

# Evaluating the Effectiveness of Corporate Sponsorships at a Minor League Baseball Park

Christopher L. Moore, IMG College

Andrew J. Mowen & Benjamin D. Hickerson, The Pennsylvania State University

## Abstract

*Corporate sponsorships are vital to the success of minor league sport businesses. As competition for sponsorships intensifies in these venues, there is a need for minor league sports to demonstrate a return on the sponsorship investment based on fan purchase intentions and behaviors. Prior research has identified fan involvement, goodwill, and sponsor attitudes as key predictors of fan purchase intentions. However, the potential of image transfer suggests that attitudes toward sport properties might also shape purchase intentions. This study replicates and extends prior sport sponsorship research by assessing the contribution of these constructs to fan purchase intentions at a Minor League Baseball park. A path model was proposed whereby the impact of fan involvement and goodwill upon purchase intentions is mediated through both sponsor and sponsee attitudes. On-site surveys were completed by 246 fans at a Minor League Baseball park in summer 2012. Consistent with prior literature, goodwill, fan involvement, and sponsor attitudes were significantly related to sponsor purchase intentions. The effect of goodwill on purchase intentions was partially mediated through sponsor attitudes. However, attitude toward the sponsee was not a significant predictor of purchase intentions. Minor league sport organizations should consider enhancing fan perceptions and attitudes as a means to increase sponsor purchase intentions.*

## Introduction and Study Background

Corporate sponsorships are ubiquitous in professional sports. These sponsorships are defined as a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property (Ukman, 1996). Corporations choose to sponsor events or organizations to expose their services and/or products effectively to their target audience. Unlike advertisements, which focus on mass media to deliver a standard message, corporate sponsorships allow consumers/fans to relate a business to a place, event, product or service and create an association (Fullerton, 2006). Corporations sponsor events to achieve outcomes associated with sales drive, improved image, increased awareness, hospitality opportunities, or improved employee morale (Fullerton, 2006). In 2013, companies in the United States are predicted to spend about \$19.94 billion dollars on sponsorship, which is approximately a 5.5 % increase from 2012 (Schultz, 2013). Of the \$19.94 billion dollars spent on sponsorship, \$13.79 billion dollars will be spent on sports sponsorship (Schultz).

The rapid growth of sport sponsorship has intensified competition for consumers' share of mind. Businesses are experimenting with different strategies to break through the clutter resulting from sponsorship advertising. They are doing this by supporting sporting events across a broader cross-section of sport venues (beyond professional sports). For example, there has been a growing interest in maximizing the return of sponsorship investment at collegiate, amateur, and semi-professional sport venues (e.g., Division I college sports teams, Minor League Baseball). These venues potentially offer a more intimate setting from which to establish closer sponsor

ties to fans and engage with the surrounding community who supports and benefits from these sport venues.

In particular, Minor League Baseball (MiLB) is an attractive property from which to promote sponsorship and engage fans. Minor League Baseball teams often operate under a different business model, which does not rely upon on field performance to generate attendance. Winning matches does not have a causal relationship with increased attendance in these settings (Siegfried & Eisenberg, 1980). At the professional level, winning sport organizations with star players experience higher levels of purchase intentions from the part of casual fans (Ngan, Prendergast, & Tsang 2011). However, MiLB organizations often have less control over team performance. Teams are assigned players by their parent organizations (e.g., Major League Baseball) and these players may “move on” to another team at any time. For this reason, MiLB teams must rely on other aspects of the ballpark experience to maintain viability.

A common strategy used by these teams to influence attendance is to offer an increased marketing and promotional schedule, opening a greater opportunity for sponsorship. Minor league or amateur sport organizations (such as MiLB) depend on sponsorships from major corporations, local businesses, and even non-profit organizations to help them generate critical operational revenue (Ozanian, 2008). Corporate sponsorship fees provided to MiLB teams not only helps sustain the financial viability of these ball clubs, but may also drive ticket sales through their support of these special promotions and ballpark events (e.g., fan appreciation nights, fireworks, themed cause-marketing activities).

To maximize sponsorship revenues, minor league organizations have traditionally focused on procuring as much sponsorship as possible. In fact, several MiLB teams believe that having more sponsors is an indicator of their organization’s operational success (Sottile, 2012). These teams perceive that their successful attendance track-record is attributed to their philosophy of consistently assembling a large base of sponsors, regardless of how much or little they are willing to spend. For example, the manager of the Reading Phillies noted that his club works with as many as 250-300 sponsors to get the same amount of money as other properties do with 10 or 11 sponsors (Sottile, 2012).

However, like other sport and entertainment businesses, the success of MiLB organizations in attracting and sustaining corporate sponsorships have been challenged by the lingering effects of the post-recession economy, which have left corporate marketing budgets strained. Furthermore, MiLB’s philosophy of maximizing the number of sponsor agreements has contributed to a relatively cluttered advertising environment on physical spaces (e.g., outfield wall, scoreboard, concourses) and public address announcements (e.g., during game broadcasts). Given these changing circumstances, minor league sport sponsors and sport properties are seeking to better understand how they can increase their return on investment at minor league venues. An understanding of the psychological factors which contribute to return on investment through fan purchase behaviors (of sponsored products/brands) can assist minor league sport organizations as they seek to maximize their sponsorship investments.

Existing literature suggests that psychological concepts such goodwill, fan involvement, and sponsor attitudes are key factors that contribute to sponsor outcomes such as brand recognition, intention to purchase sponsor products, and actual purchase behaviors (Alexandris, Tsiotsou, & James 2012; Dees, Bennett, & Villegas 2008; Dees, Hall, Tsuji, & Bennett 2010; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Meenaghan, 2001; Pope & Voges, 2000; Smith, Graetz, & Westerbeek 2008; Speed & Thompson, 2000). However, it is unclear whether these empirical

relationships are present at minor league sport venues and, if so, which of these psychological constructs are most salient in predicting fan purchase intentions. Moreover, there is a need to examine the potential mediating role of attitudes toward both the sponsor *and* the sport property in shaping the relationships between fan involvement, sponsor goodwill and purchase intentions. This study proposes to examine these potential relationships within the context of minor league baseball. What follows is a brief overview of fan psychological concepts (e.g., fan involvement, goodwill, sponsor attitudes) and how they have been utilized within sponsorship effectiveness models to explain important sponsorship behavioral outcomes (e.g., purchase intentions and behaviors).

### ***Fan involvement***

Fan involvement draws heavily from social identity theory and is considered as the extent to which consumers identify with and are motivated by, their engagement in and affiliation with specific leisure activities (Madrigan, 2001; Meenaghan, 2001). Within the context of spectator sports, fan involvement is essentially the degree to which spectators perceive that certain sports are important to them (e.g., college basketball, professional football, minor league baseball) and the extent that their personal identity is reflected by that sport. To understand the nature of the fan involvement as it pertains to sponsor attitudes and purchase behaviors, one must realize the subtle differences between it and the related concepts of fan identification and fan loyalty. Fan identification is with a specific sports team and is the personal commitment to and perceived connectedness/emotional involvement with that particular team, where the team's failings and achievements are experienced as one's own (Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012). Fan loyalty on the other hand, is an attitudinal and behavior construct that involves both repeat consumer behaviors (such as game attendance and team merchandise purchases) as well as the consumers' attitude toward their team (Stevens & Rosenberger). Regardless of these distinctions, there have been a number of studies that illustrate how fan involvement is directly correlated to sponsor attitudes. For example, passionate or involved fans of the National Football League have more positive attitudes towards the official sponsors of the National Football League than do less passionate fans (Wakefield & Rivers, 2012).

### ***Goodwill***

Goodwill is defined as a positive attitude or sense of gratitude that consumers have toward a sponsor that supports and facilitates an event, team, or cause in which they are passionate about (Dees et al., 2008; Madrigal, 2001; Meenaghan, 2001). It is believed to be the key factor distinguishing corporate sponsorship from strict advertising (Meenaghan, 2001). While traditional advertising is focused upon enhancing the financial profitability of a business, corporate sponsorship supports both business outcomes (e.g., awareness, sales) while also supporting outside causes, organizations, and activities perceived as valuable by consumers. Within the context of professional and semi-professional sports, fans can recognize the importance of sponsorship contributions in supporting their favorite sport and team and may report higher perceptions of goodwill toward companies that sponsor their favorite activities vs. those companies that do not. Corporations sponsor sports, teams, and events in order to capitalize on enhanced perceptions of goodwill in the hopes that their sponsorship activities will transfer into more positive brand attitudes and purchase behaviors (Dees et al. 2010). When studying the effectiveness of a corporate sponsorship on an elite intercollegiate football program, Dees et al. (2008) found that goodwill was the greatest factor contributing to consumers purchase intentions when compared to fan involvement and sponsor attitudes.

### ***Sponsor attitudes***

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993) an attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor. Keller (1993) concluded that attitude is one of the most important factors to examine because their study can provide better insights into consumer purchasing behaviors. Favorable attitudes towards a sponsor can have a positive influence on the consumer's purchase intentions, which is the main reason it has been so heavily investigated (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). For example, Speed and Thompson (2000) found that fans with more favorable attitudes toward event sponsors were more likely to respond by patronizing the sponsor's product or service than those who felt less favorable. Dees and Bennett (2008) further found that fans with higher attitudes towards the sponsor of a professional tennis tournament were more likely to purchase that sponsor's product or services.

The relationship of attitudes to purchase intentions is not always direct and may depend on other contextual factors. For example, Madrigal (2001) found that attitudes had a stronger influence on intent to purchase a sponsor's product/service among consumers with lower fan identification than among consumers with high fan identification. While these studies suggest strong attitude-purchase intention relationships, not all studies support this relationship. For example, Nickell, Cornwell and Johnson (2011) found that, not only did sponsorship have little positive impact on the consumer attitudes, but the linear path between brand attitudes and sponsorship outcomes was incorrect. These authors claimed that the pathway was a nonlinear S shape model suggesting that the impact of sponsorship on consumers is marginal for fans who have already established a strong dislike or like for the sponsor (Nickell et al.).

### ***Sponsorship effectiveness models: Empirical evidence***

An emerging body-of-evidence base supports a hierarchy of effects model whereby sponsorship awareness, perceptions, and attitudes influence brand loyalty and purchase behaviors. These studies generally conclude that goodwill, fan involvement, and attitudes toward the sponsor have a positive impact on consumers' intent to purchase a product or service from a sponsor (Alexandris et al., 2012; Dees et al., 2008; Dees et al., 2010; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Meenaghan, 2001; Pope & Voges, 2000; Speed & Thompson, 2000). One study in particular examined the collective degree to which fan involvement, goodwill, and sponsor attitudes contributed to sponsor purchase intentions at an inter-collegiate football venue and found that all three constructs were positive, significant predictors of purchase intentions, but that goodwill was the strongest of these predictors and fan involvement was the weakest of these predictors (Dees et al. 2008).

### ***The potential role of attitudes toward the sport property***

While the three concepts of fan involvement, goodwill, and sponsor attitudes have been established as important determinants of sponsorship effects, it is important to note that they may not be the only psychological constructs influencing consumer purchase intentions. For example, it is quite possible that attitudes toward the sport property itself (whether defined as the event, venue, or team) might be shaped by fan involvement and goodwill and might in turn influence purchase intentions. In other words, high levels of fan involvement and goodwill could be associated with higher attitudes toward both corporate sponsors and sport properties (e.g., sponsees), and these sponsor/sponsee attitudes could, in turn, influence purchase intentions.

If one is to agree with Meenaghan's model and subsequent empirical studies derived from that conceptual article, both sponsor and sponsee attitudes would be predictive of sponsor purchase intentions and the contribution of these and other constructs on sponsor purchase intention outcomes may not be through direct effects alone. For example, Dees et al. (2010) found that a related construct, fan loyalty (defined as the level of emotional attachment to a particular sport, team, or player), had an indirect effect on purchase intentions through sponsor goodwill and brand attitudes. Further, Alexandris, Tsiotsou, and James (2012) found that team attachment (a similar, but distinct construct from fan loyalty) had an indirect effect on consumer behavioral intentions through sponsor attitudes. While these important studies have examined the direct and indirect influence of fan involvement, goodwill, and sponsor attitudes on purchase intentions, they have not specifically examined whether attitudes toward the sport property (or the sponsee) also contributes to these direct and indirect relationships.

Examining attitudes toward sponsees is important because sponsorships fundamentally involve a three-way image transfer between the sponsor, property, and customer (Cameron, 2009) and the performance of/attitudes toward both parties could have implications for final consumer purchase decisions. If fans held negative attitudes toward a sport property, but positive attitudes toward a sponsor, a condition of cognitive dissonance arises and the consumer would subsequently seek to reduce dissonance by re-balancing their attitudes (e.g., lowering their attitudes of the sponsor or increasing their attitudes of the sponsee/property; Heider, 1946). This rebalancing, in turn, could influence behavioral outcomes such as purchase intentions and behaviors. Examining the nature of these collective relationships could help both sponsors and sponsees gain a better understanding of how their mutual performance might shape fan purchase behaviors and would identify which constructs are most predictive of fan purchase intentions and behaviors.

### **Study Purpose**

To substantiate and build upon prior sport sponsorship effectiveness literature, this study addresses these aforementioned gaps and examines the contributions of fan involvement, goodwill, sponsor attitudes, and sponsee attitudes upon intentions to purchase sponsor products/services at a Minor League Baseball park. Dees et al. (2008) recommended additional research that would examine the relationship between these constructs in different sporting contexts and with different measurement designs (e.g., path modeling) to more scientifically determine their relationships (Dees et al. 2008, p. 88). Moreover, they recommended further testing of construct reliability and validity. This study directly addresses these recommendations by replicating and extending their work within the context of Minor League Baseball. Similar constructs (as tested by Dees et al.) are used to re-test their predictive strength on purchase intentions. In addition, a sponsorship effects path model is tested, whereby attitudes toward both the sponsor and sponsee are proposed as potential mediator variables between fan involvement, goodwill and sponsor purchase intentions (Figure 1). Goodwill, fan involvement, attitude towards the sponsor, and attitude toward the sponsee serve as the independent variables in this study because of their effects on the consumer's intent to purchase as identified by Meenaghan (2001), Dees et al. and others. While actual purchase behaviors are the ultimate goal of for-profit businesses, this study follows the behavioral measures used by Dees et al. and focuses instead on its direct behavioral antecedent; intentions to purchase, as the dependent variable. The following research questions guide this study.

## Research Questions

1. Do perceptions of MiLB sponsor goodwill, fan involvement, attitudes toward corporate sponsors, and attitudes toward the sport organization (sponsee) relate positively and significantly with fan intentions to purchase corporate sponsor products/services?
2. To what degree, if any, do attitudes toward the MiLB sponsor and sport organization mediate the effects of fan involvement, sponsor goodwill upon purchase intentions?

## Methods

### *Study setting and data collection*

The setting context for this investigation was a minor league ball park; Medlar Field at Lubrano Park. Medlar Field is located in State College, Pennsylvania as is the home ball park for State College Spikes Minor League Baseball team. Medlar Field is also the home ball park of the Penn State Nittany Lions baseball team, representing a public-private partnership between the University and the State College Spikes organization. During the course of the 2012 MiLB baseball season, the State College Spikes played 37 home games at Medlar Field. Fans at these games can experience or utilize a wide variety of activities/services beyond merely watching the game itself. These events include sponsorship-supported fan appreciation activities, sponsor displays, food and beverage stands, kid zone activities, theme night displays such as fireworks, and mascot interactions.

The sample for this particular study included adults (18 and older) who attended a State College Spikes home baseball game during the summer 2012 season. A systematic sampling frame was used to identify 16 different home games (i.e., ten weekday games and six weekend games) where the survey would be conducted from July to September 2012. After selecting these sampling dates, the State College Spikes staff worked with the researchers to identify different stadium sections/rows from which to invite fans to participate in a brief on-site survey about their perceptions of sponsorship and their satisfaction with the venue. Each sampling date was associated with a different set of stadium sections/rows from which to approach fans and distribute written invitations to participate in the survey. The systematic selection of different sections/rows helped control potential biases the data collectors may have when asking participants to take the survey, provided an area to approach fans that were “settling into the game” during the pre-game activities, and decreased the chances of repeat invitations to participate in the study. A written invitation explaining the purpose of the study was distributed to these fans. The invitation asked fans to proceed to the survey table at the entrance to the stadium (e.g., Concourse Level) for further study information and instructions. An average of 57 written invitations per game were handed out in the selected section/rows. Fans were also notified they would receive a small prize for participating in the study (e.g., free tickets to future Spikes games).

During the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> inning, an announcement was made over the stadium PA system to remind fans of the study invitation and direct them to the appropriate area (survey table) to complete the questionnaire. The researchers who were stationed at this table welcomed fans to the table, asked to see their written invitation, and proceeded to explain the study and formally request their study participation. Those who agreed to participate in the survey were informed of their rights as a study participant in accordance with procedures established by the University Institutional Review Board. Participants then completed a brief (10-15 minute) pen/paper survey

concerning their ballpark experiences and behaviors. Upon completion of the questionnaire, study participants were thanked for their time, provided the small prize, and given the researchers' contact information if they had further questions about the study.

### ***Instrumentation***

The questionnaire included a series of items directly related to sponsorship effectiveness such as fan involvement, goodwill, attitudes, and purchase intentions. These measures were adopted from the work of Dees et al. (2008). The independent variables for this study were specific beliefs or perceptions regarding level of fan involvement and perceptions of sponsor goodwill as well as overall attitudes toward corporate sponsors and the sport property or sponsee (e.g., the State College Spikes). To measure fan involvement, study participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of 4 items that dealt specifically with their perceived personal involvement in minor league baseball: "It is important for me to be a part of minor league baseball," "My friends/family view me as a strong fan of minor league baseball," "It is very important to me that minor league baseball is played in my community," and "I see myself as a strong fan of minor league baseball." Response items ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. These items were adopted from Dees et al. (2008) except that the attitude object was minor league baseball rather than [university] football.

To measure sponsor goodwill, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a series of 4 items that dealt with fan's goodwill toward sponsors as a result of their support for minor league baseball: "Companies that support the Spikes through sponsors are involved in their community," "Companies that sponsor the Spikes try to improve minor league baseball," "Minor league baseball games at Medlar Field benefit from corporate sponsors," and "Companies that sponsor the Spikes care about the fans of minor league baseball." Response items ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Again, these items were adopted from the work of Dees et al. (2008), but were worded in a slightly different manner (e.g., minor league baseball rather than [university] football).

The final independent (and potential mediator) constructs assessed in this study were general attitudes toward sponsors and toward the sport organization (sponsee). To assess sponsor attitudes, participants were asked to respond to a series of 5 items on a five-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree): "I feel favorable toward businesses/organizations that support the Spikes through sponsorships," "Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are successful," "Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes provide quality products and/or services," "Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are highly qualified," and "Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are reputable." Again, these items were similar to the sponsor attitude items from Dees et al. (2008) with minor wording changes. For example, since several of the Spikes sponsors were non-profit organizations, a decision was made to use the terminology "businesses and organizations" instead of "companies."

In addition to sponsor attitudes, this research assessed attitudes toward the sponsee or sport property (e.g., the State College Spikes organization). The approach to create these items was to adopt the sponsor attitude items from Dees et al. (2008) and change the attitude object from companies to the sport property. Here participants were asked to respond to five items assessed on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree): "I feel favorably about the State College Spikes as an organization," "The Spikes offer a quality sport and entertainment experience," "The Spikes organization is successful," "The State College

Spikes operates a successful corporate sponsorship program,” and “The State College Spikes are well qualified to work with corporate sponsors.”

The dependent measure for this study was fans' purchase intentions with respect to sponsor products/services. Participants were asked to respond to a series of 6 items measured on a five-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). “I would consider purchasing products/services from the corporate sponsors of the State College Spikes,” “I would try new products/services if I saw it at a State College Spikes baseball game,” and “My overall attitude toward purchasing products/services from companies that sponsor the State College Spikes is positive” were representative of the items used to assess purchase intentions. Again, these items were adapted from Dees et al. (2008) with only minor changes to the attitude object (e.g., State College Spikes instead of [university] football game or this event).

### ***Analysis***

The independent and dependent variables (22 total items) were analyzed and reduced into their respective domains using factor analysis (principal components analysis, Varimax rotation, Eigen value > 1 rule). This analysis was used to reduce these items into more meaningful constructs and serve as the basis for subsequent scale reliability analysis and index creation. To assess Research Question #1, multiple linear regression (simultaneous entry method) was used to determine whether the overall model was significant, which variables were significant predictors, and assess the relative contribution (e.g., the strength or  $\beta$  values) of the independent variables upon purchase intentions. To assess Research Question #2, a path analysis was used to determine the direct and indirect effects (mediation) between the independent variables of fan involvement, goodwill, sponsor attitudes, and sponsee attitudes on purchase intentions.

### **Results**

#### ***Description of the sample***

Of the 928 invitation flyers handed out, a total of 246 surveys were ultimately completed for an on-site response rate of 27%. In addition to this study's key study constructs, the survey also gathered demographic and behavioral information from participants such as sex, age, household income, and ballpark experience use history. Fifty-seven percent of the participants were male and 43% were female and the average age was 41.4 years. Forty-three percent of respondents reported household incomes less than \$50,000 per year. In terms of fan behaviors, 82% were repeat visitors to a Spikes game with 51% visiting between 1-3 games per season and 23% reporting 10 or more games per season. Twenty-three percent reported that 2012 was their first year attending a Spikes game, while 26% responded that they had been to Spikes games ever since their inaugural season in 2006. A majority of fans visited the ball park with family (69%) or friends (57%), while a minority indicated that they visited with work colleagues (17%) or other associations/groups (13%).

#### ***Factor analysis***

A factor analysis was conducted to examine whether the 22 individual items would load on the proposed five domains of fan involvement, goodwill, sponsor attitudes, sponsee attitudes, and purchase intentions. Results indicate that the fan involvement, goodwill, sponsor attitudes and purchase intentions items loaded onto the four expected domains as described by Dees et al.

(2008) and that the five sponsee attitude items loaded onto a separate, fifth domain as expected in this research (Table 1). Subsequent scale development and reliability analyses confirmed these separate measures were internally consistent with reliability values (Cronbach's Alpha) ranging from .84 to .89. Scale reliabilities are provided in Table 2. These reliability levels satisfy Nunally's (1978) minimum standard of .60 for exploratory research.

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are highly qualified	.850				
Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes provide quality products/services	.819				
Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are successful	.809				
Businesses and organizations that sponsor the Spikes are reputable	.764				
I feel favorably toward businesses & organizations that support the Spikes through sponsorships	.467				
I see myself as a strong fan of minor league baseball		.893			
My friends/family view me as a strong fan of minor league baseball		.871			
It is very important to me that minor league baseball is played in my community		.766			
It is important for me to be a part of minor league baseball		.756			
The Spikes offer a quality sport and entertainment experience			.849		
I feel favorably about the Spikes as an organization			.730		
The Spikes organization is successful			.711		
The Spikes are well qualified to work with corporate sponsors			.698		
The Spikes operate a successful corporate sponsorship program	.490		.560		
I would consider purchasing products, services from the corporate sponsors of the Spikes				.765	
I would definitely purchase products, services from businesses that sponsor the Spikes				.755	
I would try new products, services from corporate sponsors of the Spikes				.752	
My overall attitude toward purchasing products, services from companies that sponsor the Spikes is positive				.708	
Minor league ball games at Medlar Field benefit from corporate sponsors					.771
Companies that support the Spikes through sponsorship are involved in their community					.742
Companies that sponsor the Spikes try to improve minor league baseball					.660
Companies that sponsor the Spikes care about the fans of minor league baseball					.542
Factor Label Key: 1 = sponsor attitudes, 2 = fan involvement, 3 = sponsee attitudes, 4 = purchase intentions, and 5 = sponsor goodwill.					

### ***Descriptive results and bivariate construct relationships***

Descriptive analysis of study constructs (Research Question #1) revealed generally favorable perceptions and purchase intentions with mean scores higher than 3.0 (Table 2). Attitudes toward the sport property (e.g., State College Spikes) were the highest rating domain (mean = 4.49) while perceptions of fan involvement in minor league baseball were the lowest rating domain (mean = 3.80). A summary of these descriptive results is provided in Table 2.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	$\alpha$
Fan Involvement	3.80	0.956	0.89
Sponsor Goodwill	4.16	0.681	0.84
Sponsor Attitudes	4.09	0.641	0.89
Sponsee Attitudes	4.49	0.527	0.86
Purchase Intentions	4.03	0.680	0.87

Similar to Dees et al. (2008), a correlational analysis was conducted on the sponsorship effectiveness domains. The results indicated that all five variables were significantly and positively correlated with each other at the  $p < .001$  level. The strongest correlation was between sponsor goodwill and purchase intentions ( $r = .610$ ) while the weakest (but still significant) correlation was between fan involvement and sponsor attitudes. A summary of these bivariate correlation results is provided in Table 3. It is important to note that these correlation values did not pose a threat to subsequent regression analysis due to multi-collinearity; meaning they were all below .80 and their variance inflation factors were below 10 (Farrar & Glauber, 1967).

Study Domain/Construct*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Attitude Toward the Sponsee (Sport Property)	--				
2. Attitude Toward Corporate Sponsors	.540	--			
3. Goodwill toward Corporate Sponsors	.580	.641	--		
4. Fan Involvement with Minor League Baseball	.453	.312	.430	--	
5. Sponsor Purchase Intentions	.520	.593	.610	.436	--

\* All correlations are significant at  $p < .001$

### Regression analysis

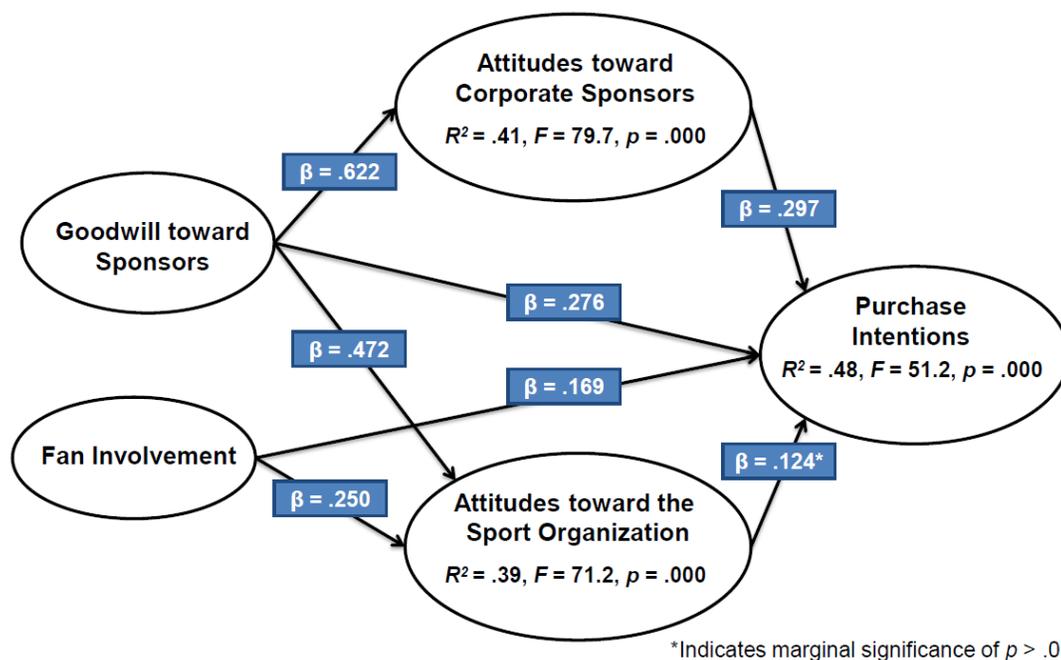
A multiple regression analysis using simultaneous entry was conducted to analyze the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable (purchase intentions). This analysis was similar to the Dees et al. (2008) study with the exception of the addition of sponsee attitudes. In order to answer Research Question #2, a regression analysis analyzed whether the overall model was significant, as well as the nature and strength of the relationships between goodwill, fan involvement, sponsor attitudes, sponsee attitudes and purchase intentions. Results indicated that all independent variables were positive and significant predictors of purchase intentions. Collectively, these four constructs explained about 48% of the total variance in the model ( $R^2 = .482$ ;  $F = 51.2$ ;  $p = .000$ ; Table 4). While very similar in their predictive strength, sponsor attitudes ( $\beta = .297$ ;  $p = .000$ ) was a stronger predictor of purchase intentions than was sponsor goodwill ( $\beta = .276$ ;  $p = .000$ ). Fan involvement ( $\beta = .169$ ;  $p = .003$ ) was, likewise, a significant, but weaker predictor of purchase intentions than goodwill and sponsor attitudes (Table 4). Attitudes toward the sport property (sponsee) was only a marginally significant predictor of purchase intentions ( $\beta = .124$ ;  $p = .055$ ).

Table 4. Results from Regression Analysis*				
	<i>B</i>	<u>SE B</u>	$\beta$	VIF
<b>Dependent Variable: Purchase Intentions</b>				
Sponsee Attitudes	.160	.083	.124*	1.754
Sponsor Attitudes	.315	.070	.297**	1.832
Sponsor Goodwill	.275	.069	.276**	2.047
Fan Involvement	.120	.040	.169**	1.329

Note.  $R^2 = .482$ ; \* $p = .055$ ; \*\* $p < .005$

### Path analysis

To assess the potential mediating effects of sponsor/sponsee attitudes upon purchase intentions, a path analysis was conducted. A series of simultaneous regressions were run in stages to determine both direct and indirect effects. Results from path analysis indicated a partial mediation model (Figure 1). The effect of goodwill upon purchase intentions was both directly ( $\beta = .276$ ) and indirectly related ( $\beta = .622$ ;  $\beta = .297$ ) to purchase intentions through sponsor attitudes. The indirect effect of sponsor goodwill upon purchase intentions was also marginally mediated through sponsee attitudes ( $\beta = .472$ ;  $\beta = .124$ ). The effect of fan involvement upon purchase intentions was both directly related ( $\beta = .169$ ) and marginally indirectly related ( $\beta = .250$ ,  $\beta = .124$ ) to purchase intentions through sponsee attitudes (Figure 1). The effect of fan involvement upon purchase intentions was not mediated through sponsor attitudes. The effect of exogenous variables (e.g., fan involvement, goodwill) upon sponsor and sponsee attitudes indicated that goodwill was a stronger predictor of both sponsor and sponsee attitudes than fan involvement. The strongest perception-attitude relationship in the model was goodwill's direct impact on sponsor attitudes ( $\beta = .622$ ). Figure 1 illustrates findings from this path analysis and provides  $\beta$  values and model statistics for each stage of the path analysis.



**Figure 1. Final Path Model of Goodwill, Fan Involvement, and Sponsor/Sport Organization Attitudes upon Purchase Intentions**

## Discussion

This study sought to substantiate the results of prior sport sponsorship studies by re-examining the importance of sponsor goodwill, fan involvement, and sponsor attitudes upon purchase intentions within the context of minor league baseball. Bivariate correlations indicated that all study constructs were significantly, positively correlated and that goodwill was the strongest correlate of purchase intentions followed by sponsor attitudes, sponsee attitudes and fan involvement. These results generally mirror the bivariate correlations reported by Dees et al. (2008) and support their importance for subsequent inclusion in path modeling.

Results from multiple regression analysis yielded both similar and different results than those reported by Dees et al. (2008). In our study, the regression model was also significant but the percentage of variance explained was somewhat lower than the Dees et al. model. Similar to Dees et al., all independent variables, with the exception of the new sponsee attitude measure ( $p = .055$ ), were significant predictors of purchase intentions at the  $p \leq .05$  level. The strength of the individual predictors in this study, however, varied from the regression results reported by Dees et al. In our study, sponsor attitudes was the strongest predictor of purchase intentions followed closely by sponsor goodwill and fan involvement. The  $\beta$  value for sponsor goodwill was considerably lower than the value reported by Dees et al. (2008) but the  $\beta$  values for sponsor attitudes and fan involvement were generally consistent with the values they reported. Interestingly, simultaneous inclusion of all study constructs into the regression model switched the order of strength between sponsor goodwill and sponsor attitudes in comparison to the initial

bivariate correlations. Here, sponsor attitudes emerged as the strongest predictor of purchase intentions and this differed from Dees et al. who reported and discussed goodwill as the strongest driver of purchase intentions.

Consistent with the Dees et al. (2008) study, fan involvement was the weakest predictor of purchase intentions in comparison to sponsor goodwill and attitudes. As Dees et al. hypothesized, purchasing products or services from an event sponsor may not necessarily bring a fan closer to the sport and strong, direct relationships should not be expected. While fan involvement was the weakest predictor of purchase intentions, it was nevertheless statistically significant and this finding differs from the results of Schlesinger and Güngerich (2011), who found that fan identity had no direct effect on the fans purchase intentions.

Due to the potential for sponsorship to involve a three-way image transfer among the property, sponsor, and consumer, we proposed that attitudes toward the sport property (sponsee) is an additional variable to be considered when modeling sponsorship purchase intentions and sought to establish/test this measure in a revised model. While attitudes toward the sponsee (sport property) did initially factor as its own separate domain and did correlate significantly with purchase intentions in the initial bivariate correlation analysis, its inclusion into the regression model yielded only a marginally significant relationship against purchase intentions ( $\beta = .124$ ;  $p = .055$ ). Thus, while sponsee attitudes are an important sponsorship outcome in their own right, our study did not find that these attitudes were a robust predictor of purchase intentions.

In summary, regression results support the validity and reliability of the findings reported by Dees et al. (2008), but within the context a minor league baseball venue. All three constructs are important considerations for corporations who wish to promote favorable consumer purchase intentions. As such, corporations/properties should work collaboratively to enhance these fan perceptions and attitudes in order to increase the likelihood of purchasing sponsor products/services. Given the importance of goodwill as identified in earlier research (Dees et al. 2008; Meenaghan, 2001), our survey instrument also included an open-ended question which asked respondents, "What, could corporate sponsors of the Spikes do, if anything, that would increase your feelings of goodwill toward them?" An initial content analysis of these comments revealed a number of general strategies for companies and properties to consider in their efforts to increase perceptions of goodwill such as, "continuing to sponsor the Spikes," "more fan activities and engagement during at the games," "supporting other local causes and charities," "providing helpful public service messages," "communicating sponsor activities within the surrounding community," and "providing more prizes and giveaways."

Prior sponsorship research has examined how these and other related constructs were directly and indirectly related to purchase intentions (Alexandris et al., 2012; Dees et al., 2010). Our study developed a path model of sponsor purchase intentions whereby fan involvement and goodwill were the exogenous variables and sponsor, sponsee attitudes were the mediating variables. Similar to prior research, we found both direct and indirect effects. The influence of fan involvement and goodwill upon purchase intentions was partially, and not fully, mediated through sponsor attitudes while (given the marginal significance of sponsee attitudes on purchase intentions) it was not mediated through sponsee attitudes. The indirect path values of goodwill upon sponsor attitudes and sponsor attitudes upon purchase intentions were higher than the direct effects of goodwill upon purchase intentions. These relationships indicate that goodwill has a stronger impact on sponsor attitudes than it did on purchase intentions and that sponsor attitudes have a stronger impact on purchase intentions than did goodwill. Corporations that wish to increase purchase of their products/services should ensure that they enjoy a

favorable attitude on the part of fans and increasing perceptions of goodwill is one pathway to these favorable sponsor attitudes. Corporate sponsors whose objectives are primarily image improvement should likewise prioritize sponsor goodwill as there were no direct relationships between fan involvement and sponsor attitudes after controlling for the effects of the other variable in the model (e.g., goodwill).

While the mediation of sponsee attitudes between fan involvement and purchase intentions was only marginally significant, the direct relationship between fan involvement and purchase intentions was significant. Thus, sponsors of minor league baseball who wish to improve purchase intentions should direct their efforts toward increasing fan involvement rather than enhancing attitudes toward the sport property. Despite the mediation effects illustrated through this final path model, the fact remains that goodwill, fan involvement, and sponsor attitudes were still significant, direct predictors of purchase intentions. Thus, corporate sponsors should consider enhancing all three perceptions/attitudes if they are to fully maximize purchase intentions.

Purchase intentions and behaviors are not the sole objectives of a corporate sponsorship programs. Some companies wish to focus their sponsorship efforts on building product/brand awareness (not assessed in this research) and increasing consumer attitudes toward their brand. Likewise, sport properties (e.g., minor league baseball organizations) are also interested in enhancing fan attitudes toward their organizations as a way to support continued ticket sales/attendance and to demonstrate, to sponsors, that they have a positive image among the fan base and that favorable image transfer effects are possible. Path analysis allowed the researchers to examine the extent that sponsor goodwill and fan involvement directly contributed to both sponsor attitudes and sponsee attitudes. Here, perceptions of sponsor goodwill contributed significantly to both sponsor attitudes and sponsee attitudes. In other words, fans who felt goodwill or gratitude toward the activities of the corporate sponsor were not only more inclined to evaluate the sponsor favorably, but also to evaluate the sport property or team more favorably. These findings confirm the critical importance of goodwill in the context of sponsorship effectiveness outcomes and further support the importance of image transfer. While perceived sponsor goodwill contributed to favorable sponsor attitudes, it also had an image transfer effect on the sponsored property itself. Sport properties should thus, pay particular attention to ensuring that sponsorship packages are designed with sponsor goodwill as their centerpiece. Sponsors that provide significant contributions to the property, but do little to increase goodwill perceptions may, in the long run, be counterproductive in building a favorable image toward the sport property.

Path analysis also revealed direct effects between fan involvement upon sponsor and sponsee attitudes. Unlike the goodwill construct, fan involvement was only significantly related to sponsee attitudes. That is, those whose identities were connected with minor league baseball and who were avid minor league baseball fans felt more favorably about the sport property/team. This is not surprising as measures of sponsee attitudes were directly tied to the attitude objects assessed through the fan involvement scale (e.g., minor league baseball).

### ***Study limitations and future research***

There were several limitations to this study. The survey was completed only at home games at one Minor League Baseball venue and did not comprehensively assess awareness of sponsors as a potential predictor of purchase intentions. These issues limit the generalizability of our findings to other contexts and may have resulted in model under-specification. Another study

limitation was the potential for response bias as the on-site response rate was only 27% and non-response bias checks were not built into the study design. Individuals who did not participate in the study may have been different in terms of their demographic characteristics and sponsorship attitude profiles. Furthermore, this study was delimited to adult fans, but it is quite possible that young fans could be impacted by sponsorship promotions/activities and this is a fertile area for future research.

Given the strong relationships of sponsor attitudes and goodwill with purchase intentions, further studies could assess the viability of specific strategies to increase goodwill and/or sponsor attitudes in greater detail. In this study, we asked a simple open-ended question asked about sponsor strategies to increase goodwill. However, focus groups of different types of fans might yield more in-depth understanding of goodwill perceptions and its antecedents at minor league sports venues. Future research should also examine whether other constructs (beyond goodwill, fan involvement, sponsor/sponsee attitudes) influence fan purchase intentions and behaviors.

### Conclusion

This study sought to examine the role of goodwill, fan involvement, and sponsor/sponsee attitudes upon sponsor purchase intentions, and was an extension of the work of Dees et al. (2008), but within the context of Minor League Baseball. Consistent with prior literature, the three original independent variables (goodwill, fan involvement and attitudes toward the sponsor) all contributed significantly to the sponsor purchase intentions of fans. In contrast to prior research, sponsor attitudes emerged as a stronger predictor of purchase intentions than goodwill, but the effect on goodwill on purchase intentions was partially mediated through sponsor attitudes. Furthermore, this study expanded on prior research by exploring the potential impact of sponsee (sport property) attitudes on purchase intentions. However, attitudes toward the sport property (the minor league baseball team) had only a marginally significant impact on purchase intentions. These relationships suggest that favorable sponsor attitudes are likely to translate into favorable purchase intentions, but that goodwill and fan involvement also contribute directly to these outcomes. Knowing that sponsor attitudes, goodwill, and fan involvement positively relate to Minor League Baseball fans' purchase intentions, efforts should find a way to maximize these perceptions and attitudes within these sport venues.

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