Show Me the Money: Purchase Behaviors in Sponsorship

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Marketing Saturday, June 4, 2016 20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Abstract 2016-256 9:20 AM (Legacy South 3)

The growth of sport sponsorship has led to an increase in the number of studies measuring sponsorship outcomes in different sport settings. Most studies, however, focus on understanding the factors leading to purchase intentions (e.g., Alexandris, Tsiotsou, & James, 2012; Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013). A more accurate assessment of sponsorship effectiveness would come through measuring actual purchase behaviors (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; O’Reilly & Madill, 2012). When measures of actual behavior were made available in general academic studies, these models often failed in predicting behavior, and typically showed low correlations between attitudinal measures such as intentions and real behavior (Foxall, 2005). The gap, however, remains poorly understood, especially within the sport sponsorship context. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine a sport sponsorship model including gratitude, sponsorship fit, attitude toward the sponsor, purchase intentions, and actual purchases, controlling for household income, household’s decision maker, and education levels of the respondents. Data were collected via longitudinal web surveys conducted with soccer fans from the United States.

Kim, Smith, and James (2010) found that feelings of gratitude significantly predicted consumers’ intent to purchase the benefactor’s products in the U.S., as gratitude is a powerful force that motivates a grateful beneficiary to react positively to the benefactor (Palmatier, Jarvis, Bechkoff, & Kardes, 2009). When fans see sponsors supporting their team, they may buy the sponsors’ products as an extension of gratitude or to repay the sponsor for supporting the team (Parker & Fink, 2010). In addition, the more relevant a brand is to consumers, the more likely they are to purchase that brand (Dees, Bennett, & Ferreira, 2010), as consumer intentions are dependent upon the level of perceived fit between the event and the sponsor (Kim, Lee, Magnusen, & Kim, 2015). Furthermore, sponsorship activity can change consumers’ responses towards a specific organization, resulting in the development of positive attitudes toward the sponsor, which can then lead to consumption of a sponsor’s products (Biscaia et al., 2013). Also, consumers must have an intention to purchase a product or service before the action takes place; therefore, purchase intentions are commonly suggested as an antecedent to actual purchase behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Research also suggests that demographic information such as annual household income, age, household’s decision maker, marital status, education, and race, can predict actual behavior (Armstrong, 1985; Sun & Morwitz, 2010). For example, more educated respondents can provide more accurate purchase behaviors (Sun & Morwitz, 2010). However, academic consideration dedicated to a better understanding of purchase behaviors in the context of sport sponsorship has yet to be conducted (Biscaia et al., 2013; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). The hypotheses specified in the proposed model are:

H1: Gratitude will have a direct positive effect on purchase intentions.
H2: Gratitude will have a direct positive effect on actual purchases.
H3: Sponsorship fit will have a direct positive effect on attitude toward the sponsor.
H4: Sponsorship fit will have a direct positive effect on purchase intentions.
H5: Attitude toward the sponsor will have a direct positive effect on purchase intentions.
H6: Attitude toward the sponsor will have a direct positive effect on actual purchases.
H7: Purchase intentions will have a direct positive effect on actual purchases.

In order to test these hypotheses, a survey was conducted through which participants rated the effectiveness of Chelsea Football Club’s (CFC) jersey sponsorship. In Phase 1 a survey was conducted to examine gratitude, sponsorship fit, attitude toward the sponsor, and purchase intentions. Phase 2 involved a follow-up survey at a later date using the sample from Phase 1, to collect data regarding actual purchases of CFC’s jersey sponsor’s products during the time between Phase 1 and Phase 2. The CFC fans’ email addresses linked the Phase 1 questionnaire with the Phase 2 survey to ensure validity of the research.
the Phase 2 questionnaire. The Phase 1 survey was conducted over 22 weeks, during which time a total of 219 usable questionnaires were returned. The Phase 2 questionnaire was sent directly to the e-mail addresses of the 219 Phase 1 participants in order to collect actual purchase behavior data. In the second phase 120 questionnaires were returned; data from 120 respondents were used in the final analysis.

To assess the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted. The results of the measurement model \( \chi^2(127) = 212.985, p < .001, \chi^2/df=1.677, \text{TLI} = .94, \text{CFI} = .95, \text{RMSEA} = .075 \) provide evidence of an acceptable fit to the data. Next, the researchers utilized structural equation modeling (SEM; Byrne, 2010) to test the hypothesized relationships. The overall assessment of the structural model indicated an acceptable fit to the data \( \chi^2(16) = 17.117, p = .378, \chi^2/df=1.070, \text{TLI} = .99, \text{CFI} = .99, \text{RMSEA} = .024 \). Gratitude had a significant, positive effect on purchase intentions \( (\beta = .19, p = .008) \). Thus, H1 was supported. However, gratitude had a positive effect but not a significant impact on actual purchases \( (\beta = .03, p = .511) \), thus H2 was not confirmed. Sponsorship fit had a significant, positive effect on attitude toward the sponsor \( (\beta = .55, p < .001) \) and on purchase intentions \( (\beta = .20, p = .019) \), which did support H3 and H4. Attitude toward the sponsor had a strong positive effect and a significant impact on purchase intentions \( (\beta = .59, p < .001) \), so H5 was confirmed. Attitude toward the sponsor had a positive effect but not a significant impact on actual purchases \( (\beta = .05, p = .499) \), thus H6 was not confirmed. The purchase intentions variable showed a positive effect but not a significant relationship with actual purchases \( (\beta = .07, p = .232) \), when controlling for household income, household’s decision maker, and education levels, and as such H7 was not confirmed.

The results of a structural equation model provided evidence that the relationships among the analyzed sponsorship outcomes did not have a significant effect on actual purchase behaviors, when controlling for household income, household’s decision maker, and education levels of the respondents. Overall, these empirical results reinforce the view that more sponsorship research is needed to explain not just intentions, but also what can be the ultimate endpoint of sponsorship effectiveness: Actual purchase behavior. The relationship between gratitude and purchase intentions was found to be statistically significant, in line with past research (Kim et al., 2010). However, gratitude was not a predictor of actual purchases, despite previous research recognizing that elevated levels of trust (which are linked to gratitude) can lead to purchase behaviors (e.g., Huff & Kelley, 2005). Moreover, the purchase intentions variable was not a predictor of actual purchases for the jersey sponsor’s products. It has been argued in the general academic literature that behavioral intentions better function as a substitute for attitude, rather than as a predictor of the actual purchase behavior (Söderlund, 2006). In support of this premise, researchers indicated intentions to purchase as a possible source of error in the conclusions of some of the sport academic research (Hickman, 2015; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). Other theoretical and managerial implications of the results will be discussed.