The More You Win, The Less You Believe? An Examination of the Moderating Effect of Team Performance on Attitude Toward Message of Sport Fan’s Superstitions

Wen-hao Winston Chou, University of Georgia
Jeong-Yeob Han (Advisor), University of Georgia
James J. Zhang (Advisor), University of Georgia

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During the 2012 season of the National Football League (NFL), Anheuser-Busch’s Bud Light, one of the NFL major sponsors, launched an advertising campaign named as “Superstitions.” The campaign with a tagline of “It’s Only Weird If It Doesn’t Work” included commercials that depicted various football fans’ superstitious behaviors believing what they did could help their favorite teams win, such as staying in one seat or on the same channel when winning and changing it if losing, wearing or not wearing specific clothing, watching the entire game or not, to name but a few (Wann et al., 2013). From the perspective of consumer insight, understanding and responding to unique consumer behaviors as a creative strategy should be promisingly effective in terms of better recognition of brands, attitude toward advertisement and brand, and overall sales (Hackley, 2003). However, this campaign turned out to be a failure when sales fell by 0.68% and was concluded by a reviewer as that “the effort is weird, but it certainly doesn’t work” (Crain, 2014). Up to date, the failure of this sponsorship leveraging has not been fully explained due to a current void in the related literature.

The purpose of this study was to revisit the Bud Light “Superstitions” campaign, for which we examined how superstitious fans’ inferences of manipulative intention might influence their responses to the sponsor’s persuasion attempt in the sponsorship-linked advertising (SLA). Inferences of manipulative intent, defined as “consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by inappropriate, unfair, or manipulative means” (Campbell, 1995, p. 228), are proved to lower advertising persuasiveness. Sports fans engage in superstitious behaviors because they believe there is a causal relationship between their actions and certain outcomes related to their favorite teams (Wann et al., 2013); yet, they might not realize to be manipulated by superstitions that were used as advertising tactics. According to one fan superstition survey of 10,000 adult NFL fans, the most superstitious fan bases were found in the teams with a long history of losing (Crain, 2014). Given that team identification was robustly found to be a powerful predictor of a variety of fan’s superstitious behaviors (Wann et al., 2013; Wann & Goeke, 2018), the current study tested the moderating effect of perceived team performance on subsequent inference of manipulative intention and attitudes toward the SLA featuring superstitions.

Data were collected by using a student sample (N=145). Multiple regression analyses were conducted on the model depicting the hierarchical relationships among sport fan superstitions, team identification, team performance, inference of manipulative intention, and advertisement attitudes (i.e., preference and credibility of advertisement). The findings revealed that sport fan’s superstition level was highly correlated with the level of team identification although the correlation was not moderated by perceived team performance. For those fans who had higher superstition level, they had a higher inference of manipulation intention after watching the SLA featuring superstitions although the SLA was more preferable and credible for them. Discussions are centered on theoretical and practical implications of channeling fan’s superstitions toward marketing effectiveness.