Consumers' Attitudes and Behavior in Response to Corporate Sponsorship

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Corporate sponsorship is one of the fastest growing types of marketing communications (Roy & Cornwell, 2003), and the number of sponsorship studies increased accordingly. However, the surrounding variables which influence sponsorship effects have not been fully considered. One such variable is product involvement. Although product involvement has been considered as an important factor on consumers’ attitudes and behaviors (Scholten, 1996; Zaichkowsky, 1985), it has not been studied in sport contexts.

Zaichkowsky (1985) defined product involvement as the degree to which an individual is involved with a given product on a regular basis. Several scales have been developed (O’Cass, 2000) to classify products into different levels of involvement. Products can be classified as high- or low-involvement depending on factors such as price, importance to self, the level of risk involved in a product's purchase, frequency of purchase, durability, and so forth.

In the sports contexts, there are many different kinds of companies that sponsor sport teams and consumers will have various levels of involvement with sponsoring companies' various products. Then, does the degree of consumers' involvement with sponsors' product influence sponsorship effects? More specifically, this study investigates how companies' sponsorship and consumers' level of involvement in the sponsoring products influence fans' brand awareness, brand attitudes, and purchase intention, where such influence is moderated by fan identification.

The researcher assumed that since high-involvement products involve greater risk, consumers would gather more information through many sources, and evaluate thoroughly, which is likely to result in less sponsorship effects compared to low-involvement products. It is also assumed that these effects will be moderated by fan identification.

In this study, four product categories (i.e., automobile, bank, soft drink, and sports drink) of sponsoring companies of the Ohio State's football team were selected and categorized as high- and low- product involvement using Zaichkowski's Personal Involvement Inventory (PII). Data were collected from 110 respondents at the game site. Collected data were analyzed using ANOVA using SPSS.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that sponsoring companies producing either low-involvement or high-involvement products will generate higher awareness toward their brands among fans who are highly identified with the teams. The indicated that high-identified fans (M = 2.49) with the team recalled the sponsors better than low-identified fans (M= 2.19, F(1,106)=2.03, p>.05).

Hypothesis 2a predicted that sponsoring companies producing low-involvement products will generate more favorable attitudes toward their brands among high-identified fans. But, there would be no difference in fans' attitudes toward sponsoring companies' high-involvement products (Hypothesis 2b). Results showed that sponsors did not generate more favorable attitudes towards their products among high-identified fans in all four product categories (Bank F(1, 106) = .10; Automobile F(1, 106) = .12; Soft Drink F(1, 106) = .43; Sports Drink F(1, 106) = .18).

Hypothesis 3a predicted that sponsoring companies producing low-involvement products will generate higher purchase intentions toward their brands among high-identified fans. Hypothesis 3b predicted that there would be no difference in fans' purchase intention toward sponsors of high-involvement products. Again, the results of ANOVA indicated that there is no difference in all sponsors' products (Bank F(1, 106) = 1.83; Automobile F(1, 106) = .16; Soft Drink F(1, 106) = .04; Sports Drink F(1, 106) = .01).

However, in the post-attitude, measured after respondents were told who the real sponsors were, there were differences between high and low-identified fans (Bank F(1, 106) = 3.92, p = .05, hp2=.036, Automobile F(1, 106) = 7.20, p < .05, hp2=.064; Soft Drink F(1, 106) = 2.30 p=.133, hp2=.021; Sports Drink F(1, 106) = 5.31 p < .05, hp2=.048). However, respondents still did not show much changes in their post-purchase intention (Bank F(1, 106) = .527, p = .47, Automobile F(1, 106) = 2.84, p =.095; Soft Drink F(1, 106) = 3.27 p=.073; Sports Drink F(1, 106) = 3.40, p = .068).

In this study, the results showed that sponsorship was not very effective in terms of increased awareness, favorable attitudes, and higher purchase intention, which was consistent throughout four product categories. However, when respondents realized who
the sponsors were, at least their attitude changed more favorably, although purchase intention was not changed. The results suggest that it is important for marketers make sure to let consumers know their sponsorship involvement. In addition, cost-effect study should also be conducted to compare sponsorship with other communication vehicles to see the sponsorship involvement is beneficial for companies.