

## **A Sport Celebrity Image Model: Focusing efforts to improve outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

The brand image construct has received considerable attention in sports marketing literature, yet its application to how the sport celebrity brand image affect consumers' attitude remains largely unexplored. This paper presents a framework to explore the sport celebrity brand image, and explains its impact on fans attitude. It offers propositions about its components and the likely influence of sport celebrity brand image on the sport fan attitude. Consideration of the sport celebrity brand image components may allow sport managers to better understand how it may be formed and managed. The framework also provides insights into the brand benefits sport consumers experience by associating with the brand image of the celebrity, and ultimately about the sport consumers' attitude towards the celebrity brand image.

Keywords: Sports marketing, consumer behaviour, brand image

# **Sport Consumer Attitude Formation Framework: Focusing efforts to improve outcomes**

## **Introduction**

Recent research indicates that worldwide sponsorship spending reaching \$44 billion in 2009 (IEG 2010). Sponsorship now accounts for 25.4% percent of organisations' overall advertising and promotion spending (IEG 2010), where sport sponsorship represent the largest sponsorship category in dollar terms reached \$11.28 billion in 2009 (IEG 2010). In this highly competitive industry sponsor organisations utilize famous sport athletes as spokespersons in their marketing communications strategies to positively impact on consumers' attitudes and to improve sales of products and services. Sponsor organisations use sport celebrities, in their marketing communications strategies to improve sales of products and services. Yet an understanding of which sport celebrity brand image attributes are contributing to positive consumer attitudes lacks.

There may be identifiable attributes, benefits and attitudes that may contribute to the SCBI. An understanding of how these aspects strengthen the SCBI can be valuable to organisations that are interested in sponsorship deals, thereby improving financial outcomes for sponsoring organisations. As Bauer *et al.* (2004) assert; sporting teams and their customers that have lasting, mutually beneficial relationships generally have enhanced customer loyalty. While there is increased discussion of teams as brands in the sports marketing theory, SCBI has been absent from the discourse. In this regard the components that may lead to a SCBI and their impact on fan loyalty could be highlighted, leading us to identify two main gaps, namely a shared understanding of what constitutes a SCBI, and how it relates to the sport fan attitude. This paper therefore addresses the following research question: What is the impact of specific celebrity brand attributes on fan attitudes? The first part of this paper investigates research done in the field of branding, sports marketing and marketing communication, followed by a proposed framework that addresses this question.

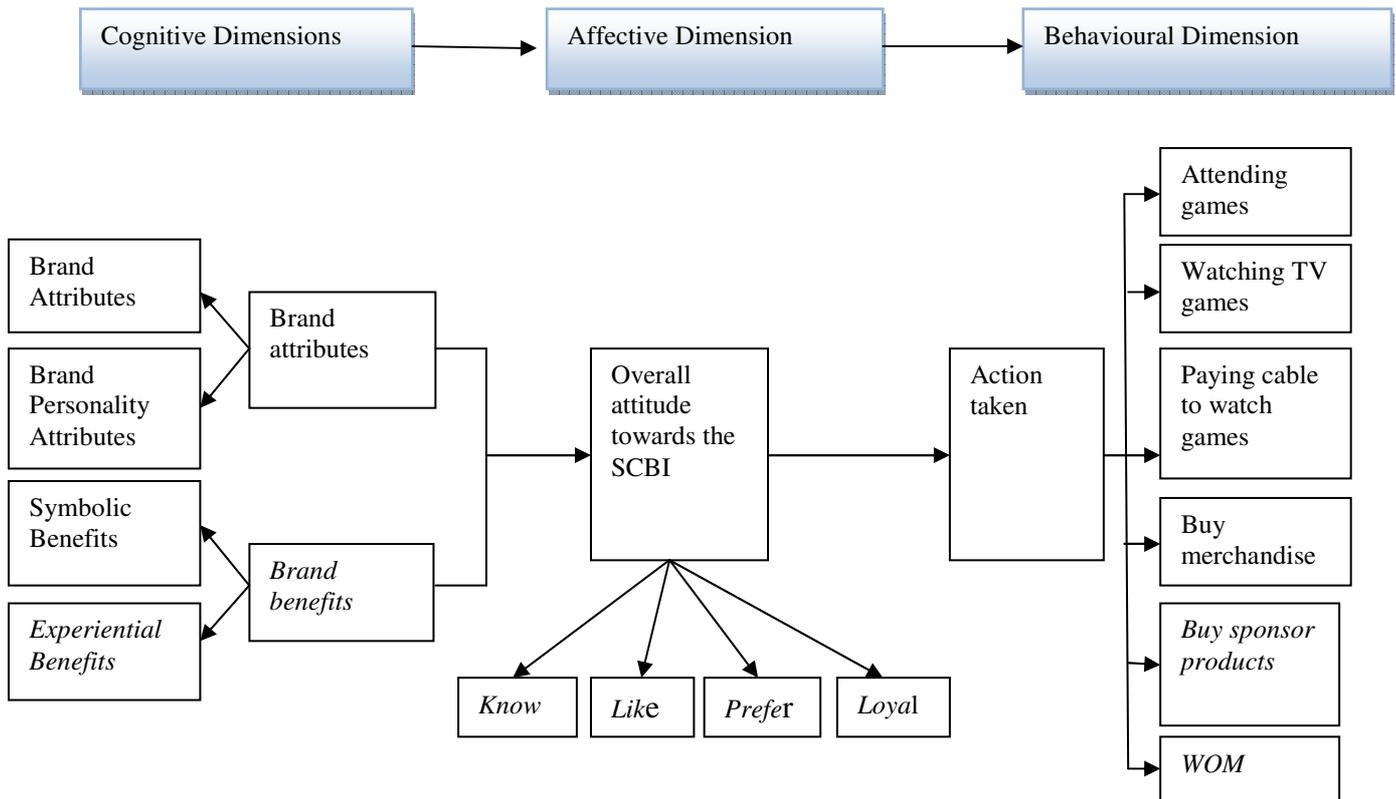
## **Sport Celebrity Brand Image**

Customer-based brand equity is the “differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand (Keller 1993, p. 2), where brand knowledge decomposed into brand awareness and brand image. However, this research focuses on the sport celebrity and assumed therefore that brand awareness is already high for the sport fan. Consequently, the current study only investigates brand image as an indication of the value or equity of the sport celebrity. Brand image is the “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in the consumer memory” (Keller, 1998, p. 93). Thus, the SCBI include the brand associations attributes held in the sport fan's memory and are indicative of how the sport fan perceives the sport celebrity brand. The current paper draws from branding, sports marketing and marketing communication literatures to develop the Sport Consumer Attitude Formation framework as shown in Figure 1 and explained next.

## **Sport Consumer Attitude Formation Framework**

This paper's framework (Figure 1) indicates that an attitude consists of three dimensions; including cognitive, affective and behavioural (Clow & Baack 2010).

**Figure 1: Proposed Sport Consumer Attitudes Formation Framework**



The cognitive component refers to the consumers' beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of the brand, the affective component represents the consumers' overall evaluation of the brand attributes, and the behavioural dimension indicates the consumers' tendency to act towards the brand (Assael, Brennan & Voges 2004). The Fishbein model indicates that affective attitudes are impacted by brand attributes and the evaluation of each attribute, which then result in the overall attitude towards the brand (Ajzen & Fishbein 1975). Thus, this study suggests that the benefits of each attribute represent the value the fan allocates to the specific brand attribute. The remainder of this section explains the theoretical bases of the framework.

### **SCBI and Sport Consumer's Cognitive Dimension of Attitude**

The current paper refers to the product related attributes of the sport celebrity as the abilities and performance of the celebrity on the field of play, and are summarised in Figure 1 (Gladden & Funk 2002). The study furthermore investigates non-sport related attributes of the celebrity as expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Ohanian 1990) and contribute to a positive consumer attitude (Friedman & Friedman 1979). Therefore we suggest that:

**P1:** *The stronger and more positive a sport fan's association with the celebrity's brand attributes, the more positive the perceived brand benefits.*

### **SCBI and Brand Benefits**

Sport fans supporting their favourite sport celebrity typically seek to meet their symbolic and experiential benefits (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler 2008). *Symbolic benefits* relate to the external benefits of the service construction, and include fan identification (Maddux & Rogers 1980) and fan internalisation (Kamins et al. 1989). *Experiential benefits* refer to product or service usage and include the emotions of the consumer ((Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer & Exler 2008; Gladden, Milne & Sutton 1998; Ross, James & Vargas 2006; Ross, Russell & Bang

2008). Symbolic and experiential benefits may contribute to an attitude change, leading us to argue that:

**P2:** *The sport fan's perceived experience of brand benefits, are positively related to their affective attitudes.*

### **SCBI and Brand Attitudes**

Brand attitudes are learned predispositions (Ajzen & Fishbein 1977) that impact on consumer behaviour and are determined by the SCBI in terms of attributes and benefits (Keller 1993). A sport consumer with a high level of affective attitude tends to act more (Assael, Brennan & Voges 2004). Therefore we propose that:

**P3:** *Sport fans' affective attitudes are positively related to their behavioural attitude.*

### **SCBI and Behavioural Loyalty**

The current study suggests testing behavioural constructs as showed in Figure 1 as an expression of fan loyalty toward the individual SCBI. We therefore propose that:

**P4:** *Behavioural loyalty is positively related to consumer behaviour as indicated in Figure 1.*

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The Sport Consumer Attitude Formation framework proposed here provides a conceptual basis for understanding how the sport fan perceives the sport celebrity brand attributes and benefits. This framework departs from traditional brand image conceptualisation (Keller 1993) that relies primarily on consumer goods perspective by stressing the importance of the SCBI in the sport industry. In describing the brand associations of sport celebrity brand image, this framework places emphasis on the effectiveness of the celebrity as endorser in marketing communication and their impact on the sport fan's attitude. While the theoretical framework is intended primarily for the study of the impact of the SCBI on fan loyalty, there are a number of possible extensions. One possible application is to use the model to analyse the effectiveness of the SCBI in sponsorship. In this context, the model could be applied by sponsor organisations seeking to develop long-term relationships with sport fans. The sport fans' responses to the SCBI may vary as a function of fans' levels of benefits and loyalty. As such, this model may assist in improving targeting practices. Identifying desired sport celebrity attributes under which certain benefits are experienced could be instituted by the sport celebrities' teams and sportspeople to enhance effectiveness of sponsorship. Furthermore, the identification of which attributes lead to positive word-of-mouth communication and increased sales may contribute to better marketing communication applications.

On a managerial level investigating the role of the SCBI in fan loyalty provides insights into managing long term relationships with sport fans. It may offer the sport managers with guidelines on how to manage sport celebrities' brands. The theoretical framework further informs the sport manager's understanding of the behaviour of the sport fan. In addition, identification of desired sport celebrity brand attributes would provide the sport manager with a tool to cultivate certain brand attributes, such as credibility, in their sport and celebrities. This paper recognises a need for a theoretical framework to serve as the foundation for the development of better research to assess the complexity of the SCBI in sports marketing. A systematic study of a sport fan's perceptions of the SCBI should incorporate the aggregate measures identified here. The SCBI can be an effective marketing communication medium; it cuts through communication clutter and increases brand awareness among endorsed products

and services. In light of increasing use of the SCBI in sponsorship and the large amount of money spend on celebrity endorsement; answers such as these are needed.

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