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Brand name ethics as a marketing concern: a narrative inquiry of the Washington Redskins' debate

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore brand name ethics and their impact on brand development. In performing this examination, the pros and cons of a brand name change are examined through the lens of social identity, social cognitive and social judgments theories. A narrative inquiry design is employed using the Washington Redskins as the unit of analysis. Data are assessed by SWOT analysis. Results show that support for the brand name was evident when social identity existed. In contrast, support for a name change exists when moral judgments are prioritized while neutrality manifestes in inconsequential situations. In conclusion, brand name ethics are evolving areas of concerns for innovative marketers.

Keywords: brand name ethics, narrative inquiry, SWOT analysis, Washington Redskins, Team Mascots, branding.

JEL Classification: M31, M14.

Introduction

Research aim

In the twenty-first century, the skillful marketer aims to develop and implement an innovated branding strategy to gain the competitive edge in the marketplace. This entails being cognizant of the heuristics consumers employ to choose between brands for consumption. As such, marketers must be considerate of the consumer decision processes so that their respective brands remain in the consideration set until the final choice is made (Decisions, decisions, decisions, 2008). These professionals should be prudent in making sure there are no lapses that could reduce the brand value and the organizational bottom line. Verschoor (2014) emphasized that ethical lapses can damage a brand value. Given this fact, Sagar, Singh, and Agrawal (2006) emphasized the importance of positioning the brand in an ethical context. Moreover, consumers can experience severe ambivalence when severe ethical lapses are aligned with strong attachment for the brand (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). This suggests that the ethical composition can evoke or inhibit consumer interest in a particular brand.

In examining the ethics of using celebrities and athletes, who have publicly displayed disreputable behavior, in promoting brands, Miller and Lacznia (2011) emphasized that managers must be aware of the interconnectedness between the core organizational values, the chosen endorsers and the ultimate impact of these internal deliberations on brand selection in the marketplace. The scandalous actions of endorsers or unethical perceptions toward a brand can lead to consumers having a low level of trust toward a brand. Particularly, the image fit of a brand

to consumers' ideal persona of a product can be a determinant of the level of trustworthiness (Alcañiz, Cáceres & Pérez, 2010). In this regard, the brand name can affect image and, in turn, ethical and trustworthy tendencies toward a brand.

According to Salciuviene, Ghauri, Salomea Streder and De Mattos (2010), the brand name can lead to different brand perceptions. The brand name, in particular, can influence marketplace personalities. When examining gendered brand personalities Wu, Klink and Guo (2013) found a linkage between the brand name and consumer responses. As such, the brand name can ethically position an offering in the marketplace. In this content, ethics can be a product differentiator and can create a strategic advantage (Sagar et al., 2006). The aim of this examination is to explore the ethical orientation of brand names and its pros and cons in the marketplace.

Reasoning for the focus of this manuscript

Branding offers the foundation for effective communication with target markets. Despite this fact, Jones and Bonevac (2013) indicated that most brands have branding problems and these have generally been product differentiation issues. Moreover, Cayla and Arnould (2008) alluded to the importance of future research into cultural and diverse branding issues. They further emphasized that these examination should be attuned to the symbolic significance of brands. Symbolism in this regard can be important to the branding effort. According to Zaichkowsky (2010) brand identity components may influence consumer choice at the subconscious level and therefore psychological processes of perceptions and social meaning should be better understood by marketers.

One brand identity component that is not fully understood is the brand name and its effect on brand equity. In fact, the naming concept has largely been assessed through looking at brand logos. For

instance, researchers have examined the effect of brand logos on firm performance. Park, Eisingerich, Pol & Park (2013) and Girard, Anitsal and Anitsal, (2013) called attention to the role of logo in creating brand awareness and stimulating brand performance. Moreover, Walsh, Winterich and Mittal (2010) stated that little is known how logo redesigns affect brand attitudes. However, there is indication that both name and logo can influence the brand identity.

As the corporate marketer prioritizes trademark law strategies, Lemper (2012) advised that additional focus must be on the management and protection of brand names. There is specific evidence that ethical perceptions can affect consumer perceptions toward brands (Brunk & Bluemelhuber, 2010). In other words, consumers make moral judgments through their brand choices. Consequently, marketers need to better comprehend the role of brand names in persuading consumer judgments. This is especially important since many brand names possess ethical/unethical tones. For instance, many names of professional sport teams fit into this category. Sport team names have been shown to influence brand identity (McMullen, 2011). Nonetheless, there has been controversy over the ethical orientation of team names thus negatively impacting the sport brand. There have been suggestions that the use of Native American monikers as professional sport team names in the US violate civil rights laws and heighten issues of racism. The heightened attention suggests that brand name can no longer be ignored. For this reason, the focus of this study is on analyzing the ethics of the brand name.

Review of literature

To have a sustainable corporate brand, the brand must be able to identify with its target market through the establishment of effective communication. According to Richelieu, Pawlowski and Breuer (2011), the ability of a sport organization to effectively manage its brand identity is often influenced with its caliber and means. When examining the factors influencing the purchase intention of athletic team merchandise, Lee, Trail, Lee and Schoenstedt (2013) found that team identification and personal values were two of the most prominent factors. When examining the transformation of a brand name from a brand possessing political incorrectness to a marketable brand designation, Easter, Leoni and Wiles (2008) found that *brand* marks and logos, nostalgia and tradition were factors that significantly influenced brand identification. Kalaighnam and Bahadir (2013) emphasized brand name changes can remove uncertainty; thus they may, in turn, lead to augmented brand identity. However, Pauwels-Delassus and Mogos Descotes (2013) questioned whether trust and loyalty can be transferred to the changed name.

Richelieu (2013) indicted that the more fans are involved with the team, the likelier they are to internalize the band into the self-identity. A name transformation can therefore leverage brand identity of a sport brand. Moore (2013) utilized a case study to demonstrate that a change in the name of a professional sport team can ramp up brand identity and subsequently increase merchandise sales. However, sport team names have been shown to evoke societal concern. Eitzen and Zinn (1989) revealed that the sexist naming practices have contributed to the maintenance of male dominance of college athletics in the US. Despite this controversy, Eitzen and Zinn (1993) stated that many college athletic organizations are resistant to name changes. However, it may not be the case if there is negative word of mouth since negativity can result in an adverse impact on consumer intention (Shreffler & Ross, 2013).

In the early 1990s, sport team names became a salient branding issue. Specifically, the fuel for this debate was the controversial usage of names that were sensitive to African Americans and other groups (Rhode, 1994). At the beginning of the century, concerns were raised about using Native American names to represent sport teams. Laveay, Callison and Rodriguez (2009) found that that Native Americans are more offended by sports teams employing American Indian imagery, as well as being more supportive of change, than the general public. Moreover, Laveay et al. (2009) indicated that perceptions about Native Americans' team names varied across demographical categories. Particularly, Laveay et al. (2009) revealed that Democrats viewing the teams with American Indian names, logos, and mascots as most offensive and in need of change. Additionally, Lindsay (2008) examined the utilization of the Native Americans' names from a philosophical point of view. Lindsay concluded that legally banning derogatory team names violated demographic principles and those opponents of the team names must continue to lobby and communicate to sport fans that the monikers they perceive as innocent are indeed harmful to others. In debating the ethics of name change, it should also be noted that suggested name changes could result in an identity crisis for sport teams. In the proceeding manuscript segments, we explored the ethics of sport team name and branding changes through social identity, moral reasoning and satisfaction theories.

Research and epistemological approach

According to Lindsay (2008), the use of Native Americans to represent US based sport teams are seen as a derogatory and unethical practice. However, Clegg (2002) stressed that efforts to abolish Native American team names is primarily unsupported by law and not reflective of sound policy or prevailing attitudes. Consequently the

purpose of this study was to examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of brand name change through narrative inquiry.

Originality of the paper and contribution to knowledge

This study provided originality by examining brand name changes from an ethical perspective. Also, the study offers originality in usage of an interpretative narrative approach. Finally, this study added to the extant literature on branding from organizational ethics contemplation.

Theoretical framework

As consumers make choice about brands to purchase, they often consider whether the organization marketing the brand is in compliance with the principles of *ethics* and values recognized by the purchaser (Lodziana-Grabowska, 2013). Lodziana-Grabowska further added that it is profitable for an organization to practice ethical behavior. Moreover, leaders must offer ethical clarity for the paths to change being adopted (Burnes & By, 2012). Organizational change can lead to consumer uncertainty (Homburg, Klarmann, & Staritz, 2012). This indecisiveness can heighten concern regarding the ethical composition underlining the change initiative. Consumers often identify with a brand because it is striking and realistic (Press & Arnould, 2011). Based on the aforementioned analysis, we can posit that consumers will be receptive of the name change when it is identified with their values. The morality of the change must be a consideration. Specifically, the ethical element was examined through the lens of social identity, moral reasoning and social acceptance theories in the following segments.

Social identity theory

Consumers tend to have loyalty toward a brand when it can be trusted, is perceived as being a good value and generates satisfaction. According to Shirazi, Lorestani and Mazidi (2013), brand identity has an indirect effect on brand loyalty. Lam, Ahearne, Hu and Schillewaert (2010) found that brand identification exerts a strong longitudinal restraint to brand switching. Brand identity can impact how successful an organization can be with a brand name substitution. Marketers, considering a brand name substitution, often experience trepidations over the loss of brand equity which could ultimately lead to a decrease in marketing share (Delassus & Descotes, 2012).

As sport teams consider name changes when their moniker is considered socially offensive, marketers must consider how the brand substitution will impact identity with fans.

The distinctiveness of a sport brand can be risked by a name substitution causing loyal fans difficulty

identifying with the brand. In their examination of facility name changes, Reysen, Snider and Branscombe (2012) emphasized that name changes threatened team distinction causing fans to explore their identity with the team.

Generally, individuals become fans of sport teams because of their identity with them (García, 2012). When this degree of identity occurs, fans commonly establish an attachment with their respective names and logos. Identity with a brand name can derive psychological utility for the consumer. Under certain circumstances, Dunn and Hoegg (2014) stressed brands can actually fulfill interpersonal psychological needs. Identity can offer the basis for not making a brand name substitution even when a derogatory persona has been established. Consequently, contemplation of the brand name change must fully explore reasons for keeping the brand name. This leads to our first research question:

RQ1: What are the pros and cons for keeping a brand name?

Social cognitive theory

Consumers' decisions to engage with a brand or components of a brand can be influenced by the cognitive evaluation of self-efficacy (Kim, Phelps & Lee, 2013). According to Kim et al. (2013), the self-efficacy assessment considers the observation of positive (social and functional benefits) and negative (embarrassment) outcome expectations associated with brand engagement behavior. Further, Kim and colleagues emphasized that the outcome expectations were found to be significant predictors of engagement behaviors. The previous work of other theorists provided support for the self-efficacy foundation. Hollebeek (2011), for instance, identified that consumer behavior engagement is a function of cognitive, emotional and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions. Consumers have been shown to understand how their self-efficacy is impacted by brand in their lives. McAlister and Cornwell (2010) found that three to five-year-olds have considerable knowledge of brands that are relevant in their lives.

As ethics become a salient issue, marketers must be aware that consumers will likely employ moral reasoning in assessing a brand. In this regard, moral reasoning may increase self-efficacy through generating functional benefit to the consumer. Marketers, therefore, could employ moral identity in marketing communications to allay unethical concerns of consumers (Woo & Winterich, 2013). Furthermore, Oh and Yoon (2014) found that self-identity was positively related to ethical consumption. Accordingly, one can theorize that consumers will not consider a brand or a brand component when it is perceived to be disreputable in nature. d'Astous

and Legendre (2009) underscored the fact that, on a global basis, consumers have the power to do what they want. In particular, they can compel organizations to become societal entities.

The discrepancy between an original name and brand substitution name in term of image often determine the consumer's penchant for change (Collange, 2008). Ethical brands typically tend to possess a conscientious orientation. Consequently, the prudent consumer will employ self-efficacy in contemplating whether change should be adopted. This will require knowing the utility and weaknesses in brand name transformation, which generates our second research question:

RQ2: What are the pros and cons for changing a brand name?

Social judgment theory

Based on the premise of social judgment theory, it should also be noted that ethical decision are based on three judgment states. Vargo, Nagao, He and Morgan (2007) conceptualized consumer satisfaction taxonomy from a social judgment theme that is introduced through the terminology of the satisfiers, dissatisfiers and neutrals. We applied the satisfaction taxonomy to the brand ethics context.

According to Brunk (2012), brand decisions about brands are the result of consequential and non-consequential principles. From the satisfaction taxonomy, consumers make either satisfied or dissatisfied judgments when the brand name has ethical consequences. However, when the name is inconsequential in nature, consumer judgments become neutral. Vargo et al. (2007) operationalized neutrals as zones of indifference or latitudes of non-commitment. As such, brand managers need to be prepared for neutral judgments. Therefore, our third research question is:

RQ3: What happens to a brand name when consumer judgments concerning its ethical origin are neutral?

Methodology

Research design

A narrative inquiry research design was used to communicate the pros and cons of a brand name change. According to McMullen and Braithwaite (2013), narrative inquiry is an appropriate design for understanding social process within the marketing function. Narrative inquiry consists of telling a story about organizational occurrences. Boje (1991) suggested that a story is a valuable yet underutilized management skill that can assist organization members to make sense of what is going on. Narrative inquiry can offer good insight regarding the current status and future possibilities of an

examined branding phenomenon (McMullen & Braithwaite, 2013). In crafting their research, McMullen and Braithwaite (2013) emphasized the appropriateness of using documents as an alternative data source to personal interview. They stressed that documents published during the time of interest can generate a good depiction of the particular issue in a real-time context.

In this study, we used a narrative inquiry to examine brand name ethics. Specifically, our focus was on using Native American monikers to designate brands. The specific issue investigated was the Washington Redskins, an American professional football team that has gained familiarity in the international sport community. Currently, at debate, how extensive is the use of the word "Redskins" being considered as racist and disrespectful to Native Americans.

Analysis

Narrative inquiry was employed to examine the Redskins name controversy through conducting SWOT analyses. Three separate analyses were constructed across three consideration states that included 'keeping the name', 'changing the name' and 'considering an alternative course of action'. This inquiry was conducted by employing current documents during the time frame of the brand name debate.

Results

Results were divided according to research questions in order to communicate outcomes in an organized manner.

RQ1: What are the pros and cons for keeping a brand name?

The Washington Redskins have been known as such for 82 years, and thus, their main strength is the history and tradition that has accompanied this team for all those years. They have one of the most recognizable logos and are one of the most well respected teams in American Professional Football. The other strength from this situation is that, as the article reported, the name is not offensive to a large number of Native Americans (Rogers, 2014). In fact, the literature presents many examples of institutions of higher learning with a predominantly Native American population that has team names reflective of their origin (The Washing Times, 2013). Ives Goddard, a senior linguist at the Smithsonian Institute, spent many months researching the name "redskin." He discovered that the term was first used by Native Americans in the 18th century to differentiate themselves from whites who were coming onto their land – further proof that the original use of the word was not derogatory.

One of the weaknesses in this situation is that there might be a subsection of fans that are actually offended and consider the team insensitive by keeping the brand name. The potential loss of fans, especially season ticket holders, would obviously result in a loss of revenue. Furthermore, with 82 years of history, could the team's brand become stagnant? After fighting to keep the name, the Redskins could be putting themselves in a precarious position as to conduct future rebranding. The fact that the issue is attracting an amazing amount of media attention is a weakness because it exposes more of the target market to the potential negative connotation of the brand name.

The Washington Redskins have an opportunity to stand firm in the support of their brand and not give in to the pressure from external entities. According to the article, ninety percent of Native Americans polled did not take offense to the name "Redskins" as it refers to the team (Nuckols, 2013). If they are not offended, there is no need to cater to people not affected, negatively or otherwise, by the Redskins' brand name. The two catalysts who have taken up this cause, neither of whom is Native American, are so busy trying to create controversy and start a legal battle that they do not realize there is no opponent to fight. The Redskins, and other teams with similar names, need to set a precedent.

The threat in this potential branding strategy change comes from the aforementioned external sources who are trying to create controversy where there is none. If the voices of few continue to falsely represent the feelings of many, they indeed may start to gain some naive followers. This is rapidly escalating into a major controversy because people want it to be, rather than rationally understanding it actually is not.

RQ2: What are the pros and cons for changing a brand name?

According to Forbes, the Washington Redskins are the third most valuable team in the NFL, behind only the New England Patriots and the Dallas Cowboys (Ozanian, Badenhausen & Settmi, 2014). They can afford to change their name and rebrand themselves and remain a profitable organization. They may also gain new fans with the name change.

The Redskins' weakness in this situation is that they might find themselves losing fans, possibly long-time fans who value the history of this team. This could result in a decrease in revenue, (e.g. merchandize sales, etc.) After an 82-year history, would it be possible to reinvent themselves by adopting an entirely new branding strategy? Not only would that, but to rebrand the entire organization would be an incredibly costly venture. As seen in Forbes's valuation of NFL teams, the

Washington Redskins have the seventh highest debt-value ratio in the NFL (Ozanian et al., 2014). Presumably, this would only increase with a major rebranding of the organization. Costs to consider include all stadium signage, promotional collateral, uniforms, merchandize, etc. Is a complete rebranding strategy worth the expense and additional promotion expenditures to justify this dramatic reaction to a grass-roots controversy?

The Washington Redskins might have a tremendous opportunity to reinvent themselves by adopting a new name a complete rebranding of the entire organization. A potential rebranding strategy could include the opportunity to allow fans to nominate and then vote on a new team name, logo, team colors, etc. The fans, especially season ticket holders, could potentially perceive this as being more engaged in this team because they would be able to determine the direction of the new branding strategy the team adopts. Using the revenue-generating supporters of the current Washington Redskins could be interpreted as a history-making branding reinvention if they view this as a new and engaging opportunity instead of a brand-killing public relations move to avoid further pressure and controversy.

The threat involved with rebranding the Washington Redskins have the potential to spiral out of control. After all, it is the brand of the Washington Redskins. What other mascots would face public scrutiny next, and which groups would be involved? As the article explains, the Notre Dame Fighting Irish, LA Angels, New Orleans Saints all have names that could be perceived as offensive to certain groups (Connor, 2013). There is an unfortunate often-used nickname for the United States, which is "the United States of the Offended." If the Redskins are forced to change their name, it can be expected that other teams in other leagues to follow suit, potentially setting an unacceptable brand identity changing precedent, leading to some of the most familiar brands to be unrecognizable. There could also be an endless stream of lawsuits between companies that have agreements with the Redskins and the use of their brand, resulting in a breach of contract and even more litigation than the Redskin brand is currently undergoing.

RQ3: What happens to a brand name when consumer judgments concerning its ethical origin are neutral?

The only way this unfortunate brand-identity crisis could have been avoided is if the various people and organizations in the debate had not become involved from the start. It is most certainly not the antagonist's duty in this branding case to act autonomously in determining the offensiveness of things that do not have a direct effect on them. If the groups that would be potentially offended by a team

name are not actually offended, who are “we” to tell people what should and should not offend those? (Norman, 2013). The recent decision by an obscure administrative law board to cancel the Washington Redskins’ trademark registrations came despite the fact the agency hadn’t received a single letter from a member of the public complaining about the team’s name, records indicate.

The Trademark Trial and Appeal Board, which is part of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, ruled in June of 2014 that the name was disparaging to American Indians. The team is appealing that decision. Politicians, including President Obama, have entered into the team Redskins’ brand controversy, with many saying the team should change its name. However, despite widespread media attention and a legal fight that goes back more than a decade, the USPTO recently acknowledged there has hardly been an avalanche of public complaints filed with the agency. In fact, the agency doesn’t have any record of correspondence from the public about the Redskins’ name – expressing sentiments one way or another – prior to the board’s June 18 ruling (McElhatton, 2014). Perhaps it is time for them to move away from this “crusade” and become advocates of the vast majority who matter in this suggested Redskins brand name change, the unoffended Native Americans.

Discussion

Consumers will generally be resistant to brand name switching if brand identification has been established (Shirazi et al., 2013). In the realm of sport, individuals become fans of teams because they identified with them and most of their product extensions. Given this identification with consumers, marketing can become quite leery of brand name transformation even when ethical problems are emerging. In regard to the Washington Redskins, the recognition and awareness exist among its consumer base. These qualities transfer into brand equity and subsequently financial gain for the franchise. As previously indicated, the Washington Redskins are the third most valuable team in the NFL (Ozanian et al., 2014). Moreover, the historical roots of the Redskins moniker suggest it is not a negative connotation but a sense of pride. This happiness with the name provides an organization an opportunity to maintain the name and craft a strategy to increase brand equity while generating positive publicity toward the Redskins’ brand.

However, if consumers become concerned with the brand name ethics and feel that their reputation as a social conscientiousness consumers are in jeopardy they will tend not to engage with an unethical offering. In this regard, according to Kim et al. (2013), consumers will consider the benefits and costs of establishing an association with the considered brand. From this perspective, individuals

will use moral reasoning in deciding whether to form a relationship with the brand. As consumers apply moral judgments to the ethics of Native American names, the Redskins could see the dwindling of their consumer base and the decrease of their brand equity. When encountering these marketing realities, Redskins could receive utility from rebranding and adopting a brand name change.

Consumers will decide to support the brand name or advocacy for a name change when respective benefits or respective costs are salient. However, if the name change is perceived by the target consumers and stakeholders with a state of indifference, the brand name will not significantly impact brand equity and the subsequent ‘bottom line’ (Brunk, 2012). In this state, other marketing mix and bottom line variables will tend to have more influence and ultimately determine the appropriateness of rebranding. With respect to the Redskins’ controversy, some argue that the name change debate should cease and desist on this issue when neutrality is the majority rule.

Implications for theory

This study adopts McMullen and Braithwaite’s (2013) approach by using narrative inquiry to investigate brands and brand extensions. Moreover, the study examined the ethics of brand names through the amalgamation of social identity (Lam et al., 2010); social cognitive (Woo & Winterich, 2013) and social judgment (Vargo et al., 2007). This theoretical blend provides added insight on the heuristics consumers apply in the assessment of branding elements.

Implications for practice

This study provided rich insight regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of keeping or changing a brand name. In performing this analysis, particular attention is given to the benefits and costs of brand ethics. Consequently, this investigation offers intelligence to brand managers on whether the brand name should possess an important role in their brand strategy. In addition, this study generated intelligence on the pros and cons of utilizing Native American monikers to represent sport teams. As such, this study could be a valuable resource to practicing sport managers as the debate over name ethics continues to evolve.

Study limitations and direction for future research

Although this study has generated important intelligence regarding brand name ethics, it is not without its limitations. First, data were collected through secondary data sources. Consequently, it would be helpful to brand research to query consumer perceptions regarding the ethics of brand names. These investigations should examine how these opinions are

cultivated over time by employing longitudinal designs. A second limitation of this investigation is that causality could not be measured. Given this, experiments are needed to assess the effect of names on brand equity. Finally, our investigation solely examined the Washington Redskins' controversy. Although this issue represents an important and valuable contribution to the branding sphere, there are other naming issues that should be addressed in order to improve brand ethics in the sport marketing segment as well as the overall marketing field. Particular attention should be given to investigating whether consumer attitudes toward name ethics are changed as brands progress through the product life cycle.

Conclusion

The adroit marketer is tactful in formulating the strategic agenda to create brand recognition and

build strong, loyal consumer bases for its brands. However, there is only limited knowledge on, if and how, these efforts are impacted by ethical issues. Moreover, there is only a paucity of insight on how branding is affected by naming aspects. Such concerns have been particularly heightened by debates involving whether using mascot names to represent sport teams are offensive to specific societal groups.

In this investigation, the focal issue pertained to the Washington Redskins and whether the organization should change its mascot's name. In providing a critical assessment of this issue, pros and cons of a name change were discussed from a branding perspective. This discourse has been theoretically interesting and offers a solid foundation for continued explorations on the ethics of brand names.

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