Examining Collegiate Football Fans’ Response to On-Site Sponsorship Activation

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College sports in the United States have changed from an amateur activity to highly commercialized entertainment (Sack, 1987). In 2012-2013 season, 35 NCAA Division I Football Bowl games brought in just under $100 million from their title sponsors (IEG, 2013). Activating sponsorship programs at intercollegiate sport events such as football games is beneficial for corporate sponsors because collegiate sport teams have a large number of loyal fans who could become consumers of sponsors’ brands (Madrigal, 2001). However, few studies have empirically examined the effectiveness of sponsorship activities at collegiate sport events (e.g., Dees et al., 2008), especially in regards to the on-site sponsorship activation.

On-site sponsorship activation can be defined as a marketing activity that leverages sponsorship by interacting with consumers at the sponsored event (Close et al., 2006; Sneath et al., 2005). Walliser (2003) discussed the commonalities of sponsorship with advertising as types of marketing communication tools with similar objectives—enhancing awareness, branding image, and making sales. Therefore, the current study utilized Mackenzie and Lutz’s (1989) structural model of attitude toward advertisement formation to understand the impact of attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation on the attitude toward the sponsor brand. On-site sponsorship activation creates consumers’ emotional response due to its unique characteristic as an “experiential” marketing stimulus (Tsaur, Chiu, & Wang, 2006). Thus, understanding the role of emotion in generating sports consumer response to on-site sponsorship activation outcome is essential. Following previous sponsorship research (e.g., Gwinner, 1997; Speed & Thompson, 2000), this research investigated the influence of the perceived image fit between the sponsor brand and the sponsored event on the consumers’ response to the sponsorship.

The purpose of this study was to understand the factors that influence consumer response during on-site sponsorship activation programs at a collegiate football game. More specifically, this study examined collegiate football fans’ emotional response to on-site sponsors of the football game and its impact on attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation and sponsor brand. The mediating role of image fit and on-site sponsorship activation in the model was also investigated.

Data was collected via an on-site, self-administered survey with spectators and tailgaters of football game at a southeastern university in October 2013 using a convenience sampling method. Though there are several on-site sponsors who provide pre-game sponsor experiences (i.e., interactive games, free giveaways, autographs from collegiate athletes), the current study focused on the consumers’ perceptions and reactions after experiencing the main sponsor’s exhibition site. Because the pre-game sponsorship activation started approximately three hours prior to the game, four interviewers positioned themselves around the main sponsor’s exhibition site from 3:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. and intercepted football fans to ask them to participate in the survey. The interviewers collected 98 usable questionnaires for analysis. The average age of the participants was 34 (SD= 13.97) in a range of 18 to 71 years. Out of 98 respondents, 46.9% were male and 53.1% were female. Most of the respondents (86.5%) were game spectators who would watch the football game after the pre-game tailgating and sponsor experience whereas the rest (13.5%) answered that they would be participating in tailgating but were not watching the game on that day. The sample was much skewed toward fans with high team identification (e.g., 74.2% agreed with the statement, “I consider myself to be a real fan of the football team”). The survey instrument included nine items of emotions, with six items of pleasure and three items of arousal (Bigné et al., 2008); three items of image fit (Till & Busler, 2000); four items of attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation; and five items of attitude toward sponsor brand (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Olney, Holbrook, & Batra, 1991). For each construct, the mean of items was used to create a new single variable for the analysis.

Multiple hierarchical regressions were utilized to investigate the potential drivers of attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation and sponsor brand. The result indicated that attitude toward sponsor brand was predicted by
arousal ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.05$), and attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation ($\beta = 0.60, p < 0.05$) accounted for 57.8% of the variance in the attitude toward sponsor brand (Adjusted R2 = .578). Pleasure and the event-sponsorship activation image fit was not a significant predictor of attitude toward sponsor brand. Attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation was predicted by arousal ($\beta = 0.39, p < 0.05$) and event-sponsorship activation image fit ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.05$), but the influence of pleasure on attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation was not significant. Arousal and event-sponsorship activation image fit explained 29.8% of the variance in the attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation (Adjusted R2 = .298). This result indicated that attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation partially mediated the impact of arousal on attitude toward sponsor brand. The impact of event-sponsorship activation image fit on attitude toward sponsor brand was not significant as that attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation fully mediated the image fit and attitude toward sponsor brand relationship.

This study expands the attitude-toward-an-advertisement (Aad) literature by adopting the Aad-model in the context of “on-site” sport sponsorship activation in a collegiate football game context. The results of the study suggest a mediating role of attitude toward on-site sponsorship activation, which is in line with prior attitudes-toward-the-ad studies that posit that the relationship between the perceptual constructs of ad and brand attitude are mediated by attitudes toward the ad (Mackenzie & Lutz, 1989). The study revealed the important role of arousal (i.e., cheerful, active, surprised) in predicting attitudes toward sponsorship activation and sponsor brand in a collegiate football game context. This can be explained by the notion that on-site sponsorship as a part of the sporting event provides a broad range of emotions to spectators (Newell et al., 2001) but also from the highly identified with the team sample of respondents. Practically, the study gives sports marketers a better understanding of the importance of providing an experience that generates cheerful and active emotional stimuli along with the sponsored event. Sport marketers could expect a more positive attitude toward their sponsorship activation and brand by implementing the findings of this study. More detailed discussions, limitations, and several directions for future study will be provided in the presentation.