Conceptualizing Gratitude in Sport Sponsorship

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Abstract 2012-282
Saturday, May 26, 2012
11:55 AM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (Salon A)

As Meenaghan (2001) noted, a tremendous amount is known about the financial impact of sponsorship, but few researchers have examined sponsorship and the relationship with the consumer. He conceived goodwill to be a key factor in separating sponsorship from advertising. He defined goodwill as being, “generated by factors such as the perception of benefit, the subtlety of the message, and the disguised commercial intent of the communication” (p. 101). Whereas sponsorship is beneficial for the participants, advertising is done solely for the company and is inherently selfish. Additionally, sponsorship should be subtle, disguised, and raise a low state of alertness to its actual presence. Meenaghan’s research continues to be influential in sport sponsorship literature today, yet his discussion of goodwill was rudimentary. Goodwill is an important aspect of gratitude (Walker, 1980). Gratitude is a critical construct for understanding human relationships and it has rich theoretical history within the consumer behavior literature. Therefore, we attempt to build upon Meenaghan’s utilization of goodwill by interchanging goodwill with gratitude (Kim, Smith, & James, 2010). Meenaghan’s explanations of possible factors which may influence goodwill towards a sponsor do not encompass the established theoretical literature on gratitude and at times contradict recognized knowledge regarding gratitude. If gratitude indeed separates sponsorship from advertising, it is important to measure gratitude correctly. In order to establish long-term, lasting relationships with consumers, further understanding of gratitude is paramount.

Kim et al. (2010) examined the sparsely researched area of gratitude in participant sports. In this relationship, Kim and colleagues conceptualized the antecedents of gratitude as perceived intent, perceived value, and perceived investment would lead to gratitude which would then lead to purchase intention. The research conducted by Kim and colleagues supported their conceptualization that gratitude mediated the relationship between perceived intent, perceived value, and perceived investment and purchase intention in the spectator sport context. However, Kim et al. did not appropriately consider all antecedents, moderators, and outcomes of gratitude. The authors did not consider the conceptual separation between positive emotions and negative emotions (Tsang, 2006), the conceptual difference between gratitude of caring and gratitude of exchange (Buck, 2004), or did they concerned the important antecedent of perceived power balance (McDougall, 1929); thus limiting the comprehensiveness of the model.

Kim et al.’s (2010) choice to utilize purchase intention as an outcome is supported in the literature by Palmatier et al. (2009). Palmatier and colleagues argued that in social relationships people enjoy feelings of reciprocity and cohesiveness. However, this conceptualization is in stark contrast to the Tsang’s (2006) understanding of the difference between positively and negatively valenced emotions such as gratitude and indebtedness. Indebtedness and obligation are negative in nature whereas gratitude is positive in nature. Therefore, it is problematic to treat them interchangeably when discussing a relationship of exchange. This important separation has not been sufficiently addressed in the sport sponsorship context. Additionally, all antecedents and correct outcomes have not been appropriately conceptualized. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to establish a more precise conceptual framework consisting of other important, theoretically based factors which could more precisely examine the effect of team sponsorship on fans feelings of gratitude towards a sponsor.

While significant progress has been made toward understanding the complexities of most human emotions, literature concerning gratitude has been largely underrepresented (Emmons, 2004). Perhaps this can be contributed to the differing viewpoints of gratitude and scant body of scholarly work on gratitude due to the disconcerted nature of gratitude as a virtue or emotion. Furthermore, gratitude is largely accepted as a product of one’s perception of another’s beneficent act and, as Heider (1958) noted, perception can be misleading and fleeting when perceptions are built by pretenses which may quickly be found to be false. Psychologists and marketers have viewed gratitude as a dispositional trait (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002), an emotion similar to thankfulness and goodwill.
(Meenaghan, 2001), a distinct emotion separate from negative emotions such as indebtedness (Tsang, 2006; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek, & Kolts, 2006), a building block for trust (Young, 2006), and a lasting positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2004; Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010). Because the conceptualization of gratitude has differed, it has been problematic for practitioners to operationalize. Likewise, it has been difficult for scholars to appropriately ascertain a model for gratitude in the sport sponsorship context.

This conceptual framework is largely driven by Fredrickson's (2004) assertion that gratitude is a unique positive emotion with the capacity to broaden and build, and Tsang's (2006) development of the separation between gratitude and indebtedness. In her broaden and build theory, Fredrickson detailed how gratitude has the capacity to develop into a long term emotion capable of being utilized as in a conscious repertoire of emotions. While gratitude can be a positive emotion, conversely, indebtedness is a negatively valenced reaction which results in feelings of guilt or obligation (Tsang). This is a valuable distinction when evaluating sponsorship effectiveness and in the decision to sponsor a team or event. Here, as an evaluation of sport sponsorship, gratitude is regarded as a positive emotion unique from indebtedness which can result in long term prosocial emotional benefits such as trust and long-term relationships between sponsor and spectator.

In order for feelings of gratitude to occur, McDougall (1929) believed that one must have a negative self-feeling, "evoked by the sense of the superior power of another ... we must see that he is able to do for us something that we cannot do for ourselves" (pp. 334-335). Buck (2004) declared that two elements which must be present in order for gratitude to formulate are an understanding that one has received benefits and a realization that one’s power is limited. Furthermore, Buck asserted that certain societal norms and expectancies dictate the relationship between the benefactor and feelings of gratitude. Algoe, Gable, and Maisel (2010) conceptualized gratitude as being an emotional response to costly, intentionally provided benefits from another individual. Tsang (2006) perceived gratitude as consisting of four elements, "individuals are more likely to experience gratitude when they receive a favor that is perceived to be (1) valued by the recipient, (2) costly to the benefactor, (3) given by the benefactor with benevolent intentions, and (4) given gratuitously (as contrasted with benefits given due to role-based obligations)" (p. 199). Based on a review of previous literature, here, the exogenous variables of perceived power balance, perceived value, perceived intent, and perceived cost are conceptualized to directly impact gratitude and to indirectly impact trust through gratitude. Moreover, societal norms, expectation, and personality are expected to affect the strength of the relationship between the exogenous and gratitude.

To be effective and develop the long lasting trust essential to long-term relationships (Young, 2006), sponsors should strive to extract feelings of gratitude leading to trust, not immediate reciprocity or purchase intentions. In evaluating the relationship between the team’s fan and the team’s sponsor, it is important to distinguish the context in which the sponsorship is taking place (i.e. participant sport, college sport, or professional sport). Establishing context and correctly relying on previously established theory to drive relationship research could help develop a better understanding of the sponsor-spectator relationship. To appropriately examine the long term effects of gratitude toward a sponsor, a conceptual model examining perceived power balance, value, intent, and cost on trust, fully mediated by gratitude should be instituted.