The Impact of Relationship Quality on Attitude toward a Sponsor

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Sponsorship is a unique business-to-business activity that brings a sport property and sponsor together for the mutual benefit of both organizations. In the midst of a severe economic recession, with companies reducing marketing expenditures, sponsorship spending overall is still projected to rise 3.9% in 2009 (IEG, 2009). The primary recipient of sponsorship spending is sport properties. Approximately 70% of all sponsorship spending is directed to sport properties (IEG, 2009). The continued investment in sponsorship is one indicator of the confidence organizations place in the tool to achieve marketing objectives.

A sport property may benefit from sponsorship activity through financial, media, in-kind resources, or an image association with a sponsor. The benefits for a sponsor include, but are not limited to, increased awareness, product trial and sales opportunities, image enhancement, and hospitality opportunities. A key way in which sponsors attempt to impact consumer behavior is through the positive association between a sponsor and a sport property. On one level, sponsorship activity enables a sponsor to foster a positive attitude toward the organization (i.e. sponsor) through the pre-existing association between consumers and a sport property. A positive attitude toward an organization is acknowledged as an important element influencing consumer purchase intentions and ultimately consumer behavior (Ajzen, 2001). While there seems to be general agreement that the positive association between a consumer and a sport property may engender a positive association between a consumer and a sponsor, additional empirical research is needed to substantiate the idea. The positive association between a sport property and consumers may be examined through the notion of relationship quality, a global evaluation of the strength of a relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006). The measure of relationship quality may then be examined with respect to a consumer’s attitude toward a sponsor.

The purpose of the current study is to advance our understanding of sponsorship effectiveness by measuring the quality of the relationship between a consumer and a sport property. It has been purported that the positive association between a consumer and a sponsor may also be influenced by a consumer’s perception of a sponsor’s goodwill (Meenagh, 2001). The goodwill effect may be regarded as the consumer’s perception of a sponsor’s motive, to either support a sport property or to advance the sponsor’s own interests. In addition to examining the impact of relationship quality on a consumer’s attitude toward a sponsor, a secondary purpose was to examine the effect of a goodwill assessment on a consumer’s attitude toward a sponsor. In the current study, sponsor sincerity is examined in relation to the consumer’s attitude toward a sponsor. A conceptual model was developed to examine linkages among relationship quality, sincerity, attitude toward sponsor and intention to purchase a sponsor’s product. This model explains the theoretical relationships between relationship quality and three salient variables: sincerity, attitude toward sponsor’s brand, and future purchase intention. Based on the conceptual model, the following hypotheses were tested. With Hypotheses 1 and 2, it was proposed that relationship quality would have a direct and positive influence on attitude toward sponsors and future intentions to purchase sponsors product. Hypothesis 3 proposed that relationship quality influences sincerity and Hypothesis 4 proposed that sincerity influences attitude. Through Hypotheses 5 and 6, it was proposed that sincerity and attitude toward a sponsor each have a direct and positive impact on intention to purchase a sponsor’s product(s).

The target population for this study was college students in an NCAA Division I-A university. 474 usable surveys were collected and analyzed. The data reasonably met all the assumptions for SEM analyses except the multivariate normality assumption. Mardia’s (1985) Normalized Coefficient of both skewness (z = 44.00) and kurtosis (z = 24.33) were significant (p < .01). Therefore, Satorra-Bentler’s (1994) scaling method was used for the ensuing SEM analyses. The global fit indices indicate good fit between the hypothesized measurement model and the observed data (χ²/df = 307.14/168 = 1.83, RMSEA = .04, CFI = .97, SRMR = .04, TLI = .97). The AVE values all exceeded .50; they ranged from .50 for Sincerity to .85 for Commitment. All reliability coefficients exceeded .70; the factors ranged from .75 for Sincerity to .94 for Commitment. The direct path from Relationship Quality to Sincerity was positive and significant (standardized γ = .55). The direct path from Sincerity to Attitude toward Sponsor was...
2010 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2010)

also positive and significant (standardized \( \beta = .50 \)). The indirect path from Relationship Quality through Sincerity to Attitude toward Sponsor was significant (standardized \( \gamma = .28 \)) and positive as well. This result indicates that the strength of the indirect path from Relationship Quality through Sincerity to Attitude toward Sponsor was significantly greater than the direct path from Relationship Quality to Attitude toward Sponsor. These results provide support that Sincerity mediates the relationship between Relationship Quality and Attitude toward Sponsors. Furthermore, when statistically controlling for Sincerity, the direct path from Relationship Quality to Attitude toward Sponsor was not significant (standardized \( \gamma = -.12 \)); this indicates full mediation. More precisely, the mediation effect accounted for 84% of variance of Attitude toward Sponsor as explained by Relationship Quality. In a similar manner, the direct path from Sincerity to Attitude toward Sponsor was positive and significant (standardized \( \gamma = .50 \)) and the direct path from Attitude toward Sponsor to Purchase Intention was also positive and significant (standardized \( \beta = .50 \)). An indirect path from Sincerity through Attitude toward Sponsor to Purchase Intention was significant (standardized \( \gamma = .25 \)). This finding provides support for Attitude mediating the relationship between Sincerity and Purchase Intention. Even so, when statistically controlling for Attitude toward Sponsor, the direct path from Sincerity to Purchase Intention was also found to be positive and significant (standardized \( \gamma = .23 \)). This finding indicates partial mediation. Specifically, the mediation effect accounted for 54% of variance of Attitude toward Sponsor explained by Relationship Quality. Finally, the direct path from Relationship Quality to Purchase Intention was positive and significant (standardized \( \gamma = .16 \)) and explained approximately 3% of Purchase Intention variance.

The results indicate that positive attitudes toward a sponsor and intention to purchase sponsor’s product(s) are more likely to occur among the customers who perceive a higher degree of relationship quality with the sport property and believe the sponsor motives are sincere. These findings provide empirical support as previous research found that a consumer’s perception of a sponsor’s product plays a major role in explaining sponsorship outcomes (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Extant research has suggested that the psychological association between sport consumers and a sport property, which was typically assessed through identification, had a positive impact on the sponsorship outcomes. These outcomes included sponsor recognition, attitude toward sponsor, sponsor patronage, and satisfaction with sponsors (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). These findings further expand the understanding of the link between a sport consumers’ psychological connection with a sport property and the sponsorship outcomes. This expansion was made possible through identifying sincerity as a mediator intervening between relationship quality and attitude toward sponsor, which are two important components in understanding sponsorship effectiveness. The significant contributions of this study are two-fold. One significant contribution lies in establishing the importance of relationship quality for a successful sponsorship. Next, this study provides a theoretical explanation about how business-to-consumer relationship quality influences the expected outcomes associated with a business-to-business relationship. Nonetheless, the model developed and the resulting findings demand further evaluation, replication, extension, application, and development.