Social Issues and Sponsorship: A New Chapter in Sport Management Research

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Purpose
The purpose of this panel discussion is two-fold: A) To examine sporting events as platforms for social activism and the potential effects on corporate sponsors, and B) to promote discourse on future research to address the managerial aspects of sport sponsorship.

Introduction
Since its inception, sport sponsorship research has been rooted in marketing, as sponsorship is a marketing communication strategy (Meenaghan, 2001). The study of sport sponsorship has focused heavily on effectiveness examining consumer response to sponsorship (Carrillat et al., 2015), creating a dearth of research grounded in management theory. Moreover, sport sponsorship scholars have not focused their efforts on examining the sponsoring organization by studying managerial decision-making (Tsuji et al., 2016). Another area where sponsorship has been under-researched is the area of the intersection of sport and social issues. Most sociological sponsorship research has explored cause-related marketing (CRM) or corporate social responsibility (CSR) with a focus on consumer response to sponsorship when companies are affiliated with a good cause (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Trimble & Rifen, 2006). To date, no research has been conducted in sport to explore the outcomes when companies are affiliated with social causes perceived by some to be negative and how to prepare and respond to such outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this panel discussion is to examine sporting events as platforms for social activism and the potential effects on corporate sponsors of sport organizations, and to promote discourse on future research to address the social and managerial aspects of sport sponsorship.

Sporting events are social places and have historically served as platforms for social activism by athletes and others. In 1913, Emily Davison died jumping in front of race horses on the track to promote the cause of women’s suffrage. Muhammad Ali refused to serve in the U.S. Army. Before Colin Kaepernick, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf of the Denver Nuggets bowed his head and closed his eyes during the national anthem to protest tyranny in America (CBS, 2016). Today, major sporting events continue to be used as platforms to promote awareness of important social issues such as race, gender, violence, corruption, and poverty. Most notable have been the national anthem kneel-downs initiated by Colin Kaepernick, protests surrounding domestic violence in the NFL, the relocation of major events out of the state of North Carolina due to HB2, and Brazilian protests/riots during the World Cup and Olympic Games. These situations bring enormous exposure and media attention, often negative, to major sporting events. Meanwhile, corporate sponsors have invested millions of dollars to connect with and oftentimes fund the events, with the expectation that the association will be positive for its brand. Like celebrity endorsements that result in scandal, sporting events surrounded by social activism can cause brand image issues or decreased sponsorship effectiveness for partnering organizations. Unlike the area of athlete endorsement, which has been researched heavily in the sponsorship literature (Carrillat et al., 2014; Lee & Kwak, 2015; Lee et al., 2016), social activism has yet to be addressed, and how corporate sponsors manage their investments in an increasingly complex social world is critically important. Panelists will discuss recent social issues facing major sporting events and the potential impact on official sponsors. Next, they will discuss future research that could be grounded in sociological or management theory to assist sport sponsors in strategy and decision-making.

Literature Review
Congruence theory and match-up hypothesis have been used extensively in sponsorship and athlete endorsement research to examine how sports and sponsors are paired successfully to achieve organizational objectives (Dees,
Bennett, & Ferreira, 2009). Moral reasoning and moral coupling have been applied in studies that examined athlete transgressions and consumer response to sponsorships involving scandals (Lee & Kwak, 2015). Since little, if any, sport sponsorship research has addressed social issues and managerial decision-making in sport sponsorship, the following theories are being proposed for discussion and future research directions in this area.

Sociological Theory
Network Analysis, or Social Network Theory, is the study of social structures of relationships between people, groups, or organizations and how these social networks effect attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors (Katz et al., 2004). Network analysis takes a relational approach to studying behavior. Rather than examining individual responses (like consumer response to sponsorship), network analysis seeks to understand the responses of social networks, to determine how a stimuli effects a larger group of people. Rogers (1986) describes a communication network as consisting of “interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows. A network analysis studies the interpersonal linkages created by the sharing of information in the interpersonal communication structure” (p.14). By exploring these relationships between people, network analysis helps to uncover emergent and informal communication patterns present in social groups, which may then be compared to more formal communication structures (Katz et al., 2004). Corporate sponsors of major sporting events could benefit from understanding the communication patterns of social groups involved in activism in order to better prepare their sponsorship messaging and/or responses to social activism.

Management Theory
Chaos Theory has been used as a framework to assist businesses in managing issues and crises and creating public relations strategies. This theoretical framework could help sport sponsors better understand how to predict and prepare for the effects of social issues on sporting events. One of the most difficult aspects of social activist impacts on sport is the unmanageability of public perceptions. Since protests, riots, and other similar behavior are not typical protocol at sporting events, their presence often becomes uncomfortable or unwelcomed in the arena. The distraction often detracts from fan experiences on-site and spectator viewing at home. In today’s fractured media environment, social media provides a means by which the spectacle can be captured, communicated, and commented on worldwide within minutes. While social situations are not crises per se, they are large-scale, often negative, events that force sport organizers (and even sponsors) to react. Chaos Theory “attempts to understand the behavior of systems that do not unfold in a linearly predictable, conventional, cause-and-effect manner over time….it urges us to reinterpret the universe as being constituted by forces of disorder, diversity, instability, and non-linearity” (Murphy, 1996, p.2).