Consumer Attitudes toward Naming Rights Sponsorships in College Athletics

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College sport has been transformed from an amateur activity, similar to the British model of university sport, into a highly rationalized form of commercial entertainment (Sack, 1987). Despite its popularity, college sport overall has struggled as a commercial enterprise. In 2008, only 25 Division I (FBS) athletic programs reported positive net revenues, and the gap between profitable programs and the remaining institutions has continued to grow (Fulks, 2009).

With these economic difficulties in mind, the issue of commercialism has been at the forefront of college athletics since the 19th century, and corporate sponsorship is considered by some to be an especially destructive element to the egalitarian nature of amateurism (McAllister, 1998). The institutions that have embraced the growth of sponsorship in college athletics are also beginning to turn to naming-rights agreements as an additional form of sponsorship revenue. Several Division I (FBS) football programs have secured naming-rights partners for their stadia, including Louisville, Maryland, Minnesota, and Texas Tech (Bentubo, 2007).

While there can be little debate that naming-rights sponsorships can be quite lucrative, many institutions are hesitant to fully explore naming-rights. Institutions may consider corporate names for smaller areas of the facility, such as club or suite levels, but changing the name of the stadium or field is considered by some administrators to be an attack on the tradition of the football program (Bentubo, 2007). Although these concerns for tradition seem warranted, little is known about how fans might actually perceive a change in a stadium name, or how they might change their behaviors if such a sponsorship became a reality at their favorite team’s stadium. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine fans’ attitudes and behavioral intentions related to naming-rights sponsorships in college football.

Previous research indicates that fan attitudes are an important aspect of the decision-making process when it comes to certain fan behavioral intentions, such as attending future games and purchasing team merchandise or sponsors products. In particular, team identification and attitudes toward commercialization have been found to influence these behavioral intentions among fans of college athletics (Madrigal, 2000; Trail, Anderson, & Fink, 2005; Zhang, Won, & Pastore, 2005). Additionally, group norms, venue attachment, and team tradition have been found to affect fans’ behavioral intentions (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Madrigal, 2000); however, it should be noted that many studies on behavioral intentions have overlooked these concepts, so more investigation of these variables is necessary. Hence, this study will amalgamate these constructs that have been examined largely in isolation in previous work.

Data collection for this inquiry is ongoing and will be completed by December 5, 2010. The study is being conducted at a variety of NCAA Division I (FBS) stadiums around the United States. Participants represent a purposive sample of individuals who will be contacted using an intercept survey distribution method at tailgating areas prior to college football games. The survey instrument was adapted from several sources to include the various pertinent constructs related to sponsor purchase and team consumption intentions, which were identified above. The survey also includes items related to team involvement (donations, attendance, etc.) and basic demographic information.

Once data collection is complete, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with an oblique rotation technique (i.e., promax) will be used to segregate the items into the proper dimensions. Since these measures were adapted from a variety of sources, the variable structure should not be assumed based on the literature alone; thus, EFA will be necessary to ensure that the survey items will be grouped with the correct factors in this study. The final number of factors will be decided based on the common criteria outlined by Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), which requires that: (a) eigenvalues are greater than 1.0 for each factor, (b) factor loadings are at least .32, (c) each factor has at least two items, and (d) that the factors are easily interpretable by the researcher. Using the factor structure from the EFA, multiple linear regression will be conducted to examine the connection between sponsor purchase intentions relating to naming-rights sponsorships and the predictor variables listed above. Another multiple linear regression will then examine the connection between team consumption intentions relating to naming-rights sponsorships and the predictor variables. A Bonferroni-adjusted significance level of .025 will be used, as the same independent variables will be used in both regression analyses. Finally, tests of reliability and validity will be examined. Data analysis for this study will be completed by January 5, 2010.

In summary, this study measuring various perceptions of college football fans will fill a void in the literature, as the subject of naming-rights has received very little attention in the realm of college sports research. Also, there has been little attention paid to fans’ attitudes toward commercialization in general, with even less previous work related to naming-rights sponsorships. Thus,
the original perspective being adopted in the current study has the potential to address several gaps in the literature, and act as a basis for future research in these areas. Further, the findings in this study could assist athletic administrators in developing sponsorship plans that maximize sponsorship revenue in a manner that is acceptable to various important stakeholders.