#Sponsoring the #FrenchOpen: An Examination of Social Media and Sport Sponsorship

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Sponsorship has been perceived as a strategic partnership between a sport property and sponsor (Meenaghan, McLoughlin, & McCormack, 2013), and companies have embraced sport sponsorship as a differentiator in marketing efforts, capitalizing on the benefits of sponsorship beyond traditional advertising. The popularity of sponsorship as a tool is evidenced by sponsorship spending reaching a record high of $51.1 billion worldwide in 2012 (IEG, 2013), and with spending forecast to surpass $53 billion in 2013 (IEG, 2013). Looking at the benefits of sponsorship beyond traditional advertising, attention should be given to the impact social media may have on sport sponsorship.

Social media represents a new opportunity for consumers to interact during a sporting event, and also an opportunity for sport organizations to examine the way in which these consumers interact (Boyle & Whannel, 2010; Hutchins, 2011). More specifically, through social media sites sport organizations have the opportunity to “observe” consumers as an event takes place, creating an optimal avenue for unobtrusive consumer research. This opportunity extends beyond the sport organization to include various stakeholders such as sponsors. Through assessment of consumer engagement with social media sponsor companies have the opportunity to gauge discussion of the sponsor as a result of and/or in conjunction with the sporting event itself. As scholars and industry professionals continue to endeavor to understand consumer perceptions of sponsorship (see Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005), social media is an additional tool available in striving to meet these ends.

Meenaghan and colleagues (2013) suggested the need for researchers to extend studies of sponsorship in the social media environment, specifically emphasizing the notions of buzz, sentiment, and engagement as measures of sponsorship effectiveness. Sponsor companies and sport entities interested in measuring the return on investment (ROI) of sponsorship endeavors can utilize social media to evaluate the effectiveness of sponsorship campaigns. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine social media users’ discussion of sport sponsorship via the social networking website Twitter in association with the 2013 French Open.

Sponsorship of a sport property may include sponsors at multiple levels, with higher level sponsors paying more (and subsequently receiving more exposure) than lower level sponsors. As social media is quickly becoming an outlet for consumers to converse and react to sport events, one might speculate sponsor level influences the extent to which discussion of sponsors occurs via social media. Despite the prevalence of distinction between sponsor levels, a limited amount of research examining sponsorship effectiveness has been conducted relative to sponsor level. The findings of Wakefield, Becker-Olsen, and Cornwell (2007) support the notion that discussion or mention of French Open sponsors via Twitter may vary based on sponsorship level. Thus, a primary research question in the study was:

RQ1: Does the magnitude of French Open sponsor mentions (via tweet) differ by sponsorship level?

Congruence effects in sponsorship, or what Wakefield et al. (2007) refer to as sponsor relatedness have been examined extensively. Sponsor companies which are perceived as having a good “fit” with or relating to the sport event or team they sponsor are generally perceived more positively by consumers (Johar & Pham, 1999; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Ruth & Simonin, 2003). Rifon et al. (2004) found that sponsor-event congruence led to consumers’ perception of more altruistic motives and greater credibility of the sponsorship, as well as a more positive attitude toward the sponsor. Thus, the authors posed the following research question:

RQ2: Does valence of French Open sponsor mentions vary by functional fit?

The extent to which sponsor-related tweets might vary in terms of positive or negative mention based on functional fit may add to the sponsor-entity congruence effects literature in sport. However, it may be wise to consider the
“relatedness” of the sponsor itself to social media; that is, the degree to which the sponsor is present on social media, and its subsequent influence on sponsor-related tweets during a sport event. Thus, the authors asked:

RQ3: Does a sponsor company’s Twitter presence (i.e., number of followers) relate to the number of sponsorship mentions during the French Open?

The social media platform examined in the study was Twitter, with individual users’ tweets operating as the units of measurement. Tweets were collected via DiscoverText, a text analytics software which allows users to collect and analyze textual information from variety of social media platforms (DiscoverText, 2013). Tweet collection began on the first day of the 2013 French Open and concluded on the final day of competition; tweets including mentions of “French Open” or “#FrenchOpen” were collected.

Tweets were analyzed and coded by the researchers for manifest and latent (i.e., valence) content. To examine whether sponsor-event congruence influenced discussion, two other scholars seasoned in sport sponsorship determined sponsor-event strength-of-fit. Correlation analysis was conducted to gauge valence of French Open sponsor mentions by functional fit as well as a sponsor’s Twitter presence (i.e., number of followers) relative to the number of sponsorship mentions during the French Open. Tests of statistical significance were employed as well to determine the strength of relationship between the variables of interest.

Of the 295,272 tweets collected, 1,138 mentioned at least one French Open sponsor (0.39%). The official main partner did not receive more mentions via tweet than all other partners, however they did receive more mentions via tweet (116) than the average of the official partners (n = 9, M = 86.56) and official suppliers (n = 12, M = 19.92). Nearly all sponsor mentions were positive (89.28%, or 1,016 of the 1,138 sponsor tweets). The authors found a moderate correlation (n = 16, r = 0.39, p = 0.14) between positive tweets and sponsor fit; stronger sponsor-event fit was positively related to positive tweet. The authors found a weak correlation (n = 22, r = 0.28, p = 0.21) between a sponsor’s Twitter followers and the number of mentions via tweet during the French Open.

Following analysis of the collected tweets, the authors critically analyzed a variety of interesting findings, including: lack of sponsor-related French Open tweets; negative social media user discussion of the official main partner; unusually high discussion of one official partner; and the use of social media as a means of innovative promotion. Each of these instances provides direction for future research concerning sport sponsorship and social media.

Conclusion
The primary purpose of the project was to gauge buzz and sentiment in regard to sport sponsorship during the 2013 French Open among social media users. While sport sponsorship spending continues to grow annually, academics and professionals have largely constrained measurement of sponsorship effectiveness to traditional research methods (e.g., survey instrument, focus group). The findings of the exploratory study and subsequent discussion allowed the authors to illustrate the breadth and depth social media may offer as a location for sponsorship research. As social media usage among consumers increases and academics and professionals continue to seek a better understanding of sponsorship effects and implications, future researchers should utilize social media as an avenue to assess sponsorship.