Tapping into Feelings of Gratitude: A New Approach in Understanding How Sponsorship Works

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With the current economic climate and the heavy reliance on sponsorship revenue by many sport properties, understanding how to make sponsorship practices more effective and efficient is important for sponsors as well as sport organizations. In order to develop and maintain healthy sponsorship relationships, it is essential that exchange partners provide tangible and intangible benefits in return for partner investments (Palmatier, 2008). It is easy to see how the sponsored property benefits from a sponsor-sponsee relationship. Sport properties receive financial, media, and in-kind resources from sponsors. However, the benefits of sponsorship for the sponsor are often not easily grasped. Therefore, better knowledge of sponsorship effects on sponsor outcomes is needed to develop mutually beneficial sponsorship packages. Sponsorship research has evolved considerably over the past decade. Researchers studying the effects of sponsorship have discussed various mechanisms to explain sport sponsorship effect: mere exposure, matching/congruence, low-level processing, reactivation, balance/image transfer, identification, classical conditioning, heuristic, and attribution theory (Cornwell, 2005). However, there has been limited research examining gratitude in sponsorship context. Gratitude can be defined as the cognitive and affective appreciation for benefits received (Emmons, 2004). Gratitude has rich theoretical history within the psychology literature and it is a critical construct for understanding human relationships (Ames, Flynn, & Weber, 2004). Recently, researchers emphasized the significant role of gratitude in consumer behavior context as well (Palmitier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, & Kardes, 2009). Gratitude is a powerful force that motivates a grateful beneficiary (consumer) to react positively to the benefactor (sponsor) because feelings of gratitude generate an ingrained psychological pressure to return the benefit received (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2005). Previous research suggests that an aspect of sponsorship that is differentiated from traditional advertising is the theoretical outcome of gratitude (Meenaghan, 2001). Specifically, sponsorship, when properly conveyed, engenders consumer responses unavailable from traditional advertising. However, there is scant research examining the nature and the role of gratitude within a sponsorship context. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to develop and test a framework to better understand the nature and the role of gratitude within a sponsorship context. More specifically, we empirically examine the influence of perceived value and investment on consumer’s gratitude toward sponsor in experimental setting.

Value is defined as the perceived importance of the sponsor to the event/organization. Many sport organizations heavily rely upon sponsorship revenue and it is intuitive that the value consumers attribute to a sponsorship influences feelings of gratitude. Robust support exists for this determinant of gratitude within the psychology literature. Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver (1968) examine the role of perceived value and report that more valued sponsorships receive greater gratitude. Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988) offer further support, noting that only the perceived intended value (as opposed to the perceived actual value) leads to gratitude. Similar to value, perceived investment is also shown to be strongly associated with gratitude. The term “investment” can be likened to the sponsor's imposition or sacrifice. Okamoto and Robinson (1997) demonstrate this in a naturalistic study involving participants’ reactions to the common gesture of a stranger holding open a door upon entering a building. After asking participants to rate the degree of imposition they perceive that a door-holder endures, Okamoto and Robinson find a strong relationship between perceived investment and feelings of gratitude. Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) demonstrate that the amount of money spent on gifts influences feelings of gratitude. Goei and Boster (2005) use an experimental approach to also support this hypothesized relationship. The discussed relationships between the perceptions of the sponsor and feelings of gratitude are very intuitive. As the perceptions become more positive (i.e., good value, large investment) gratitude increases. This desirable outcome is considered to occur when an individual perceives that someone has given them a valued benefit and the benefit is considered costly to the benefactor.

Two experimental studies were conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. Consistent with existing sponsorship
literature, the current study utilized fictitious press release articles to manipulate Value (high/low; Study 1) and Investment (high/low; Study 2) variables. In both studies, convenience sampling method was used and participants were recruited from a large Midwestern university. Four trained research assistants approached undergraduate students at various locations (e.g., dining halls) on campus and collected the data. Participants who agreed to participate in the study were randomly assigned to receive one treatment article and filled out the questionnaires. Multi-item scales were utilized for this study to measure value (Tsang, 2006), investment, (Schlosser et al., 2006), gratitude (Palmaiter et al., 2009), and identification (Robinson & Trail, 2005). Each session lasted for about 5-7 minutes.

Study 1 focused on the effect of Value on gratitude. Participants (N = 60) received one of two press release articles (high value scenario or low value scenario). Manipulation check showed that participants in the high value scenario (M = 5.76, SD = 1.03) rated the sponsor's effort to be more valuable than respondents in the low value scenario (M = 5.11, SD = 1.03), indicating that the value variable was successfully manipulated in the article (p < .05). An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of value on feelings of gratitude controlling for identification. Results showed that value had a significant effect on feelings of gratitude toward the sponsor [F (1, 59) = 3.87, p < .05, η² = .06]. The covariate (identification) was not statistically significant (p = .19). The same procedure from Study 1 was applied in Study 2, to investigate the effect of Investment on gratitude. Participants (N = 60) received one of two press release articles (high investment scenario or low investment scenario) and completed the survey. Manipulation check showed that participants in the high investment scenario (M = 5.47, SD = .86) rated the sponsor's investment to be greater than respondents in the low investment scenario (M = 4.89, SD = .86) (p < .05). However, ANCOVA results showed that Investment did not have a significant effect on evoking feelings of gratitude toward the sponsor [F (1, 59) = .19, p = .66]. The covariate (identification) was not statistically significant (p = .96).

Findings from this study will provide a conceptual and empirical basis for both sponsors and sport properties to better understand how sponsorship works as well as how to effectively achieve marketing communication objectives through sponsorship. First, the current study advances the body of sponsorship literature by providing new insights into the application of a gratitude framework. Sport sponsorship research overlooking gratitude and focusing solely on image transfer may undervalue the critical outcome of sponsorship investments and may fail to provide a sufficient account of sponsorship effectiveness. A second significant contribution of this research is the identification and empirical validation of determinants of gratitude toward sponsors. This study is among the first to provide insight into the factors determining the beneficiary's gratitude toward a benefactor in a sponsorship context, and the knowledge of the determinants obtained from this study helps sponsors understand how to achieve sponsorship objectives by leveraging gratitude.