Gratitude toward Sponsors: Conceptual Framework and Empirical Examination

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Recently, sponsorship within the participant sport industry has increased. We argue that, in a sponsorship context, the participant sport industry is fundamentally different from the spectator sport industry. The purpose of our study is to provide a framework for participant sport sponsorship that accounts for these differences. Central to our proposed framework is the construct of consumer gratitude.

The traditional objectives of sponsorship investments involve enhancing awareness (Day & Pratt, 1971) and achieving image transfer (Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2007). However, the overwhelming focus of sponsorship spending and research has been restrained to the spectator sport industry, where these objectives are more suitable due to the general prestige and widespread appeal of major league sport (Gwinner, 1997; Meenaghan, 2001). Participant sport, on the other hand, typically penetrates only small niche markets and lacks the prestige associated with spectator sports (Greenwald & Fernandez-Balboa, 1998). Therefore, it is reasonable to conceptualize participant sport sponsorship in a different manner. We argue that participant sport sponsors should approach establishing relationships by inducing consumer gratitude.

Often characterized by low attendance and a strictly local demand, participant sport events regularly rely on sponsorship revenue for a majority of their funding (Miloch & Lambrech, 2006). Therefore, a potential exists for firms to establish consumer gratitude by demonstrating corporate social responsibility (Pope, 2010). Gratitude is considered to occur when consumers believe that the sponsor’s investment benefits the activity (Meenaghan, 2001). However, previous research in various domains has provided robust agreement that gratitude is dependent on the beneficiary’s perceptions of the benefactor (Lane & Anderson, 1976; Meenaghan, 2001; Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968). Based on our review of the literature, we hypothesized that predictors of gratitude would include the perceived intent (H1) and perceived investment of the sponsor (H2), as well as the perceived value of the sponsorship itself (H3).

Positive perceptions of the sponsor are necessary components for establishing gratitude due to the consumer’s affiliation with the sponsored party. However, less involved participants may be differentially impacted by these perceptions, as they are less likely to be influenced by non-functional perceptions of the sponsor (i.e., perceived intent) and more likely to be influenced by functional perceptions of the sponsor (i.e., perceived value). Indeed, previous research has shown that the gratitude is influenced by this notion of “involvement” (Arnett, 1995; Meenaghan, 2001; Sloan, 1989), which Meenaghan defines as “the extent to which consumers identify with, and are motivated by, their engagement and affiliation with particular leisure activities” (p. 106).

Therefore, we hypothesize that the relationship between gratitude and perceived intent will be moderated by involvement, such that more involved consumers will be more influenced by positive perceptions of intent (H4). Conversely, the relationship between gratitude and perceived value is hypothesized to be moderated by involvement, such that less involved consumers will be more influenced by positive perceptions of value (H5). To examine the behavioral outcomes of gratitude, purchase intentions and word-of-mouth intentions were measured. We hypothesized that gratitude would positively impact both behavioral outcomes (H6 and H7). Finally, based on previous research depicting gratitude as a mediating mechanism of exchange relationships, we hypothesized that gratitude would mediate the relationship between perceptions of the sponsor and consumer behavior (H7; Okamoto & Robinson, 1997).

Members from a national triathlon organization were sampled. An invitation to an online questionnaire was posted on the homepage of the triathlon organization and the posting remained available for two weeks. A total of 439 persons clicked the link and 291 completed the survey. We adapted and modified multiple items (3 items each) to measure Gratitude (Palmatier et al., 2009), Intent (Tesser, Gatewood, & Driver, 1968), Value (Tsang, 2006), Investment (Schlosser, White, & Lloyd, 2006), Involvement (Kyle et al., 2007), word of mouth (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman, 1996), and purchase intention (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). We used generic items rather than sponsor-specific items. At the beginning of the questionnaire, we included an item asking the participants to choose one of the listed firms sponsoring the sport organization and to rate their perceptions toward the chosen sponsor.

To assess the psychometric properties of the scales, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The measurement model fit the data well ($\chi^2/df = 369.75/224 = 1.65$, CFI = .96, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .05, WRMR = 0.85). All reliability
coefficients, factor loadings, and average variance extracted (AVE) were sufficient, demonstrating good convergent validity and reliability (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham, 2006). Additionally, correlations for all pairs of latent factors were significantly different from 1.0, rendering support for discriminant validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

The overall fit measures of the simultaneous equations model indicate good fit of the model to the data ($\chi^2/df = 218.69/120 = 1.65$, CFI = .97, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .05, WRMR = 0.88). We found support for all hypothesized relationships except H3. Investment did not have a significant impact on Gratitude ($\gamma = -.07, p = .46$). Nonetheless, the results indicated that Gratitude fully mediated the impact of Intent and Value on Word of Mouth and Purchase Intention. Overall, the predictors in the hypothesized model collectively explained 50% of the variance in Gratitude, 58% of variance in Word of Mouth, and 50% of the variance in Purchase Intention. Finally, to test for moderation, we assessed the equality of path coefficients across the subgroups. The effect of intent on gratitude is significantly greater for high involvement group than for low involvement group ($\Delta \gamma = .42$). However, the effect of value on gratitude is significantly greater for low involvement group than for high involvement group ($\Delta \gamma = .56$). No significant difference is found in effect of investment between high and low involvement group ($\Delta \gamma = .15$). Our results generally support H4.

The central premise of this research is that the traditional sponsorship approach is inappropriate for the participant sport industry. We believe that the current study provides a framework for effectively sponsoring within this context. Our findings highlight the utility of feelings of gratitude on sponsorship effect as it directly relates to consumers’ purchase and word-of-mouth intentions. In the participant sport setting, our results showed that feelings of gratitude seem to play a pivotal role in making behavioral decisions to support sponsors. Therefore, managers should focus on creating and developing feelings of gratitude toward sponsors.

However, our findings provide further insights that consumers develop feelings of gratitude differently based on their level of involvement toward the sport. While motive was the strongest predictor of gratitude for high involvement group, perceived value was the most important antecedent for low involvement group. Therefore, our results indicate that managers should consider consumers’ involvement as an important factor when planning for sponsorship activation strategies (e.g., publicity, advertising, etc.), to effectively enhance feelings of gratitude. As Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy (2005) contended, one of keys to achieving desired outcome through sponsorship is to develop a favorable and long-lasting association between a sponsor and the sponsored property. Therefore, we suggest different communication strategies at specific consumer segments for the efficacy of fostering feelings of gratitude.

In turn, different approaches should be taken toward a less involved consumer segment. The findings suggested that value perception was the key driver in predicting gratitude among this group. This indicates that less involved consumers are more concerned with the benefit rather than investment or motive, in developing their feelings of gratitude. Therefore, when planning public relations strategies targeting at a more general consumer group, it is recommended to emphasize the value of the sponsorship. For instance, a sponsor would want to create communication messages that illustrate how important and valuable their relationship with a sport entity is. Overall, managers should acknowledge the different process of how gratitude feelings are developed and plan their communication strategies accordingly, for a greater “grateful” return on investment in the participant sport context.