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Brand Love, Brand Image and Loyalty in Australian Elite Sport

Sarah Broadbent, Deakin University, sarah.broadbent@deakin.edu.au
Kerrie Bridson, Deakin University, kerrie.bridson@deakin.edu.au
Lesley Perkins, Deakin University, lesley.perkins@deakin.edu.au
Ruth Rentschler, Deakin University, ruth.rentschler@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This paper aims to contribute to the current brand and sport marketing literature by conceptualising the relationship between brand image, brand love and loyalty within Australian elite sport. The context for this study is an investigation of Australian football and more specifically its teams. Sport teams are seeking to enhance profits through marketing strategies targeted at driving supporter loyalty. Such teams are marketing their identities as a brand in an attempt to create a unique team personality in order to achieve a competitive advantage over other teams. But team or brand personality and its relationship with loyalty do not operate in isolation and the introduction of brand love to the conceptual model seeks to better explain variations in loyalty performance. This paper presents a holistic conceptual model and subsequent research propositions.

Keywords: Brand love, loyalty, brand image, passion, sport
Introduction

According to the famous Beatles song and Roberts (2006) in his book on lovmarks ‘all you need is love’. The word ‘love’ tends to conjure up thoughts of romance and the feeling of love for another person, however love can also be used to describe how one feels about an object, activity or even a brand (Ahuvia, 2005; Whang, Allen, Sahoury, and Zhang, 2004). Brand love is defined “as the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied customer has for a particular brand” (Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006, p. 81) where brand love can lead to positive loyalty outcomes. Loyalty from consumers is said to provide an organisation or seller with protection from competition (Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi, 2006), positive word-of-mouth, repeat purchasing and sizable purchasing from its customers (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol, 2002). Further to this it has been argued that loyalty provides an economic benefit to an organisation beyond repeat purchase where the cost of acquiring new consumers is considerably higher than that of retaining present consumers (Kaynak, Salman, and Tatoglu, 2008; Rundle-Thiele, 2005; Srinivasan, Anderson, and Ponnavaulu, 2002). Thus, of what influence is brand love on the loyalty of a brands consumer? Moreover, is there value in investigating brand love and loyalty in sport? To answer this it is critical to review what brand love is.

Literature Review

Brand Love

Until recently the concept of love was limited to the psychology literature where Sternberg (1997) presented his triangular love scale. In this study on the elusive theory of love, Sternberg (1997) espoused love to be a triangulation of passion, intimacy and commitment. Building on early psychology theories such as that of Freud (from 1922), Reik (from 1944), and Maslow (from 1962), Sternberg (1997) discussed the idea of love in terms of being love, deficiency love, and love as a search for salvation. The theory of love has received extensive attention in the psychology literature however brand love, as distinct from romantic love, is a relatively new concept in the marketing literature, thus has received limited attention until recently. Based on Sternberg’s (1986) original paper on the triangular love theory, Shimp and Madden (1988) argued that the triangular love theory concept could be used to study consumer-object relations. They argued that as consumers interact and form relationships with objects and brands they develop feelings which range from ‘antipathy, to slight fondness, all the way up to what would, in person-person relations, amount to love’ (Shimp and Madden, 1988, p. 163). Where this notion of love is equivalent to extreme enthusiasm towards a product or brand in the consumer behaviour literature (Shimp and Madden, 1988). Whilst there are a few empirical studies on the measurement of brand love (Ahuvia, 2005; Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence, 2008; Heinrich and Bauer Johannes C. M. Muhl, 2008) there is much controversy over the conceptualisation of brand love. Sternberg’s (1997) triangular love theory appears both reasonable and plausible, however once applied to the consumer-brand relationship the term commitment (as a component of love) takes on a different meaning and the literature argues that commitment is a dimension or possible outcome of loyalty.
Thus far, the measurement of brand love has been investigated without consideration of other related constructs. For instance, the empirical study presented by Heinrich & Bauer Johannes C.M. Muhl (2008) operationalised the triangular love theory in isolation of other constructs. If traditional loyalty measures had been included in the past study, there would most certainly be cross-loading of the constructs, for example, commitment could potentially measure both loyalty and brand love. Therefore, it is the intention of the present study to re-examine how brand love has been conceptualised and operationalised with consideration to existing marketing measures and terms. As distinct from Shimp and Madden (1988) who eluded to the similarities between brand love and brand loyalty, Carroll and Ahuvia (2006) argued that brand love can lead to the positive outcomes of word-of-mouth and loyalty. Thus, postulating the distinction between the constructs of brand love and loyalty. This relationship between brand love and loyalty has been further postulated by Maurice Levy, the Chairman of Publicis Group (owners of Saatchi & Saatchi) who stated that ‘the vast majority of the population ... consumes and shops with their mind and their heart, or if you prefer, their emotions’ (Roberts, 2006, p. 68). Consequentially suggesting that consumer decision making and therefore loyalty to a particular product or brand is emotionally driven.

**Brand Loyalty**

Loyalty has been defined by Oliver (1999, p. 34) as ‘a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behaviour.’ This definition highlights two distinct aspects of loyalty which are present throughout the literature, behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. George Day, in his 1969 study, was the first to suggest loyalty was a multidimensional construct whereby he postulated that true loyalty was the combination of both attitude and behaviour (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). Day (1969) discussed the need for empirical investigation into loyalty measures beyond simply purchasing behaviour. Whilst the literature has adopted a multidimensional view of loyalty, there is much conjecture as to the dimensions. Dick & Basu’s (1994) conceptual framework to measure customer loyalty whereby social norms and situational factors were seen as mediators to the loyalty relationship, defined customer loyalty as ‘the strength of the relationship between an individual’s relative attitude and repeat patronage’ (Dick and Basu, 1994, p. 99). Thus, suggesting that loyalty is the combination of both attitude and behaviour, where one or the other does not constitute loyalty. Following an in-depth analysis of the literature and development of the conceptual framework, Dick & Basu (1994) concluded that this mediation occurred in so far as a strong relative attitude was resistant to social norms and/or situational factors.

Within the sport context, loyal fans are important beyond their commitment to repurchase memberships and merchandise or watch their sporting team (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler, 2008). Sports organisations can leverage their loyal fan base to secure media broadcasting, which in turn enhances the exposure of the team and its ability to seek revenue from sponsorship (Kaynak et al., 2008). The conceptualisation and subsequent measurement of loyalty in sport has received much attention more recently in the literature, as the penultimate fan loyalty measurement tool is sought after (e.g. Bauer et al., 2008; Filo, Funk, and Alexandris, 2008; Funk and James, 2006; Gladden and Funk, 2002; Kwon, Trail, and James, 2007). Further when considering loyalty as a multidimensional construct it is important to realise that attitudinal loyalty, behavioural loyalty and word-of-mouth items can and have been blended to form a unidimensional construct (Gladden and Funk, 2001).
However for the present study it is important to be able to see where the relationships form, and thus the power of brand love on each individual dimension of loyalty. Beyond the measurement of loyalty the question which begs attention is that of the motives or drivers of loyalty. Thus we propose that brand love provides opportunities to investigate the variance in loyalty to teams leading to hypothesis 1: \( H_1 \); Brand Love has a positive relationship with Brand Loyalty.

**Brand Image**

Brand image is a widely recognised concept in marketing, however its definition proves to be the cause of much conjecture in the literature (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). In their work analysing the array of definitions of brand image, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) determined the general theme that brand image is based on is a perception of reality rather than reality itself. Stated more succinctly, Keller (1993, p. 3) defines brand image as the ‘perception about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer memory.’ Thus, brand image is largely a subjective concept which is formed in the consumers’ mind (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). Neal and Strauss (2008) define brand image as an organisation’s promise and its ability to deliver this promise over time in the mind of the consumer. In reviewing the definition of brand image it is important to recognise and distinguish between some brand concepts which are intertwined with brand image. Brand identity is the brand image the company would like to have, that is the desired brand image. Brand value is the dollar figure assigned to the brand which is the culmination of tangible and intangible benefits less cost. Brand equity is the brand value in comparison to the brands rivals (Neal and Strauss, 2008), and brand associations are ‘the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers’ (Keller, 1993, p. 3).

It has been argued that brand image can be seen and measured as a ‘personality’ with consideration to the consumer as the brand image reflects the consumers own self image (Farquhar, 1989). That is, a brand is essentially a status symbol, an ingredient to the personal image of the consumer and in portraying the self image a consumer will seek to align themselves with those brands which reflect their core values. Further to this some studies, whilst referring to brand image, use alternate personification terms, such as brand personality or brand character and personality image (Aaker, 1997; Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). The personification metaphor allows the consumer to view the brand as a person with personality characteristics, this interpretation of brand image is established (e.g. Aaker, 1997; Davies, Chun, da Silva, and Roper, 2001; Guzman and Paswan, 2009; Wang and Yang, 2008) and furthermore is a relevant conceptualisation within the context of sport, where fans of a sports team view their favourite team as a person with personality characteristics such as competence, excitement and ruggedness as examples (Davies et al., 2001).

The relationship between brand image and loyalty is discussed on many occasions in the literature; however there is little empirical evidence to support the relationship. Whilst much attention has been given to the relationship between brand associations or brand equity and loyalty (e.g. Filo et al., 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2002, 2004; Kaynak et al., 2008; Yoo, Donthu, and Lee, 2000) little focus has been directed to brand image. In an empirical study of the relationship between brand image and fan loyalty Bauer et. al. (2008) found that brand image strongly influences behavioural loyalty. They stated that the ‘fans’ perceptions of a club’s attributes and benefits’ play a signification role in creating loyal fan behaviour (Bauer et. al., 2008, p. 220). In their study Bauer et. al. (2008) measured brand image using product and non-product brand attributes as well as brand benefits and attitudes. Whilst this study found that brand attitude (as a component of brand image) was a strong and significant
predictor of behavioural loyalty, it was unable to differentiate between brand attitude and attitudinal loyalty (using psychological commitment items). Therefore attitudinal loyalty could not be modelled in the study and provides not only an avenue for future research but also something to be wary of when developing the questionnaire to ensure that brand attitude and attitudinal loyalty are measured separately. In Nandan’s (2005) discussion paper, it was argued that brand image, in congruence with brand identity, can enhance brand loyalty. Thus we propose that \( H_2: \) Brand Image has a positive relationship with Brand Loyalty. Moreover brand loyalty has the potential to be further explained when brand love is introduced as a mediator leading to our third hypothesis: \( H_3: \) The relationship between Brand Image and Brand Loyalty is mediated by Brand Love.

Antecedents to Brand Image

In their conceptual framework, Gladden and Milne (2004) suggested team related items, organisation related items, market related items, team logo design, and the stadium / arena where the team plays are antecedents to brand equity. They identify brand equity as the positive and negative consumer perceptions of the brand image and brand equity; consisting of perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Thus, brand image is viewed as a component of brand equity. While Gladden and Milne (2004) argued that fan or team identification as an outcome of brand loyalty and brand associations, the present research however, hypothesises that team identification is an antecedent to brand image and the loyalty constructs rather than a consequence.

Gladden and Funk (2004) identified eight brand associations which predict loyalty, of which only three were found to be significant predictors (tradition, product delivery, and star player). Four of the remaining five brand associations measured were predictive of loyalty (identification, nostalgia, peer group acceptance, and escape) and winning was found to not be a predictor of loyalty at all. Further to this, new stadium and charismatic head coach, also were not found to be signification predictors of loyalty in their study. Thus, the results here suggest that a star player is a significant predictor of fan loyalty above and beyond identification, nostalgia or new stadium. What this in turn means for marketers is that campaigns to attract and retain consumers building on the nostalgia, history and team or sport identification may not be the best way to create and maintain loyal fans (Gladden and Funk, 2004). These antecedents can be grouped into headings such as attraction (entertainment, escape, knowledge of the sport), heritage (tradition, family history, club colours, song, logo, nostalgia), the sport offer (product delivery, star player, coach, service, team success), and team identification (public evaluation, private evaluation, cognitive awareness) (Gladden and Funk, 2004; Heere and James, 2007). Whilst this is a discussion paper and the actual results of this research are not shown here, this research identifies the need for further exploration into the drivers of loyalty in the sport context. Beyond utilising existing measures, qualitative analysis which includes rather than excludes casual fans is necessary to draw out all the possible antecedents to loyalty and image. It is very probable that what draws or attracts the casual fans will differ from what attracts and motivates the more frequent fans. We therefore propose to investigate the antecedents to brand loyalty and hypothesise: \( H_c: \) Brand Image is reflected by: \( a: \) Sport Offer, \( b: \) Heritage, \( c: \) Attraction, \( d: \) Team ID.

The Conceptual Framework
In the present study, loyalty is considered to be the dependent variable where a positive relationship is present between brand image and loyalty. The antecedents to brand image or drivers of brand image are seen to have a positive relationship with brand image (directly) and indirect positive relationship with loyalty. These relationships are depicted in the conceptual framework outlined in figure 1. Based on the conceptual framework the study will address the question: What are the drivers of Brand Image, Brand Love and Loyalty for the sports consumer?

Figure 1 - Conceptual Framework

Conclusion

This conceptual study provides a foundation for brand research in the sport management arena. This conceptual model aims to provide greater insight into the variation of fan loyalty to a team. The context for this study is an investigation of Australian football and more specifically its teams. It is through the introduction of branding concepts such as brand image and brand love that we seek to contribute to knowledge. It is also through the conceptualisations of antecedents to the relationship that we hope to provide an abundance of future research opportunities within the branding and sport management domain.
References


