to predict consumer behavior include attendance (e.g., Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; James & Trail, 2008), media consumption (e.g., Trail et al., 2003), branded merchandise (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) and purchasing of a sponsor’s products (Hickman, 2015). Given the important role of team identification regarding sport consumer behavior, the authors wanted to control for this variable’s influence on consumer perceptions of brand image by using team identification as a moderator.

Perceived Brand Image

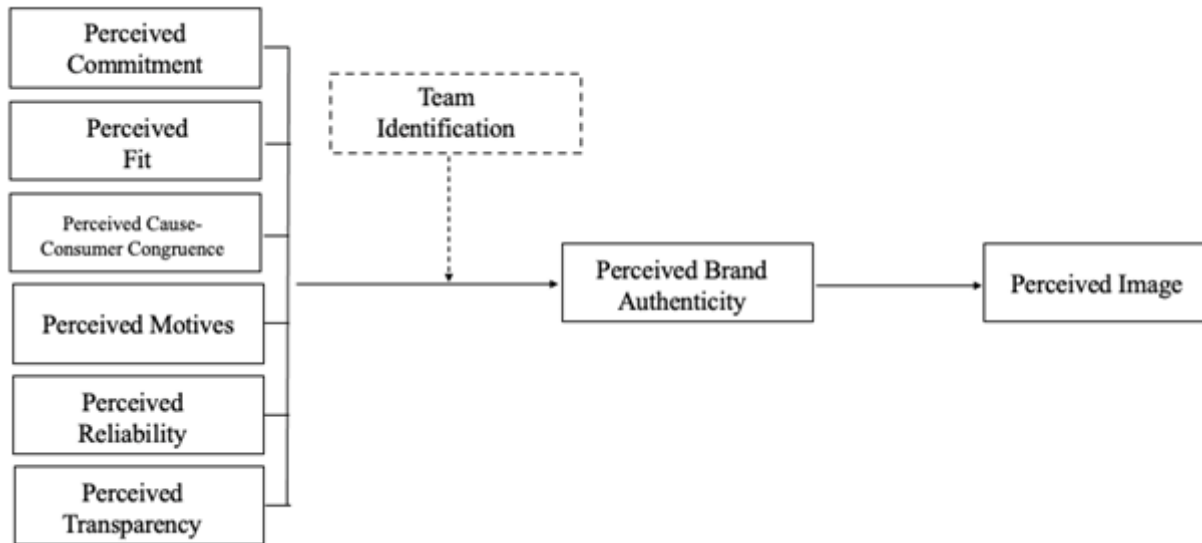
Perceived brand image can be defined as that which is brought to a consumer’s mind by a brand association. Importantly, this concept relies on associations, usually those that have some significance to a given consumer, and these associations usually are accompanied by resulting thoughts and feelings (Roy & Banerjee, 2007). The role of perceived brand image is crucial because it, too, has been shown to influence consumer behavior (Burmman et al., 2008). Lu et al. (2015) found that a brand’s perceived authenticity influences various brand relationship measures, including brand image.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Based on the above review of the relevant literature, the following framework was proposed and tested to analyze consumer responses to a cause-related sport marketing campaign.

Figure 1

Consumer Responses to Cause-Related Sport Marketing



Research Context

The Green Bay Packers are a professional football team that competes in the National Football League (NFL). The organization was founded in 1919 and became an active club in 1921, making the team the third oldest in the NFL. The Packers are the only professional team in the American “Big 4” sports leagues that is publicly owned yet shares in the organization cannot be bought or sold and do not appreciate nor provide dividends. This public ownership structure, however, enables the organization to have a unique charitable focus as no owner claims organizational profits. This charitable focus manifests itself through not only the Packers vs. Cancer campaign, but also via many other organizational initiatives. Included in these initiatives is the Packers Tailgate Tour, which raises money for Special Olympics Wisconsin; Tundra Tales, an at-home reading program; product/in-kind donations; and social justice grants.

In recent years, the Green Bay Packers partnered with the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation to sell a sponsored, cobranded knit hat. The authors chose this campaign because (a) the public ownership nature of the organization, (b) the campaign has established itself as an annual campaign as part of the NFL’s Crucial Catch program, (c) the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation supports a cause (i.e., cancer) that has had a widespread impact, and (d) many individuals identify with and are passionate about the Green Bay Packers. Forbes magazine rated the Green Bay Packers as having the most passionate fanbase in the United States (Settimi, 2020). Finally, the Packers vs. Cancer campaign website is among the clearest explanations of an NFL team’s cancer campaign across the league.

Throughout the month of October, the Packers sold these hats and with the purchase of each unit during the campaign, \$5 was donated to the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation. An example of the product and a description of the campaign can be found on their Packers website. This product and description

were shown at the outset of data collection to ensure participants had knowledge and understanding of the campaign.

Hypothesis Development

Figure 1 visually illustrates how consumers may respond to CRSM. From this model and the supporting review of literature, eight hypotheses were generated.

- H1.** Perceived brand commitment will have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H2.** Consumer perceptions of cause-brand fit will have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H3.** Causes that are more important to the consumer will have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H4.** Campaign motives perceived to be focused on the given cause(s) (i.e., the campaign is driven by altruistic motives) is hypothesized to have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H5.** Perceived reliability will have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H6.** Perceived transparency will have a positive effect on perceived brand authenticity.
- H7.** Team identification will moderate the roles of perceived reliability, perceived fit, cause-consumer congruence, perceived motives, perceived reliability and perceived transparency on perceived brand authenticity.
- H8.** Brands utilizing CRM campaigns that are perceived as authentic will have a positive effect on the overall perceived image of the sponsoring organization.

Method

Data Collection Procedures

To empirically test these hypotheses, the authors conducted an online survey through Qualtrics. Participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), targeted only to the state of Wisconsin. Recruitment of participants began on a national scale; however, participants across the United States consistently stated that they did not identify as fans of the Green Bay Packers. Furthermore, recruiting only in the state of Wisconsin ensured respondents were most likely familiar with not only with the Green Bay Packers, but also the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation, and Bellin Health (the program's sponsor, a local healthcare provider in Wisconsin). Participants received an initial sum of \$20 as a part of a pilot study, in which 25 participants were recruited. Reliability tests were conducted with an initial pilot sample. Upon recognizing that \$20 was not sufficient payment for participants, the authors doubled the compensation to \$40. No other changes were made when moving from the pilot study to the full data collection other than compensation.

The authors recruited a total of 101 participants for this study after conducting a statistical power analysis that required a minimum of 97 participants. Although the authors had hoped for a significantly larger sample size, targeting individuals via MTurk specific to the state of Wisconsin minimized the study's breadth.

Constructs and Measures

The authors used well-established scales to accurately gauge the following constructs. Scales were modified to fit the research context by changing the wording to include "Green Bay Packers" and/or "Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation." A description and image of the Packers' cause campaign, which

participants were shown before completing the survey, can be found on the team website (<https://www.packers.com/community/packers-vs-cancer>).

Table 1 outlines the specific constructs used in this study. All constructs were measured on a 1–7 Likert type scale.

Table 1

Construct Scales

Construct	Scale
Team Identification	James et al. (2019; SSIS–R)
Perceived Brand Commitment	Joo et al. (2019)
Perceived Fit	Keller and Aaker (1992); Westberg and Pope (2014)
Perceived Motive	Ellen et al. (2006); Groza et al. (2011)
Cause-Consumer Congruence	Goldsmith and Yimin (2014)
Perceived Brand Reliability	Joo et al. (2019)
Perceived Brand Transparency	Joo et al. (2019)
Perceived Brand Authenticity	Napoli et al. (2014; CBBA)
Perceived Brand Image	Kim and Kim (2004; two items); Low and Lamb (2000; four items)

Data Analysis

The authors used multiple linear regression (via SPSS) to analyze survey data. Specifically, paths and relationships were analyzed using a simultaneous regression technique. To begin, the six antecedent variables were regressed on perceived brand authenticity to determine the direct effects of the antecedents on authenticity. Then, a moderator analysis was run using the statistical program PROCESS on SPSS to determine the moderating effect of team identification on the antecedents' impact on brand authenticity. Finally, perceived brand authenticity was regressed on perceived brand image to determine the direct effect of authenticity on image.

Results

The purpose of this research is to identify the factors that lead consumers to perceive a brand engaging in CRSM to be authentic and to test a relevant outcome (brand image) of perceived authenticity. Six antecedents were regressed on brand authenticity, and the overall multiple regression relationship was statistically significant ($R^2 = .675$, $F [6, 94] = 32.574$, $p < .001$). Regarding the individual antecedents, perceptions of a values-driven motive ($\beta = .421$, $p < .001$) and perceptions of brand transparency ($\beta = .215$, $p = .032$) were found to be statistically significant at the .01 and .05 levels, respectively. Table 2 provides the complete list of antecedent factors, beta weights and p-values.

Table 2
Statistical Significance

Antecedent	β	p
Perceived Brand Commitment	-.018	.869
Perceived Fit	-.014	.870
Values-Driven Motive	.421**	< .001
Cause-Consumer Congruence	.145	.069
Perceived Brand Reliability	.194	.082
Perceived Brand Transparency	.215*	.032

N = 101

* Statistically significant at .05 level.

** Statistically significant at .01 level.

The data showed mixed results. Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 6 were supported. Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 4, and Hypothesis 5 were not supported. Additionally, Table 3 shows the results of the moderation analysis of team identification on the six antecedent variables. Values-driven motive was found to be moderated by team identification, yet an interaction effect was not found in the other five antecedents. Because only one of the six antecedents was moderated by team identification, Hypothesis 7 was only partially supported.

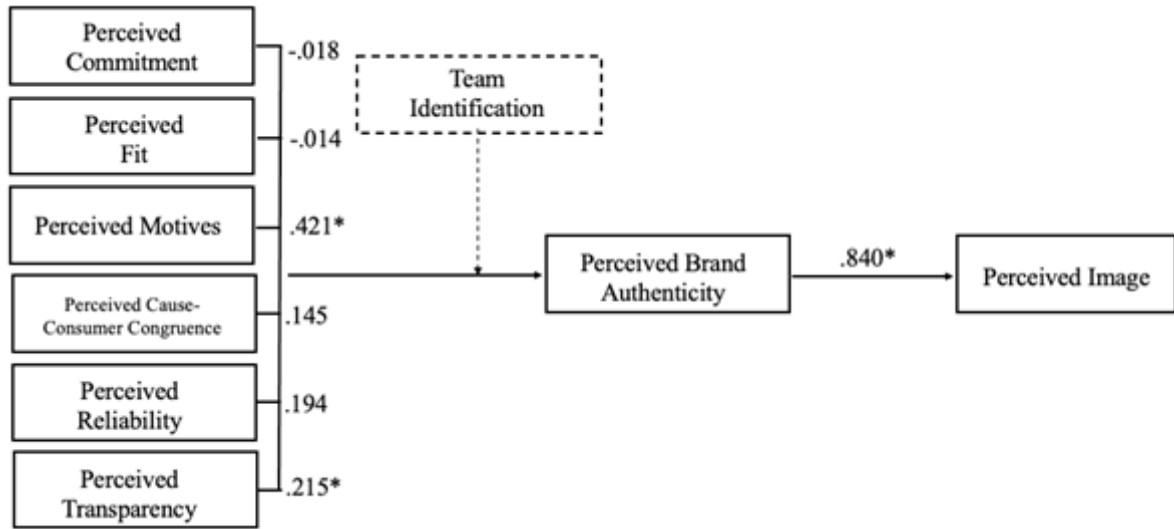
Table 3
Interaction Effects

Antecedent	p
Perceived Brand Commitment	.216
Perceived Fit	.998
Values-Driven Motive*	.019
Cause-Consumer Congruence	.407
Perceived Brand Reliability	.229
Perceived Brand Transparency	.127

N = 101

*Statistically significant at .05 level.

Finally, a simple regression was run to test the impact of brand authenticity on brand image. The relationship was found to be statistically significant ($\beta = .840, p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 8 is supported. In sum, Hypotheses 3, 6, and 8 were supported and Hypothesis 7 was partially supported. Figure 2 shows the path weights for the tested relationships.

Figure 2*Path Weights*

Discussion

Antecedents and Outcomes

Consumer perceptions of brand motives describes the attributions that consumers place on organizational actions. In this study, values-driven attributions were found to have a significant impact on perceptions of brand authenticity. In other words, when a brand is perceived as being altruistic, it is perceived as more authentic.

It does not appear that the Green Bay Packers share any information regarding the company's motive in engaging the Packers vs. Cancer campaign. Motives had a significant impact on authenticity perceptions (a worthwhile goal for brands), but it seems that motives are not often shared by sponsoring organizations.

The second antecedent that was found to be statistically significant was perceived brand transparency. This concept, regarding CRSM, is guided by the idea that consumers can easily glean information about the sponsoring brand, the campaign, and the benefitting organization. The authors sought as much information about the Packers vs. Cancer campaign as possible. However, this search yielded minimal additional information other than what was found on the initial description provided by the organization on Packers.com. The researchers did not find any amount that the Packers claim to have donated to the Vince Lombardi Cancer Foundation or any additional cancer work beyond this individual campaign. Therefore, it can be argued that this campaign is relatively nontransparent, yet perceived transparency was a primary factor in perceived brand authenticity.

Combined, this understanding of perceived motive and perceived transparency brings both researchers and practitioners to a unique question regarding perceived brand authenticity: Should sponsoring brands be more open about their motives when engaging in CRSM? Based on the results of this study, this increased transparency regarding organizational (altruistic) motives could lead to increased authenticity perceptions.

Impact of Team Identification

The results of this study provide novel insights regarding team identification. Wann and James (2018) stated, “For a large portion of fans, the role of team supporter is a highly central and important component of their sense of self” (p. 15). The authors elaborate that team identification could have a greater impact on sport consumers decisions than any other variable (Wann & James, 2018). However, in this study, team identification did not have the expected moderation impact on the antecedents’ impact on perceived brand authenticity. This concept should be especially exciting for practitioners, in that a level of identification may not be needed for CRSM to be effective, especially for lowly identified or nonidentified fans. Although these fans may not be apt to purchase CRSM products, perceived brand authenticity (and the corollary of perceived brand image) may increase if the relevant antecedents are capitalized upon. This idea is central to what Wann and James (2018) noted in their conclusion regarding the role of sport marketers and team identification: “what sport marketers might be able to do is to develop campaigns that highlight (environmental and psychological) antecedents” (p. 98). Given this, we argue that sport organizations should highlight their motives and be more transparent in their CRSM efforts. The results of this study provide insight that those marketing tactics will be effective across all levels of team identification, from highly identified fans to individuals who are not identified. Team identification remains a vitally important construct regarding sport consumer behavior, but this study is one of the few studies that found that team identification may not be as fundamental as many in the sport management discipline believe.

Limitations and Future Research Opportunities

Although the researchers sought to develop a valuable and influential study, a few limitations must be addressed. First, the study had 101 participants. Although this sample size met the minimum needed for statistical power, more participants would provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. Regarding participants, the sample was targeted to the state of Wisconsin given the context and focus on the Green Bay Packers’ cancer campaign. Other geographic areas may have yielded different findings, and additional research in a broader context would be valuable (such as a league-wide CRSM campaign). The study recruited participants from Amazon MTurk, which has been shown to be valid research method (Hauser & Schwartz, 2016). This being stated, Amazon MTurk also comes with its own set of limitations, such as declining data quality (Kennedy et al., 2020).

Furthermore, additional antecedents could be analyzed. The overall model was statistically significant with an $R^2 = .675$. That means 67.5% of the variance in brand authenticity was explained by the six antecedents included in this study. Though these results offer beneficial insights into brand authenticity, in the future researchers should still consider additional potential antecedents that may influence perceptions of brand authenticity.

Conclusion

Cause-related sport marketing has become an integral part of many sport organizations’ marketing and social responsibility activities. Perceived brand motives (i.e., altruistic motives) and perceived brand transparency were statistically significant antecedents regarding perceived brand authenticity. Team identification was found to moderate only one of the relationships between the various antecedents of brand authenticity, providing support that team identification may not be as influential as many scholars believe.

Additional support was found for the relationship between brand authenticity and brand image. These findings expand the extant literature on brand authenticity, team identification, and CRSM while also providing a launching point for additional empirical work in this realm. All brands want to be perceived as authentic regardless of their marketing efforts. For sport organizations engaging in CRSM providing insight into their motives and being more transparent holistically, the brand may be perceived in a more positive way by fans and nonfans alike.

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