Rugby World Cup 2011: Sponsor Memorization

Michael Naylor, Auckland University of Technology
Geoff Dickson, Auckland University of Technology
Sean Phelps, Auckland University of Technology
David P. Hedlund, The Florida State University

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The Rugby World Cup (RWC) is the self-proclaimed third-largest sporting event in the world (International Rugby Board, 2011). Well before the 2011 event, sponsorship agreements involving numerous multi-national organizations were forged. The impact of sport sponsorship on consumers is still not clear (Breuer & Rumpf, 2011) and evaluating it should be in the interest of both sport marketing scholars and practitioners. Seven of the official RWC 2011 partnering organisations and the industries in which they operate are the focus of this research: Emirates (airline), Heineken (beer), ANZ (bank), Land Rover (automobile), Toshiba (electronics), Canterbury (sportswear) and KPMG (tax services). The primary purpose of this study is to assess the impact of sponsors’ involvement in RWC 2011 on the memory of consumers. This is done by assessing sponsor memorization using three disparate techniques in an experimental design: unaided recall, text-aided recognition and logo-aided recognition. A second, complimentary purpose of the study is to compare event-related behavioral and attitudinal data of university students studying in sport related programs to data of those studying in non-sport related programs.

Many organizations sponsor sport events to positively affect brand awareness (Meenaghan, 1991). Brand awareness “is related to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory, as reflected by consumers’ ability to identify the brand under different conditions” (Keller, 1993, p. 3). Consumers can be asked to identify who the sponsors were of a given event (cf. Pham & Johar, 1997) in order to assess a sponsor’s impact on their memory. Memorization, in turn, is believed to impact several downstream marketing objectives (Breuer & Rumpf, 2011). A consumer’s ability to identify sponsors in the context of sport events such as the RWC can be measured through consumer recall and recognition. Correct brand recall indicates that consumers have retrieved the brand from memory when given a relevant cue such as the product category (Keller, 1993). As in similar studies, brand recall is referred to as “unaided recall” in the current study (cf. Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001). Sponsor recognition is a consumer’s ability to confirm prior exposure when prompted with a cue or aid such as the name or logo of the organization. Both text and logos are used in the current research to aid the consumer recognition process.

New Zealanders’ ability to correctly recall and recognise sponsors of RWC 2011 is of considerable interest to a variety of the event’s stakeholders including organizers, sponsors and government officials. The current project also adds to the general body of sport management research as it relates to sponsorship and major, international sporting events. More specifically the project represents an initial foray into better understanding the specific impact of mega-event sponsorships on the domestic markets of New Zealand. In this case, the young adult market (age 18-23) is the focus. Consumers of typical university age are targeted by several of the RWC sponsors so therefore the inquiry is warranted.

Although often criticized for it, one of the realities facing sport management and marketing scholars is the use of convenience sampling schemes involving students enrolled in sport-related course of study (cf. Sears, 1986). The concern is that sport students are not representative of larger populations, particularly in regard to sport-related perceptions. As part of the current study, the data of sport and non-sport students are compared in an effort to learn more about the appropriateness of generalizing the perceptions of sport students to a wider population of students. Generalizing results to a wider population of students or worse to a wider population encompassing larger segments of society is risky (Anderson, 2001; Baumgartner, Strong & Hensely, 2002). To our knowledge, comparing these types of samples in the context of sport sponsorship research has not been previously reported. Therefore the results contribute to the debate on the suitability of student samples in sport management and sport marketing research. Further justifying our use of a student sample is that it is considered appropriate for exploring internal validity and testing hypotheses through experimental designs (Kam, Wilking, & Zechmeister, 2007).
University students (n = 603) completed paper-and-pencil questionnaires during the tournament's last week in what can be characterized as a post-test only, experimental design. Almost half (n = 287) of the students were enrolled in a sport focused program, while the remainder were enrolled in a non-sport program (n = 316). Distinct questionnaires were randomly administered to three equivalent groups (i.e., 1 control and 2 treatment groups). Group 1 (control group) completed unaided sponsor recall questionnaire items which required them to write the name of the sponsor within each of the seven categories. Group 2 completed text-aided sponsor recognition items. Participants were asked to circle the name of the correct sponsor (i.e., Heineken) from a list of category competitors (i.e., Steinlager, Speights, Tui and Carlsberg). Group 3 completed logo-aided sponsor recognition items. Participants were asked to circle the name of the correct sponsor (i.e., Emirates) from a group of logos representing category competitors (i.e., British Airways, Air New Zealand, Qantas Airlines and Virgin Airways logos). For the text-aided and logo-aided questions, category competitors included domestic and international organizations. In addition to demographic questions, all respondents completed identical items measuring their interest, importance, enjoyment, match attendance and television consumption of RWC 2011.

The percentage of the full sample that correctly identified the RWC sponsor in each category varied considerably: Heineken, (80%), ANZ (68%), Emirates (34%), KPMG (20%), Land Rover (19%), Canterbury (12%) and Toshiba (8%). Heineken has been a RWC sponsor since 1995 while Canterbury and Land Rover were two new sponsors for the 2011 event. So, the results appear to support the notion that sponsoring a sporting event over multiple occurrences may increase effectiveness. The low identification percentage noted for returning sponsor Toshiba may be a function of poor leveraging, as it appears anecdotally appeared that other RWC sponsorships were leveraged more aggressively.

The next stage of the analyses explored differences in consumer's ability to identify sponsors attributable to the recall or recognition treatments. One noteworthy finding here was that for 2011 RWC newcomer KPMG, a significant chi-square test (X2 = 244.9, df = 14, p < .01) revealed that a higher than expected percentage of respondents were able to correctly identify the organization as a sponsor in the logo-aided group than the others. This suggests that logos might be presented by new sponsors in leveraging activities whenever possible.

The comparison of event-related behavioral and attitudinal measures of university students studying sport related programs from non-sport related programs also yielded some interesting findings. For example, statistically significant differences emerged between the sport (M = 21.6, SD = 15.2) and non-sport student sample (M = 14.0, SD = 14.0) on RWC match television viewing; t(597), p < .01. Similarly, the sport (M = 5.0, SD = 1.7) and non-sport student samples (M = 4.2, SD = 1.9) also differed significantly on the personal importance they placed on RWC 2011; t(601), p < .01. In both cases Cohen's d effect sizes were in the moderate range. Results such as these question the veracity of attempts by sport management scholars to generalize the behaviors and attitudes of sport students to the wider university student population, let alone the general population.