An Investigation of Sponsorship Effects at Charity-Linked Sporting Events: Does Gender Matter?

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Sponsorship is a growing industry that is projected to reach over $55 billion in global investment in 2014 (IEG, 2014). Sport remains the most prominent form of sponsorship while growth is also observed in other areas such as causes, entertainment, and festivals (IEG, 2014; O’Reilly & Beselt, 2013). As the industry matures, various types of sponsorship are beginning to merge (such as sport and cause, art and cause, and sport and festivals) and are effectively blurring the traditional set and understandings of sponsorship classifications.

Given the prominence of sport, early sponsorship research efforts have been mainly grounded in the context of sport (Farrelly, Quester, & Burton, 1997; Quester & Thompson, 2001). Furthermore, sport has traditionally been male-dominated and therefore a significant portion of sponsorship knowledge has been derived through investigations of male sports and male consumers with less consideration for women’s sports or for women as targets of sponsorship efforts (Lough & Irwin, 2001). Over the past decade, increased attention has been devoted to women in the sponsorship industry (Dodds et al., 2014; Sack & Fried, 2001; Shaw & Amis, 2001; Maxwell & Lough, 2009). A synthesis of reviewed literature suggests that this marked shift toward female interests can be attributed to three main influences. The first is that gender is among the most relied upon consumer segmentation variables. Gender (in the context of biological sex) is an objective variable that is sizeable, identifiable and reachable through marketing campaigns (Darley & Smith, 1995; Perreault, McCarthy, Meredith, & Ricker, 2007; Putrevu, 2001). The second factor driving interest in the female market is the increased recognition of the influence of women and the corresponding profit potential of engaging this lucrative female market (Barletta, 2006; John, 2010; Johnson & Learned, 2004). Finally, evidence of fundamental gender differences in consumer behaviour has effectively captured the attention of sponsorship scholars and practitioners who realize the need to adapt marketing strategies to reflect these significant differences (Dodds et al., 2014; Goodrich, 2014; Green & Antoine, 2011; Kempf, Laczniai, & Smith, 2006; Meyers-Levy, 1989; Wajda, Hu, & Cui, 2008).

The purpose of this study was two-fold. First, this research contributed to an understanding of the effects of the emerging area of cause-related sport sponsorship (CRSS) on consumer perceptions and responsiveness in terms of sponsor interest, favourability, and intended use. Second, this investigation examined the potential influence of gender at all stages of the sponsorship process through a comparison of grouped samples that included respondents of spectators of men’s versus women’s hockey, and cancer-cause versus social-cause affiliated events. A proposed framework of consumer processing of CRSS extended earlier findings by Speed and Thompson (2000) and Alay (2008) in highlighting multiple paths of possible influence for both women and men to process sponsorship factors and to respond at the various levels of effect, leading to an investigation of the relationships between five possible predictors of sponsorship response. These included gender, personal involvement (with sport and with cause), gender-support (for women and for men), sponsor-event fit, and perceived sincerity of the sponsor.

Field-level data was collected among spectators of five different charity-linked (women’s and men’s) hockey events across three different Ontario cities. A total of 314 women and 319 men participated in this study. Statistical analyses explored differences between response groups (t-tests) and relationships between constructs (correlation analysis and multiple regression). Findings confirmed the direct and indirect influence of personal involvement, sponsor-event fit, and perceived sincerity of the sponsor on CRSS response. The potential impact of sponsorship at all levels of the hierarchy of effects was also recognized. This study conceptualizes the Diamond of CRSS Goodwill to highlight the expanded platform of consumer engagement offered through these evolved forms of sponsorship. This proposed concept illustrates the interacting effects of goodwill, involvement, and reciprocal return in sponsorships that unite consumers and sponsors with elements of both sport and cause. With regards to gender differences, women expressed significantly greater involvement with social causes than did men. Gender support
was also established as a significant and mediating influence on all levels of female consumer response while men’s sponsorship response was diluted at women’s hockey games. The answer to whether gender matters in CRSS was discovered to be highly contextual and reflective of complex relationships that are not only based on differences but also on equally important similarities between genders.