Exploring New Frameworks in Sponsorship Research: Rhetorical History, Subcultures and Institutional Theory

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Recent articles in sponsorship research have noted the need for improved conceptual frameworks and theory backgrounds to improve scholarship in the field of sport management (Meenaghan, 2013; Dowling & Smith, 2016). In response, this work initiates efforts to identify useful theory frameworks to help us better understand sponsorship and make a contribution to the body of knowledge. Specifically, we consider three distinct frames and adapt each for potential future work in sponsorship.

First, we propose that we examine how rhetorical histories (Suddaby, Foster, Quinn-Trank, 2010) are constructed and how this influences sponsorship choices. Rhetorical history is the deliberate construction and use of history to persuade key organizational stakeholders so that the organization can achieve its strategic goals. One key example of rhetorical history can be seen in the areas of corporate heritage and corporate branding. Heritage branding helps us to understand long established brands and how to manage them in the present and future (Santos, Burghausen & Balmer, 2016; Miller & Merrilees, 2015). The nascent nature of this approach to brands necessitates the investigation of sponsorship maintenance and selection through this lens. In the area of sport marketing research on Olympic sponsorship, for example, the study of rhetorical history could allow researchers to understand why and how different historical narrative (e.g., Foster, Coraiola, Suddaby, Krozen and Chandler, 2016) are strategically used to achieve different marketing goals and why each of these historical narratives resonate and persist in the mind of the consumer. Long-time Olympic sponsors like Coca-Cola and VISA are good illustrations of this case. Indeed, Coca-Cola has celebrated its established partnership with the Olympic Games in some of their promotional activity to support the sponsorship.

Second, in building on emerging body of work that includes both sponsorship and sport tourism (e.g., Nadeau, O'Reilly, & Heslop, 2015) and the use of the marketing concept of subcultures of consumption in sport (e.g., Hirschman, Ruvio, & Belk, 2012), we encourage scholars to pay attention to the research area that has interesting potential benefits. While there has been research examining the use of subcultures and sport for topics such as event promotion effectiveness (Green, 2001) and social spending (Xing, Chalip & Green, 2014), there does not appear to be research exploring sponsorship from a subculture perspective. For example, such a framework could allow researchers to explore the notion of place through a subculture lens and to sponsorship actions by sponsors, properties and agencies. In particular, a subculture lens could explain possible differential effects in sport event sponsorship, inform the category exclusivity construction and guide activations at the local level.

Finally, this work proposes the use of neo-institutional theory (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) around isomorphism (Scott, 2001) in persuasion attempts. This proposition conceptually links to the idea of ‘self’ and how sponsorship associations and transfers of images are impacted (Gwinner, 1997). Early discussions of neo-institutional theory focused on the reasons why organizations tended to acquire and adopt similar characteristics. The primary reason was not for technical or financial reasons, but in order to acquire legitimacy in an organizational field. More recently, Dowling and Smith (2016) as well as Edwards, Mason and Washington (2009) draw upon institutional entrepreneurship and the sociology of practice to explain how individuals act agentically to shape their institutional environment. In marketing, a discussion of institutional theory can help extend our understanding of how managers and customers co-construct the marketing environment to help create legitimacy for their product. An examination of the practices of institutional entrepreneurs (e.g., Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006) and the institutional work that...
they engage in can open doors to new understandings about how sponsorship opportunities are identified, created and then acted upon. The outlined research frameworks are hoped to facilitate the production of knowledge that expands the sponsorship scholarship and extends the existing literature on the topic area. The work is in-progress, and a more elaborated version of the paper will be presented at the NASSM conference, if accepted.