We Are In This Together: Sport Brand Involvement and Fans’ Psychological Well-Being

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The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered an unfolding health, economic, and quality-of-life crisis (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020). Resonating with earlier work on fans’ well-being in a post-disaster context (Inoue et al., 2015), this study examines how sport brand involvement (SBI) could contribute to fans’ psychological well-being by affecting their perceptions of a brand’s crisis responses. We situate this study under the lens of transformative sport service research (TSSR; Inoue et al., 2020) and creating shared value (CSV; Porter & Kramer, 2011). In doing so, we aim to enhance the understanding of how sport brands can enact transformational changes that go beyond transactional business models.

Drawing on the TSSR and CSV literature, we hypothesized that SBI would be directly associated with two well-being outcomes (i.e., hope and emptiness). In addition, two constructs capturing fans’ perceptions of brands’ responses to COVID-19—crisis management performance (CMP) and perceived togetherness (PT)—would mediate the associations between SBI and the well-being outcomes.

To test these hypotheses, survey data were collected from 770 consumers in mainland China via a crowdsourcing platform in April 2020 after the country lifted the national lockdown, and were examined using Bayesian structural equation modeling. Results showed that SBI was significantly associated with emptiness ($\beta = -0.52, [-0.85, -0.19], p < .01$), CMP ($\beta = 1.21, [1.11, 1.31], p < .001$), and PT ($\beta = 1.34, [1.22, 1.46], p < .001$). Further, PT had significant effects on emptiness ($\beta = -0.18, [-0.34, -0.02], p < .05$) and hope ($\beta = 0.33, [0.25, 0.41], p < .001$), whereas CMP had a nonsignificant association with emptiness ($\beta = -0.15, [-0.33, 0.03]$) but a significant positive association with hope ($\beta = 0.45, [0.37, 0.53], p < .001$). However, hope was not directly associated with SBI ($\beta = 0.02, [-0.14, 0.18], p = 0.80$). Lastly, the indirect effects of SBI - CMP - hope ($\beta = 0.55, [0.39, 0.71], p < .001$) and SBI - PT - hope ($\beta = 0.44, [0.32, 0.56], p < .001$) were positive, while the indirect effect of SBI - PT - emptiness ($\beta = -0.24, [-0.46, -0.02], p < .05$) was negative. The indirect effect of SBI-CMP - emptiness was non-significant ($\beta = -0.18, [-0.40, 0.04], p = 0.10$).

Our findings suggest that SBI serves as a robust determinant of fans’ well-being. Fans’ involvement with sport brands had a direct negative association with emptiness, and this relationship was partially mediated by PT, but not by CMP. Moreover, CMP and PT fully mediated the relationship between SBI and hope. These findings resonate with the core tenet of transformative service research in that consumers’ well-being can be constructed by interacting with service brands (Anderson et al., 2013; Inoue et al., 2020). Our work further highlights the importance of sport brands in contemporary society and substantiates the role of reciprocity in managing sustainable brand–fan relationships (Lee et al., 2019), which contributes to the creation of shared value.