

Examining Consumer Response to Sport Sponsorship: A Case Study Among Fans of a Group of 5 Division I Programs

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Abstract

Considering sponsorships function as a prime source for revenue streams in intercollegiate athletics, the evaluation of sport sponsorship effectiveness is essential to maximize relationships between sponsors and athletic programs. While previous research has explored the topic of sponsorship effectiveness, previous work has largely focused on major college sports. This case study addresses this gap by examining the sponsorship effectiveness among fans of a Group of 5, Division I football team. The purpose of this case study is to measure consumer response to sport sponsorship by analyzing how attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill towards the sponsor both influence purchase intentions. Respondents included 267 fans of a Group of 5, Division I football program. Findings suggest attitude and goodwill both influenced consumer purchase intentions. The present research provides insight into the effects sport sponsorship programs have on purchase intention among college football fans of a smaller sport institution.

Introduction

Over the last quarter century, intercollegiate athletics departments sponsoring major college football have found a need to drastically improve their revenue generating strategies (McEvoy, Morse, & Shapiro, 2013). Sport organizations in the United States have had to rely on several revenue streams to keep up with escalating costs, primarily through television rights, ticket sales, donations, corporate sponsorships, and naming rights opportunities (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Eddy & Cork, 2016; McEvoy et al., 2013). Therefore, increasing sponsorship revenues continues to be a major priority, prompting many athletics departments to either increase staff or secure the services of outsourced companies to handle these duties (Kitun, 2013). While the overall revenue of college athletics has increased, it is not a consistent increase across the board. Research suggests there is disparity in revenues generated between schools with strong conferences, commonly known as Power 5, and schools from smaller conferences, also known as Group of 5 programs (Brady, Berkowitz, & Schnaars, 2015; Caro & Benton, 2012). Due to the gap between revenue generation amounts between schools of both types, specifically in terms of television revenues and ticket sales (McEvoy et al., 2013), areas such as sponsorship are more critical for smaller universities. Thus, the need arises for evaluation of these sponsorship programs and the influence of consumer response at smaller institutions.

Research on the sport sponsorship programs, including perspectives from both the corporate sponsor (Alvarado, 2012; Weight, Taylor, & Cuneen, 2010) and the sport organization (Yang, 2009), has steadily increased over the years. This research, however, has focused primarily on

consumers of Power 5 football programs. This focus has created a gap in the research by not examining consumer response among fans from Group of 5 conferences (Weight et al., 2010). Other work focuses on sponsorship effectiveness among fans for high-profile athletic programs – specifically those from Power 5 conferences (e.g., Cheng & Zhang, 2012; Eddy & Cork, 2016). Sport sponsorship research in the context Group of 5 athletics is sparse. Of the few studies that have examined sport sponsorship in this context, most of them focus on aspects of corporate motives (Weight, Taylor, & Cuneen, 2010) and competitive advantage (Anderson & Birrer, 2011). Other research in the Group of 5 context indicates, though, that Group of 5 sport organizations generally have a tougher time competing for consumers, possibly due to the perception of quality or ability (Padgett & Hunt, 2012). It is this idea that suggests smaller sport organizations need to be more strategic in finding ways to generate revenue. Considering Group of 5 programs have a difficult time competing for consumers and revenue (Padgett & Hunt, 2012), the current research sought to provide empirical data of this important consumer base. Therefore, the purpose of this case study is to explore how consumer attitudes towards a sponsor influence purchase intention among fans of a Group of 5 football program.

Specifically, this study examines how consumer attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill towards the sponsor influence consumer's purchase intention. This work builds off previous studies regarding the related constructs (Dees et al., 2008; Meenaghan, 2001; Moore, Mowen, and Hickerson, 2013). Collectively, these three studies suggest that sport sponsorship effectiveness can be measured by evaluating the influence of consumer attitudes towards the sponsor and perception of the sponsor's goodwill on the eventual purchase intention of the sponsor's respective products. However, this paper focuses on assessing the sponsorship process within the Group of 5 context.

Findings from this research should be useful in two areas. First, it seeks to extend the literature on the sport sponsorship effectiveness – by focusing on consumer attitudes of the sponsor and the relationship with purchase intention – in the context Group of 5 athletic programs. From a practical perspective, findings should assist intercollegiate athletic administrators responsible for sport sponsorship and fan engagement by having the ability to better articulate the benefits and outcomes of sport sponsorship.

Background and Theoretical Framework

Within the sport sponsorship context, the relationships between corporate sponsors and the sport organizations provide strategic value for both parties (Cousens, Babiak & Bradish, 2006; Jensen & Cornwell, 2017). For the sport organization, the value comes from much-needed infusion of financial assets, while the corporate organization benefits in physical sport assets (i.e., signage, advertisements, promotions), as well as other long-term benefits of associations and related competitive advantages (Cousens et al., 2006; Spais & Johnston, 2014). Over the years, corporate sponsorship has become a prime source of revenue, and long-term relationships with these sponsors can provide a steady revenue stream to a university's athletic program (Dees et al., 2008; McEvoy et al., 2013). There are several benefits that corporate organizations gain from participating in a sponsorship relationship, including more cost-effective exposure to specific markets, enhanced brand image and positive brand associations (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Other corporate objectives of sport sponsorship include generating goodwill within the target audience (Meenaghan, 2001), fostering positive attitudes toward the brand (Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006; Lee, Sandler & Shani, 1997) and increasing consumer purchase intentions (Lee et al., 1997; Shanklin & Kuzma, 1992).

One of the guiding theories in this study is Schema-triggered Affect Theory (McDaniel & Heald, 2000), which explains how attitude toward a sponsor is formed, especially in the context of sport. While previously used in advertising response and recall studies, schema-triggered affect theory (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) focuses on the idea that consumers develop feelings and belief about an event or due to previous experiences. Essentially, consumers develop their attitude through repetitive exposure to stimulus categories such as advertising and sponsorship (McDaniel & Heald, 2000). From a sport sponsorship perspective, this theory suggests that consumers develop event schemas from being at events and recognizing the sponsors of these events (see Jagre, Watson, & Watson, 2001; McDaniel & Heald, 2000). For the present study, schema-triggered affect theory explains how attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill towards the sponsor are generated. Thus, the following hypotheses are presented:

H1: Attitudes towards the sponsor will positively influence purchase intention among respondents in the study.

H2: Goodwill towards the sponsor will positively influence purchase intention among respondents in the study.

Sport sponsorship in college athletics

Sport sponsorship continues to be an attractive endeavor for corporations both domestically and internationally (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013; Eddy, 2014; Mason, 2005). Various reasons exist why corporations find sport sponsorships so appealing, which include increasing brand awareness, enhancing brand image, and stimulating positive attitudes and behaviors of potential consumers (Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, & Clark, 2003). Research suggests that sport sponsorship can accomplish these objectives as well as stimulate consumer purchase intentions (Levin, Beasley, & Gamble, 2004; Levin, Joiner, & Cameron, 2001; Madrigal, 2000). Ultimately, corporations utilized sport sponsorships to elicit positive attitudes towards their products resulting in purchases (Mason, 2005).

Madrigal (2000) examined social alliances between fans and sport teams and the resultant influence on purchase intentions. Social alliances referred to the level of identification individuals had with the sports team and the importance of group membership on the individual's self-esteem. Findings from the study suggested that respondents with higher levels of team identification had higher intentions to purchase products from sponsors. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) investigated the relationship between an individual's identification with a team and various sponsorship outcomes. Results indicated that individuals with higher levels of team identification had higher levels of sponsor recall, patronage, and attitudes toward the sponsor. Identifying and segmenting highly identified fans may be more beneficial to sponsors regarding effective use of marketing resources (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

Dees et al. (2008) examined how consumer purchase intentions are influenced by the individual's attitude toward the sponsor and goodwill. Results indicated that both factors were significant predictors of consumer's purchase intentions. The strongest predictor of purchase intentions was goodwill or the perception that sponsors were supporting the team. The authors implied that additional research should be conducted on sponsorship effectiveness at different levels of intercollegiate athletics (Dees et al., 2008).

Attitude and goodwill towards the sponsor

Previous research has shown that attitude toward the sponsor influences consumer purchase intentions (Koo et al., 2006). When applied to sport sponsorship, attitude could be defined as a consumer's overall evaluation of an organization sponsoring an event (Keller, 2003). Attitudes generally refer to how favorably/unfavorably or positively/negatively an object is viewed. When a consumer makes up their mind about a particular sponsor these attitudes can strongly impact their behavior (Dees et al., 2008).

Goodwill towards the sponsor is demonstrated by fans who positively support sponsors of their favorite events or teams (Dees et al., 2008). Meenaghan (2001) concluded that event and team sponsors derive positive attitudes, which in turn influence consumer purchase intentions. This influence is contingent upon several actions of the sponsors, including duration of the sponsorship, perceived commitment to the sponsored property, and evidence of caring and goodwill the sponsors demonstrate towards the team or event (2001). In light of this, Dees et al. (2008) caution that organizations are aware of the implications of these contingencies and its related influence on eventual purchase intention. Meenaghan (2001) suggests organizational understanding of goodwill and the related implications are paramount because goodwill is a primary point of differentiation between sponsorship and traditional advertising.

Methods

Sample and data collection

Research examining consumer response to sport sponsorship has focused on the influence schemas such as attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill towards the sponsor (Cheng & Zhang, 2012; Dees et al., 2008; Kuzma, Veltri, Kuzma, & Miller, 2003) have on the desired outcome of purchase intention (Cheng & Zhang, 2012; Dees et al., 2008). As such, the present study examined consumer response to sport sponsorship using these constructs utilizing fans from a Group of 5, Division I football team at a southeastern university. Data for this quantitative study were collected through a nonprobability, convenience sampling, in the form of a web-based questionnaire. E-mail addresses were collected through two separate e-mail lists. The first list was made up of people who gave their information at a "register to win" table outside the university's football stadium before six home football games. The second list was made up of fans who purchased home football tickets through the university ticket office. Survey implementation utilized a modified Dillman (2007) approach. The process initiated with sending an email with a link to an online questionnaire to all emails collected two weeks after the end of the football season. Two follow-up emails were sent one and two weeks after the initial request. A total of 1,442 e-mail addresses were collected by the research team, of which 59 were non-deliverable due to incorrect email addresses. After deleting the non-deliverable email addresses, the effective response rate was 20.4%. Out of the 282 returned questionnaires, 15 were excluded from the analysis because of incomplete questionnaires. Therefore, results are based on a sample size of 267.

Survey instrument

In order to address the first three hypotheses, constructs relating to sport sponsorship, including: attitude toward the sponsor, goodwill towards the sponsor, and purchase intentions, made up the survey. All items were adapted from previously utilized inventories regarding sport sponsorship and sport fan behavior included in Table 1.

Attitude towards the sponsor

There were four items measuring attitude towards the sponsor. Quester and Thompson (2001) initially developed these items for their study regarding the effectiveness of arts sponsorship, while Dees et al. (2008) later used the items in a sport context with their study regarding the effectiveness of sponsorship of major college football. In the present study, the four attitude toward the sponsor items had a reliability of $\alpha = .879$.

Goodwill

This factor was measured using four items from Dees et al. (2008) that measured a consumer's feelings of goodwill relative to a sport sponsoring organization. The items focused on the perception each respondent had towards the organization's commitment to the community, as well as evidence of each organization caring about the sport or event being sponsored and the fans in attendance. The present study yielded a reliability of $\alpha = .805$ for the four goodwill items.

Purchase intention

The four items measuring purchase intention also have been previously used in sponsorship and fan behavior research. The items were initially used in Madrigal's (2001) study on team identification and sport sponsorship, and also were later utilized in the follow up study by Dees et al. (2008). For the present study, the purchase intention items had a reliability of $\alpha = .882$.

Table 1. Questionnaire Items

Question/Scale	M	SD
Overall Attitude towards the sponsor	5.35	1.00
I think favorably of companies the sponsor this event.	5.74	1.29
Companies that sponsor [university] football are successful.	5.22	1.21
Companies who sponsor [university] football provide quality products/services.	5.11	1.10
Companies that sponsor [university] football are professional.	5.33	1.09
4 items, $\alpha = .879$		
Overall Goodwill towards the sponsor	5.37	0.95
[University] football sponsors are involved with their community.	5.31	1.19
Corporate sponsors try to improve [university] football.	5.08	1.25
This sporting event benefits from corporate sponsors.	6.02	1.15
Corporate sponsors care about the fans of [university] football.	5.02	1.19
4 items, $\alpha = .805$		
Overall Purchase Intention	5.36	0.94
I would consider purchasing products/services from the corporate sponsors of this event.	5.18	1.12
I would try a new product/service if I saw it at a [university] football game.	5.57	1.15
I would definitely purchase products/services from the corporate sponsors of [university] football.	5.49	1.08
My overall attitude toward purchasing products/services from companies that sponsor this event is positive.	5.19	1.08
4 items, $\alpha = .882$		

Nunnally (1978) indicated an acceptable criterion of .60 or higher for an exploratory research study. Thus, all four reliability tests satisfied the criterion, allowing all items to be used in the research study.

Data analysis

In order to address the three hypotheses proposed in the study, two analyses were conducted. First, a correlation analysis was utilized to determine the relative strength of the relationship between the variables of interest (attitude, goodwill, and purchase intention). Second, regression analysis was utilized to examine the influence that the two independent variables (attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill), had on the purchase intentions among the participants. Where applicable, squared structure coefficients (sr^2) (Nathans, Oswald, & Nimon, 2012) were included to determine the level of variance both attitude towards the sponsor and goodwill contributed to purchase intention. Statistical analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics Package, version 24.

Results

Participants

The majority of 267 respondents were 25-49 years of age (59.6%), while 41.8 percent reported an annual household income between \$50,000-\$99,999. More than half of the respondents (56.2%) were male. Most respondents held college degrees (48.9%), 20.7% of which held a postgraduate degree. Additionally, the majority of respondents (67.5%) reported having children, including 36.9 % with two children, and more than 70 percent having children over the age of 16.

Spectator profile

Respondents reported attending an average of 3.15 games during the football season under investigation, and had been attending the university's games for an average of nine years. The majority of participants (69.8%) were not season ticketholders and 94.4% indicated they were not members of the university's donor club.

Attitudes, goodwill, and purchase intentions

Among the independent variables examined in this study, respondents demonstrated high levels of attitudes towards the sponsor ($M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.00$) and perceptions of sponsor goodwill ($M = 5.37$, $SD = .95$). For attitude, participants mostly thought favorable companies that sponsor [university] football games ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.29$). For goodwill, respondents most agreed with the notion that [university] football benefits from corporate sponsors ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.15$).

The dependent variable of the study focused on consumer purchase intention ($M = 5.36$, $SD = .94$). Respondents most agree that their attitude towards purchasing products/services was influenced by companies that sponsor [university] football ($M = 5.56$, $SD = 1.15$). Complete results of the variables examined in the study are listed in Table 1.

Hypotheses Results

Correlation analysis was conducted (Table 2) to determine if a relationship among the four variables of interest existed. Results indicate that all the variables were significant and positively correlated at the $p < .01$ level. Purchase intention (.821) and goodwill (.811) demonstrated high positive correlations with attitude. Purchase intention (.775) also had a high positive correlation with goodwill.

Variable	1	2	3
Attitude	1.000		
Goodwill	.811*	1.000	
Purchase Intention	.821*	.775*	1.000

**Note: all are significant at the $p < .01$ level (2 tailed)

Both of the hypotheses were addressed using a standard regression analysis (Table 3) to illustrate how purchase intention was influenced by attitude and goodwill. The ANOVA table revealed that the full model was significant ($p = .000$; $F_{2, 265} = 321.21$), and the overall R^2 was .708 indicating the model explains 70.8% of the variance in purchase intentions. Overall, results suggest attitude toward the sponsor to be the best predictor of purchase intentions due to its unique effect size ($sr^2 = .329$).

Hypothesis 1 predicted that attitude towards the sponsor would significantly influence purchase intention. Results indicate that attitude toward the sponsor indeed was a significant predictor of purchase intentions ($p = .000$, $t = 9.90$) with a unique effect size of 10.82% ($sr^2 = .329$), supporting hypotheses 1. The slope (B) of attitude toward the sponsor was .529, which means for every unit increase in attitude toward the sponsor, purchase intentions increased by .529 units.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that goodwill towards the sponsor would significantly influence purchase intention. Goodwill was found to be a significant predictor of purchase intentions ($p = .000$, $t = 5.61$) with a unique effect size of 3.46% ($sr^2 = .186$), thus supporting hypothesis 2. The slope (B) of goodwill was .314, which means for every unit increase in goodwill, purchase intentions increased by .314 units.

Model	Beta	Standard Error	Significance
Constant	.849	.183	.000
Attitude	.529	.053	.000
Goodwill	.314	.056	.000
$R^2 = .708$ ** $p < .001$			

Discussion

As previously mentioned, the need to generate revenue is an important aspect of any NCAA Division I athletic program. In addition to the traditional areas of ticket revenue, media rights and merchandise sales, sport sponsorship has long been considered an area of focus among these departments (Dees et al., 2008; Eddy & Cork, 2016; McEvoy et al., 2013). One of the primary ways to examine sport sponsorship research has been through evaluating consumer response to sponsorship programs (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

Sponsorship and its many benefits has been a topic of study for many scholars (e.g., Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1999; Levin et al., 2004), especially within the sport context (Cousens et al., 2006). Among the outcomes most important to organizations are those that affect revenue, of which consumer purchase intentions is a major area of study (Moore et al., 2013). Additionally, there are several factors that influence a consumer's purchase intentions from sponsorship exposure, including those included in the present study (attitude toward the sponsor and goodwill). Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine if, and how, consumer's purchase intentions were affected by these variables.

Primary findings

Results indicate that spectators who attend games and have a high level of attitude towards the event sponsors are much more likely to purchase or consider purchasing from the companies that sponsor institutional football games. Similarly, fans who perceive high levels of goodwill from event sponsors were more likely to purchase from those sponsors than those fans with low levels. Thus, both attitude and goodwill had a high level of significance in regards to purchase intentions.

Attitude and goodwill on purchase intention

The findings support previous research on the relationship between attitude toward the sponsor (Dees et al., 2008; Madrigal, 2001) and goodwill (Meenaghan, 2001) with purchase intentions. These studies suggest fans who experience positive levels of attitude toward the sponsor and goodwill are more likely to buy goods and services from those. The present study indicates that attitude toward the sponsor and goodwill both had a small, but significant influence on purchase intentions. These findings add support to the mutually beneficial relationship between sport organizations and their sponsors, as both parties experience positive benefits in terms of revenue and financial support. Additionally, as Meenaghan (2001) suggests that goodwill is a byproduct of the sponsor's partnership with the organization, the present study supports that this is indeed an outcome of importance. For sport organizations who need to provide rationale and support when securing outside sponsorships as a return on investment, the present findings indicate there are other benefits outside of financial impact.

Practical application

There are some areas in which the information gleaned from the present study can be used by universities to evaluate sponsor relationships and eventual consumer responses to sport sponsorship. While findings from this specific case study should be tempered due to the use of a single institution, there are still some aspects on which organizations in a similar position could build. From a strategic standpoint, university athletics departments can utilize similar information when attracting and prospecting new businesses to become corporate sponsors. As sponsoring organizations seek to gain more return on their investment, sport organizations can use similar surveys among their respective fan bases to get such information. Additionally, as many Group of 5 programs experience are usually not the primary sports team in the state, information from a similar study only enhances the value that sponsors seek. The increased focus on corporate benefits for sponsors could result in additional revenue streams for the universities, while sponsors may see an increase in sales and awareness.

From a marketing perspective, university athletics departments could also utilize similar findings to enhance game-day activities and overall fan experiences through sponsor promotions and activation. Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014) suggest that corporate sponsors have objectives outside of simple increases in awareness and exposure, including opportunities to showcase products or services. In this way, university athletics departments could focus on more promotional aspects involving the sponsors beyond simple recognition. The results of this study also add to the importance of corporate goodwill with regards to sponsorship. Considering Group of 5 institutions rely heavily on their local community for overall support, sport sponsors should seek greater opportunities to enhance their image within those same communities. This, these communities are likely to benefit from this research because sponsors will become aware of the importance of giving back to the local community. Lastly, this research further adds to industry and statistical results regarding attitude and goodwill, allowing organizations to use this research in justifying the resources, of which U.S. collegiate institutions already struggle to obtain, being spent within sport sponsorship programs.

Limitations and Conclusion

The present study is not without some limitations. First, data collection methods of e-mail addresses are a limitation. Using email lists provided by the institution and not collecting the e-mail address directly from attendees, limited the opportunity to explain the purpose of the research which may have resulted in a lower number of respondents. Additionally, the lack of random sampling procedures could have affected the representativeness of the sample. However, the demographics and type of tickets used from the sample suggested the sample was representative of the population. Finally, while the purpose of this case study was to examine consumer response to sponsorship from a single institution, the findings would be more generalizable through the inclusion of other similar institutions.

Future Research

Future research on the impact of sport sponsorship could focus on the influence of brand equity factors, such as brand awareness as well as brand recognition and the relationship with purchase intentions. It would be important to examine whether or not the sport sponsorship process influences or moderates the various brand equity components of the commercial organization. A secondary focus of research could come from the organizational decision making processes that lead to sponsorship relationships, both from the sport organization and commercial organization perspectives. Such analysis would allow for a better understanding of this relationship, and how each party could further benefit from the sponsorship agreements.

Finally, further research could be conducted to determine if team preference moderates the relationship between the selected factors of the present study, including attitude towards the sponsor, goodwill, and purchase intention. This line of research would further explore the notion that perceived quality alters how fans perceive the sponsorship relationship.

Conclusion

The present study suggests that attitude and goodwill both influence fans' purchase intentions. The findings suggest that fans like to see that companies not only sponsor sports events and teams, but also are involved in the community, with the team and the organization. It is the hope that the present research sheds some insight into the possible effects sport sponsorship has on fans purchase intention among Group of 5 sport institutions. Considering the aforementioned

need for smaller intercollegiate athletics departments to focus on generating revenue in a variety of areas, departments could demonstrate to potential and existing clients the effectiveness of their sponsorship dollars.

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