

The Role Of Product Importance Type On Brand And Product Level Responses

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Abstract

This research empirically examined product importance, its sources and role in explaining behaviour within an experiential consumption context of spectator sport. Product perceptions represent a psychological phenomenon evoked by a personal interaction with a given stimuli in a particular situation. Perceptions of sport product type would be drawn from the desired benefits and meaning individuals' derive from their symbolic association with the experience. A theoretical model developed by Bloch and Richins (1983) was used to explain how sources of stimuli (i.e. Situational Effects and Personal Characteristics) impact on perceptions of the product's importance, and how this in turn leads to certain psychological and behavioral responses.

Keywords: Product Importance, Involvement, Sport, Consumer Behaviour

Introduction

The importance of a sport [product] experience, its attributes and their meaning, is central to the description of how people become increasingly involved with different consumption activities (Funk & James, 2001; James, 2001). Few settings or experiences in society are accorded as much importance or record greater exposure than sports do (Michener, 1976; Novak, 1976). Nearly two-thirds (9.1 million) of Australians aged 18 year and older participate in some form of sport and physical activity with 48% or 7 million attended a sporting event as a spectator (ABS, 2004). In addition, the five free-to-air stations in Australia showed just under 100 hours of sport programs during a week in May. Despite this popularity, the importance of a leisure experience, and more narrowly spectator sports, remains difficult to define.

Perceptions of sport product type would be drawn from the desired benefits and meaning individuals' derive from their symbolic association with the experience (Gladden & Funk 2002). An instructive approach would be to empirically examine the sources of product importance and its role in behaviour within a context of experiential consumption (Holt, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Leisure consumption in general and spectator sport in particular reflects emotional and subjective reactions to objects that are predominately experiential (Madrigal, 2003). As such this area provides fertile ground for examining how different stimuli alter perceptions of the experience and contribute to a sense of product importance. Work along these lines not only offers new information on the nature of spectator involvement, but may also aid practitioners in the marketing of professional service experiences, vacation and travel experiences, and atmospherics in the retailing sector.

Literature Review

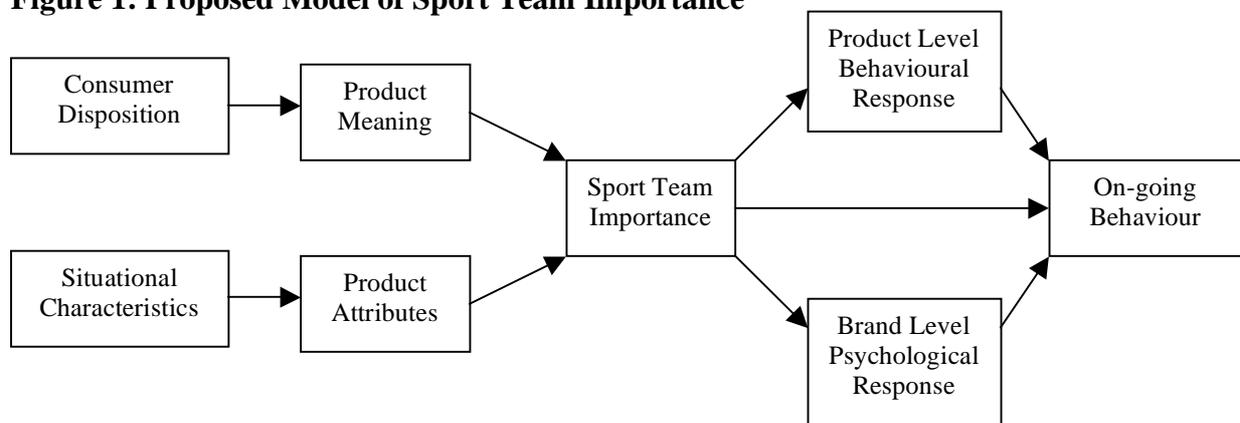
Jacoby, Chestnut and Fisher (1978) reported that "in consumer behavior, the construct of product importance has been accepted without question" (p.533). Much of this early interest stemmed from the managerial implications of being able to evaluate consumer perceptions of a product and ascertain whether certain features were more important than others. Some have

argued product importance is the central precursor to enduring involvement (Laurent & Kapferer, 1987), and used the concept to explain the effects behind involvement's role in purchase decisions (Richins & Bloch, 1986; 1991). Research has examined perceived product importance in a variety of consumptive settings. Janiszewski and Cunha, Jr.'s (2004) evaluation of product bundles revealed that consumers subjectively value attributes in a bundle and then sum those values to arrive at an overall sense of a product's importance. Further work has noted that perceived product importance is a central determinant in the choice process applied to purchase decisions (McQuiston, 1989). Beatty and Talpade (1994) reported that the level of product category importance for durable goods among teenagers was related to the level of perceived relative influence on their purchase decision. Whereas Wangenheim (2003) observed that under conditions of high product importance the link between satisfaction and loyalty was stronger. Despite its intuitive appeal, few efforts have explored product importance or its composition. Scholars have long recognized that individuals perceive some products and product contexts as more important than others, but efforts to empirically examine these perceptions as a way to understand behavior remain under developed. Research has generally focused more on product importance's role within involvement and less on explaining the construct itself; hence the need for the current inquiry to empirically examine sources of product importance and its role in leisure behavior.

Bloch and Richins (1983) suggested that product importance is best understood when divided into three sectors: sources, importance type and responses. The source sector represents (i) antecedents of product importance that are derived from certain product characteristics, (ii) situational variables, and (iii) consumer characteristics. As the focal construct, importance signifies the extent to which the attitude-object's priority reflects enduring and instrumental importance, whereas the response sector reflects both cognitive and behavioral outcomes that result from that attitude.

Despite Bloch and Richins' (1983, p.77) call for research on "leisure activity and its relationship to perceptions of product importance", work that focuses on the matter is sparse. A few consumer studies have applied Bloch and Richins' framework to empirically examine relationships between importance and responses (Burton & Netemeyer, 1997; Richins & Bloch, 1991). Yet, the model offers leisure researchers a useful way to explore how product importance both forms and effects subsequent behavior. Bloch and Richins model serves as the framework from which a Sport Team Importance (STI) model was developed and applied to a spectator sport context.

Figure 1: Proposed Model of Sport Team Importance



The STI model illustrates the mediation role of product importance in leisure contexts (see

Figure 1). Sport team importance is defined as the extent to which a person attaches enduring psychological significance and value to a sport team (Funk, Haugtvedt, & Howard, 2000). In contrast to Bloch and Richins' model, the STI describes a causal structure within the source and response sectors. Sport team importance creates product level and psychological responses that combine to influence an ongoing participation response to the brand. The STI model indicates that consumer characteristics and situational variables lead to perceptions of product characteristics (attributes and meaning) that in turn create sport team importance. The STI accounts for interactions between sources and responses of product importance (i.e., antecedents and outcomes of team importance).

Methodology

Measures

Prior scale development work and multivariate studies offered a useful means to explore sources of sport importance. Funk and colleagues developed the Sport Interest Inventory (SII) to measure perceptions of product-related factors and situational variables related to spectator sports (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004). The SII's Likert-type items, anchored on 5-point strongly disagree/strongly agree scale, were adapted to assess sources, importance, and response factors. The present study also included 3 Sport-Scape constructs, Cleanliness, Parking, and Food Service (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995) to represent product attributes. Three product importance items (e.g., Funk & Pastore, 2000; Krosnick et al, 1993) captured the focal construct of sport team importance. A total of 23 constructs were measured each assessed using 3-item indicators.

Data Collection

The data for the study were collected using the following procedures. Five home contests during a season of a professional sport team were randomly selected. For each contest, seat numbers were randomly selected and the Sport Interest Inventory questionnaire was randomly distributed by team personal to 100 individuals aged 18 years old and above during halftime. Average home attendance for the season was approximately 2,150 for the year. Of the 500 surveys distributed 370 usable questionnaires were returned, yielding a 74% response rate. The information from the completed surveys was then entered into SPSS and analyzed.

Results

The 3-item importance measure was summated and used to compare respondents at each of the five stages of data collections. T-tests revealed no differences, which indicates that importance was stable and that data from each stage could be combined for further analysis (e.g., Richins & Bloch, 1986). Similar analyses of proposed source and response factors were also conducted. Each of the multi-item scales was deemed reliable and summated to create a summary index of each element. This included scores for Source Factors: two consumer disposition indicators (team & sport interest), four situational effects measures (excitement, socialization, bonding, drama), four product meaning estimates (community pride, role models, support-for-women's-opportunities, wholesome environment), and four product attribute scales (food service, cleanliness, parking, entertainment value). Response Factors were similarly assessed: a frequency of attendance measure accounted for ongoing response, two indicators of media use determined task-related behavioral response, and three vicarious achievement items estimated psychological response.

CFI = .92) reported an acceptable fit, with the Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA = .07) and the Squared Root Mean Residual (SRMR = .05) satisfying recommend cutoff values.

Construct relationships were examined that had been specified in the Sport Team Importance Model STI shown in Figure 1. Again, using AMOS 4.1, this structural model was fitted to the data. Table 3 reports the results of the model's fit as acceptable, ($X^2 = 708.4$, $df 219$, CFI = .90; RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06). A closer examination of the model's causal relationships (reported as standardized regression coefficients), gave insight into the formative links behind [sources of] product importance. Perceptions of product meaning ($\lambda = .34$) and product attributes ($\lambda = .34$) both contributed significantly to explaining importance ($R^2 = .46$). Consumer Disposition [Interest] had a significant impact product meaning ($\lambda = .34$). However, Situational Effects overall had the largest influence on perceptions of both product attributes ($\lambda = .89$) and meaning ($\lambda = .60$). A link from Consumer Disposition to product attributes was not supported. The STI was next compared to Bloch's nested model (see Table 3). Although Bloch's Direct Effects Model (DEM) provided an adequate fit to the data ($X^2 = 703.5$, $df 218$), it did not provide a significant improvement over the STI ($\Delta \chi^2 = 5.1$, $df 2$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

The present study examined sources of product importance and its role in behavioral and psychological responses within an experiential consumption context of leisure. Bloch and Richin's (1983) model of product importance served as the framework to examine the relationship between three sectors: sources, importance type, and responses. Our study provided empirical support for their model but also revealed a two-stage causal model of importance Sport Team Importance achieved a better fit that specified sequential relationships within the source and response sectors.

The Sport Team Importance (STI) model demonstrated that consumer characteristics and atmospheric variables lead to perceptions of product characteristics (attributes and meaning) that in turn create sport team importance (Iwaski & Havitz, 1998, 2004). The STI and its paths provided a more parsimonious explanation than Bloch and Richins (1983) original model as 3 out of the 7 links were not significant and the overall explanation of ongoing response was significantly diminished ($R^2 = .10$). In this sense, the STI offers a more specific account of the relationships at work in the source and response sectors, and greater insight into how certain source elements drive and consequences result from product importance.

Based upon Bloch and Richins (1983) perspective, team sport importance produced behavioral and psychological responses that in turn influence game attendance across two seasons. We extended this perspective and demonstrated that importance as the focal construct created three response types: product level tasks, brand level emotion, and ongoing participation. Product level responses represented the perceived importance of information and search-related activities of using the media to obtain information about the product (soccer) and watching the product on TV independent of the brand (team). The brand level psychological response reflected the perceived importance of emotion generated from a sense of personal or collective esteem after usage through a sense of accomplishment or vicarious achievement. The final response ongoing represented the number of games a person attended over two seasons and were derived from the perceived importance of the team as well as product level tasks and emotions at the brand level.

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