The Role of Flow in Sponsorship Effectiveness

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When participating in or spectating sport, have you ever felt the absolute concentration or involvement, where one completely immerses in the moment without distractions, letting things happen as it goes, feeling confident and comfortable, and occasionally loosing track of time? This ‘optimal’ experience is called the ‘flow’ in psychological terms (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). It is a common and notable phenomenon in sport (Jackson, 1996; Madrigal, 2006), which could be the cause or the outcome of ideal sporting experience. However, while several studies on flow were conducted in participation or elite sport highlighting flow’s importance in engendering positive emotions and personal growth (Jackson, 1996; Kimiecik & Stein, 1992), the phenomenon is unaddressed in the spectator sport and sponsorship context. Research on flow in these contexts can be beneficial for (1) investigating a salient phenomenon in the sporting experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), (2) shedding light on the engendered positive emotions (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), which leads to the psychological well-being of sport consumers (Cohen & Fredrickson, 2009; Diener, 2009), and (3) uniquely focusing on the positive ‘momentary’ feelings (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975), which better depicts the consumer’s emotions (Kahneman, 1999) and later develops to long-term relationships. In this sense, to better understand the phenomenon and role of flow in the spectator sport and sponsorship context, this research investigates the influence of flow on sponsorship effectiveness and suggests theoretical and practical implications.

According to flow theory, the state of flow epitomizes the intensity of momentary engagement and the positive psychological state during the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1997; Kimiecik & Stein, 1992). Positive emotions such as self-esteem, enjoyment, pleasure, fun, and happiness are effectively engendered through flow, which in turn improves the psychological well-being of the consumers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). The experience of flow is closely related to one’s perceived quality of experience (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989), as the engendered positive emotions are critical for the consumer’s satisfaction and contentment (i.e., the key determinant of experience quality; Fredrickson, 2001; Stavrou, Zervas, Karteroliotis, & Jackson, 2007). The quality of experience is vital in establishing and strengthening the long-term relationship with the consumers (Novak & Hoffman, 2009). Satisfactory experience facilitates positive attitudes and higher behavioral intentions toward the sponsored activity or event (Madrigal, 1995), where this improvement of attitude and intention can be transferred to the sponsors as well (Farrelly & Quester, 2005). Thus, we empirically investigate how experience of flow affects consumer focused sponsorship outcomes by testing moderating effect of flow experience in the relationship between sponsorship exposure and brand equity.

A longitudinal design study was conducted on whether the experience of flow influences the consumer’s attitude and behavioral intention towards the sponsor before and after the sponsorship exposure through a major sport event. Based on Csikszentmihalyi’s conceptualization of flow (1975) as “the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement” (p. 36), the experience of flow was measured with Fisher and Wakefield’s involvement items (1998) modified by expert panels. Attitude (Keller, 1997) and behavioral intention (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003) items were adapted and used. In all cases, participants responded on 7-point Likert-type scales, in which 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 7 “strongly agree”. Among 318 consumers recruited by a professional marketing research company, 238 respondents were selected based on the screening test asking if they could correctly recognize the official sponsor of the event separately from dummy sponsors. Total 209 samples were usable completing the two waves of web-based survey. Item order effect, social desirability bias, potential response bias (Armstrong & Overton 1977; Dooley & Lindner 2003), and common method variance issues (Malhotra, Kim, & Patil 2006) were procedurally and statistically checked indicating no concern in this study.

CFA indicated a good fit of the model ($\chi^2/df = 36.83/32 = 1.15$, CFI = .99, SRMR = .03, RMSEA = .03, WRMR = .45). All factor loadings were significant (p < .001; from .60 to .94). Reliability coefficients (from .84 to
.94), composite reliability (from .98 to .99) and AVE (from .59 to .84) demonstrated good convergent validity and reliability. Discriminant validity was verified through multiple $\chi^2$ difference tests. For the hypothesis test, the influence of sponsorship exposure on brand attitude and behavioral intention was evaluated by simultaneous equations model approach. The overall fit measures indicated good fit of the model to the data ($\text{S-B } \chi^2/\text{df} = 38.33/12 = 3.19$, $\text{CFI} = .99$, $\text{SRMR} = .02$, $\text{RMSEA} = .07$, $\text{WRMR} = 0.35$). Sponsorship exposure did not have significant effect on attitude ($\gamma = .10$, $p = .06$) and behavioral intentions ($\gamma = .07$, $p = .17$), only explaining less than one percent of variance in attitude ($\zeta = .99$) and behavioral intentions ($\zeta = .99$). Latent moderated structural equations (LMS) method was used to test interaction effect of flow experience on the relationship between sponsorship exposure and attitude and behavioral intention. The results showed a latent product term of exposure and flow experience had significant interaction effect on attitude ($\gamma = .31$, S.E. = .11, $z = 2.78$) and behavioral intention ($\gamma = .26$, S.E. = .12, $z = 2.22$).

The significance of this study lies in introducing the concept of flow into sport marketing context by identifying its moderating role in sponsorship effectiveness. Based on the finding, couple of theoretical insights on flow can be offered. First is to view flow as the short-term momentary engagement of the consumer, which accumulate and later develop into long-term engagement. In this sense, flow can be utilized to function as the initiative or facilitator in building stronger connection with the consumers. Second is to understand the frequent occurrence of flow as a characteristic of consumers with strong long-term engagement based on flow’s tendency to emerge more exclusively and repetitively among those with previous flow experience during the specific activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Accordingly, the frequency of flow experience can be considered as a primary indicator of the degree of consumer engagement. Meanwhile, approaching sponsorship through flow is meaningful in bringing the consumer’s positive emotion and psychological well-being (both the key benefits of sport consumption; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997) into academic attention. The authors suggest employing the concept of flow in sponsorship to pursue psychological benefits for the sport consumers, which eventually benefits the sponsor as well by establishing a mutually beneficial long-term relationship. Practically, in terms of how to facilitate flow, the following marketing implications are proposed referring to Csikzentmihalyi’s nine characteristics of suitable settings for flow (i.e., challenge-skill balance, self awareness-action merger, clear goal, immediate feedback, full concentration, feel of comfort and control, free from self-consciousness, time warp, and autotelic experience; 1997): (1) maximizing consumer’s concentration and minimizing distraction through strategic physical layout and program composition, (2) assisting consumers to set an achievable yet exhilarating goal, and (3) encouraging consumer’s to focus on intrinsic achievements rather than extrinsic rewards.