Sponsoring Women’s Sport Leagues as a Cause: What Signal Does it Send?

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Socio-Cultural - Diversity (Professional Sport)  
Saturday, June 3, 2017  
Poster  
Abstract 2017-357  
Room: Sopris  
1:55 PM

Despite the growing interest and appeal of women’s sport around the globe, Tom Kingsley (Director of Sport and Sponsorship at Ernst & Young) reported “less than 1 percent of sport sponsorship is invested in women’s sport” (Mott, 2015, para. 8). Comments from sport executives at the 2015 Game Changers conference hosted by the SportBusiness Journal might provide some insight into why sponsorship investment is so low. For instance, WNBA President Laurel Ritchie said, “I’m not running a charity here, I’m running a league, and running a business” and suggested that, in the past, the WNBA had positioned the league to partners as “too much of a cause” (Mensheha, 2015, para. 2). Mimi Griffin concurred and suggested that how sport executives sell the product (women’s sports) is as important as what they sell and implored that they ask for “….no handouts. Provide value in your product and ask for support commensurate to the value” (Griffin, 2016, para. 9).

Indeed, past research has shown that sponsors of men’s and women’s sport seek similar objectives such as increased awareness, image transfer, branding opportunities, sales, customer engagement and other return on investment types of benefits (Lough and Irwin, 2001). Announcements of new sponsorship opportunities in men’s leagues typically focus on such benefits. For example, Stubhub recently announced their jersey sponsorship for the Philadelphia 76er's and said, "We’re so tightly associated with the event-going experience that it was natural for us to move aggressively and chase this opportunity (to connect with target market)” (Gelston, 2016). However, recently some companies have positioned their sponsorship of women’s sport as support of a worthy cause, rather than for a financial return on investment (ROI). For example, when explaining Nike’s reason for extending their sponsorship agreement with NWSL (National Women’s Soccer League), Andrea Perez—North American general manager of soccer for Nike—did not mention how the Women’s World Cup final drew 25.4 million viewers, making it the most watched match in U.S. history for men’s or women’s soccer. Instead, she said the partnership “reinforces Nike’s overall leadership in women’s soccer, helping to grow the women’s game beyond where it stands today” (emphasis added, Kennedy, 2015, para. 6). Ritchie and Griffin’s comments mentioned above suggest this type of positioning diminishes the value of the sport product. Thus, when sponsors frame their investment as a way to support or help women’s sport, does this impact perceptions of the sponsored team/league and its athletes? What impact does it have on perceptions of the sponsoring company? This research uses signaling theory and experimental design methods to answer these questions.

Signaling theory (Rynes, 1991; Spence, 1974) provides an explanatory framework to understand why the positioning of a sport sponsorship may influence fans’ perceptions of a sport property and its athletes. According to the theory, people often lack adequate knowledge to make informed decisions about organizations or their products and services. As such, they will draw conclusions based on cues the organization conveys to its stakeholders. In its early years, for instance, Nike used athlete endorsers to indicate to consumers they sold high-quality athletic shoes (Knight, 2016). In a similar vein, sport organizations that partner with prestigious sponsors can communicate the high status of their events to consumers and the media and visa-versa (Fink, 2015). It is also important to note that though these examples illustrate how organizations take deliberate actions to signal the company’s (or products’) underlying quality to others, some actions can send unintentional signals as well.

In the context of women’s sport, a number of scholars have examined how intentional and unintentional cues from the sports media (e.g., lack of women’s sport coverage, verbal and visual gender marking, differential production techniques), sports commentators (e.g., infantilizing female athletes, differential framing of men’s a women’s sports) and sports marketers (e.g., highlighting female athletes’ attractiveness instead of athleticism) influences consumers’ perceptions of women’s sports and female athletes (see Fink, 2014 for a detailed review). This considerable body of research consistently demonstrates that the differential coverage of women’s sport compared to men’s sport serves
to “trivialize, demean, and ignore female athletes’ accomplishments which, subsequently, renders women’s sport less attractive to viewers” (Fink, 2014, p. 336). In fact, some coverage “appears positive at first glance, but actually includes words, phrases, or themes that subtly belittle women” (Eagleman, 2013, p. 4). Similarly, while the sponsorship deals described above are vitally important for the women’s leagues, does the positioning of the sponsorship as merely providing support for women’s sport signal that the league (or its athletes) does not offer an exciting or enjoyable fan experience?

Given the aforementioned literature, we will conduct an experimental study to examine the following research questions. Does the type of sponsorship positioning for women’s sport influence consumers’ perceptions of female athletes and the women’s league? (RQ1) Does the type of sponsorship positioning for women’s sport influence consumers’ perceptions of the sponsoring brand? (RQ2) Does the consumer’s gender influence these perceptions? (RQ3)

Using MTurk, we will survey approximately 300 sport consumers in the United States. We will conduct a 2 x 2 (sponsorship position: cause, return on investment (ROI), consumer gender: male, female) experiment in the study. Participants will be randomly assigned to read one of the two press releases that announces a partnership between the sponsor (Nike) and the professional women’s sports league (NWSL). To manipulate the sponsorship position, participants will read a quote by the sponsor that articulates their reason for investing in the league (support of a worthy cause, or anticipated ROI). Once participants read the press releases, they will respond to items that assess demographic variables and the dependent variables (attitudes toward the sponsor, perceptions of the athletes’ athleticism, perceptions of the league, intentions to attend a NWSL event, intentions to support the sponsor). Prior to reading the press release, we will also ask participants to indicate their pre-manipulation attitudes toward the sponsor, behaviors toward the sponsor, and level of fandom for women’s soccer—these constructs will serve as control variables in the final analysis. We will perform a MANCOVA to examine the research questions with sponsorship position and consumer gender serving as the IVs.

We expect that positioning a sponsorship as a ROI will signal a high level of interest and excitement for women’s sport, which will enhance fans’ perceptions of the league and the athletes’ athleticism. Positioning the sponsorship as a cause may signal the league and its athletes are a charity, and as such, decrease consumers’ perceptions of the league’s and its athletes’ quality. However, attitudes toward the sponsor may increase because consumers perceive the sponsoring brand to be altruistic. In addition, considering women are more likely than men to indicate supporting women’s sport as one reason (of many) they attend women’s sport events (Funk et al., 2003; Ridinger et al., 2006), we expect women will report more positive views of the sponsor in the “cause” condition.

From a practical perspective, these results can improve sponsorship positioning in women’s sport. From a theoretical perspective, this study answers Connelly et al.’s (2011) call for more researchers to examine the effect of unintentional signals, as they may “conflict with intentional signals or be communicating negative information about the signaler” (p. 59). The final poster presentation will expand on the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and suggest areas for future research.