

Sponsorship recognition in NCAA Division I Women's College Basketball: Comparison between in-arena signage versus no signage

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While previous literature suggests more highly involved spectators, such as college sport fans, are typically more likely to recognize and support sport sponsors (Dodd, 1997; Pitts, 1998, 2003; Pope & Voges, 2000; Quester & Farrelly, 1998; Shannon & Turley, 1997; Turco, 1995), a dearth of research regarding variables influencing correct sponsorship recognition rates at women's sporting events exists. As such, the primary purpose of this study was to examine how the presence of sponsor signage in collegiate basketball arenas influences correct sponsorship recognition by women's basketball spectators. A secondary purpose for the study was to identify additional variables significantly contributing to correct sponsor recognition by women's basketball spectators.

The current study is intended to continue building upon previous literature pertaining to women's sport spectators, sponsor recognition and marketing efforts aligned with women's sport. The following research questions provided the framework for the study. 1) Will sponsor signage in college basketball arenas result in higher correct sponsor recognition by women's basketball spectators compared to correct sponsor recognition by women's basketball spectators where signage is not present in the arena? 2) What percentage of variance in correct sponsorship recognition by women's college basketball spectators is explained by spectator identification levels, sex, age, number of games attended and presence of signage in the arena? 3) What marketing strategies would enhance the value associated with these women's sport sponsorships?

The reliance on signage to increase spectator recognition of sponsors stems from the multitude of studies that have measured recognition and/or recall among sport spectators as the means to justify the practice (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002; Cuneen & Hannan, 1993; Nicholls, Roslow, & Dubliss, 1999; Pitts & Slattery, 2004; Pitts, 1998; Stotlar, 1993; Stotlar & Johnson, 1989). Surprisingly, no studies were found examining the potential effect an absence of in-arena signage would elicit on recognition of corporate sponsors. Given the growing concern regarding commercialization of intercollegiate athletics (NCAA, 2004; Knight Commission, 2007, 2001), the finding that pointed to the possibility of eliminating corporate intrusion due to signage emerged as a salient construct worthy of further examination.

Surveys were distributed and collected at one home conference women's basketball game at two mid-west universities during the 2006 season. Both women's basketball programs participated in the NCAA Division I basketball tournament during the previous four seasons and boasted average attendance figures ranking in the top 15 nationally, thus representing the upper echelon of intercollegiate women's basketball programs (NCAA.com). When considering solely the influence of in-arena signage on correct sponsor recognition, the presence of sponsor signage in the arena did not significantly increase the likelihood of a spectator correctly identifying the official sponsors. Perhaps counter to intuition, spectators in arenas without signage correctly identified significantly more official sponsors. The number of home games attended was the one variable that accounted for 10.5% of the variance in correct sponsor recognition. Commonly sport marketers strive to sell as many season tickets as possible in order to pitch a larger number of impressions to sponsors; however, results indicate the ticket purchasers need to physically attend consistently in order for the sponsor to reap recognition benefits. Gender, as a stand alone variable, did not contribute significantly to correct sponsorship recognition, contradicting previous research conducted in a professional sport environment (Ross, Walsh, & Maxwell, 2007). Still, findings from the current study suggest that college women's basketball spectators qualify as highly identified fans capable of significant recognition rates, although they may also be quite different psychographically from professional sport fans. Implications based on the results of the study will be discussed from both a marketing perspective and a gender perspective. Additionally, the increasing commercialization and commodification of college sport will be critically examined.