Driving Sponsee Equity in a Sports Context: Concurrent Sponsors’ Collective Responsibility

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Sport sponsorship is both an intensely growing communication platform (Zarantonello & Schmitt 2013), and an increasingly researched academic field of study (Yang & Goldfarb 2015). In this context, research emphasis tends to focus on how sponsorship influences attitudes and behaviors towards a sponsor (Biscaia, et al. 2013). Scant studies have so far considered how people’s behaviors towards sponsees (i.e. likelihood of consuming an event (cf. Ruth & Simonin 2006), also labeled sponsee equity) are affected by sponsorship (Olson 2010). Yet, increasing sponsee equity is important for a number of reasons. For example, operational costs per person could be reduced (Jae Ko et al. 2011), or future sponsorships could be attracted, which in turn allows future sponsees to continue (Witcher et al. 1991; Mazodier et al. 2012).

In addition, much sport sponsorship research examines individual sponsors in isolation from other sponsors of the same sponsee. This ignores the fact that in today’s world, most sponsees have concurrent sponsors (Carrillat et al. 2015). Concurrent sponsorships are an important consideration in sponsorship research; consumers of such sport properties can develop connections between the sponsors (Carrillat et al. 2010), and this can influence people’s evaluations of the sponsee itself (Groza et al. 2012). Yet, sponsorship studies seldom take this into account. A third shortcoming in existing sport sponsorship research concerns the fact that sponsors fall into different categories: those that provide financial resources to the sponsee’s rights holder, and those that provide in-kind benefits such as the use of branded products. It has been suggested that these two forms of sponsorship have different objectives behind them (cf. Carrillat & D’Astous 2012). Thus, it is conceivable that differing objectives may impact upon how consumers interact with, and thus perceive each sponsorship form. In turn, this could lead consumers to perceive both the sponsors and sponsee differently. Despite this possibility, limited research actively distinguishes between sponsorship forms in the same study.

Consequently, the paper’s objective is to investigate how sponsee equity is affected by its concurrent sponsors. More specifically, we examine how people’s concurrent sponsors’ entitativity and authority perceptions impact upon sponsee equity in both financial and in-kind sponsorships. In doing so, we make three key contributions to the sport sponsorship domain. First, we address recent calls in the literature for further understanding into how sponsorship affects sponsee equity (cf. Olson 2010). Second, we examine concurrent sponsorship contexts (Carrillat et al. 2010). In so doing, we use the entitativity concept found in social group impression formation research as per Carrillat et al. (2015). We also utilize other concepts associated with entitativity in social psychology (namely perceived authority, inferences of commission and omission, and perceived collective responsibility) to better understand the mechanisms behind how people’s perceptions of concurrent sponsors affect sponsee equity. Third, we distinguish between two forms of sponsors – those that provide finance for a sporting event but no other resources, and those that provide other resources but no finance.

Conceptual Model

We anchor our conceptual logic in lay social reasoning theory (Heider 1958) and social group impression formation research (Crawford et al. 2002) to develop a conceptual framework of how consumers’ perceptions of concurrent sponsors affects sponsee equity. In so doing, we draw on Lickel et al.’s (2003) study to identify perceived entitativity of concurrent sponsors and perceived authority over the sports event as determinants of sponsee equity, through collective responsibility. The latter is also determined by inferences of omission and commission which act as mediators. Entitativity refers to the degree to which a social aggregate is perceived as a single entity (Hamilton 2007). Perceived authority refers to people’s perceptions of sponsors’ influence on the sponsee (cf. Kahn & Kram 1994). Collective responsibility is when liability for an event is extended beyond those directly responsible (here, beyond a sponsee’s rights holder) (Feinberg 1970). Inference of responsibility by commission is when people (sponsors) are
held responsible for an event if they encourage or benefit from it; inference by omission is when people (sponsors) are held responsible for an event when they could have influenced it (cf. May 1987).

Method

A questionnaire was developed to test the 7 hypotheses via a survey of random UK consumers. Within the questionnaire, a within-subject vignette methodology (also known as a factorial survey experiment) was implemented (see Zeelenberg and Pieters 1999) to enable respondents to distinguish between finance and in-kind forms of sponsorships. This follows recent best practice recommendations (Aguinis & Bradley 2014). All measures were adapted from established literature. For example, entitativity items came from Sani (2005), authority from Vroom (1959), inference by omission and commission from Lickel et al. (2003), collective responsibility from Denson et al. (2006), and sponsee equity from Olson (2010). We also included control variables as per Becker et al. (2015), such as event identification (Stokburger-Sauer et al. 2012), attitude towards the sponsee sponsorship (Simonin & Ruth 1998), and fit between sponsors and sponsee (Speed & Thompson 2000). Sliding scales measured sponsors’ perceived sincerities (anchored at 0%/100%). Analysis was undertaken on 255 completed questionnaires using structural equation modeling (SEM) via Lisrel 8.71. The use of regression/SEM analysis in factorial survey experiments is appropriate, given the focus on relationships between independent and dependent variables (Burt & Albin 1981; Hox et al. 1991; Tobin et al. 2000).

Results

The model was tested for both sponsorship forms. In both cases, confirmatory factor analysis showed acceptable fit indices, with good composite reliability and average variance extracted, and discriminant validity upheld. SEM also showed overall fit indices within acceptable thresholds for both forms. Results obtained indicated all 7 hypotheses are supported at the 5% significance level in both sponsorship contexts. Thus, perceived entitativity and authority are both positively related to inferences of commission and omission; the latter are positively related to collective responsibility, and collective responsibility is positively related to sponsee equity.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

The study suggests opportunities should be created for sponsors to enhance entitativity and authority perceptions so that collective responsibility perceptions can increase. This should benefit the sponsee directly (and sponsors indirectly through goodwill and spillover effects). Creating such opportunities may be difficult given that many sponsee’s rights holders’ cultures are “built on securing rather than managing sponsorships” (Farrelly 2010, p. 329). Concurrent sponsors must also ensure that any benefits they could accrue from increased entitativity (and authority) perceptions are not jeopardized by increased ‘threat’ perceptions that can also occur in entitative contexts (Abelson et al. 1998; Castano et al. 2003). For example, increased entitativity perceptions could lead to increased ‘threat’ perceptions towards the integrity and sanctity of the sponsee, especially if people perceive concurrent sponsors’ influence as being unwarranted (cf. Meenaghan 2001; Crompton 2014). While these results do not suggest this is the case, future research should look at this possibility, including in major/minor sport event and team contexts.