Assessing Collegiate Sport Sponsorship: An International Perspective

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Many potential sport sponsors are so inundated with sponsorship solicitations they are looking for reasons to reject rather than accept these proposals (e.g., JP Morgan; LeFton, 2014). Still, many sport organizations require sponsor support simply to function on a day-to-day basis. Sport organizations face tremendous pressure to seek out and secure sponsorship support (Copeland, Frisby, & McCarville, 1996), which has been described as the ‘financial backbone’ for many sport properties and can be the central element in the image of an event. Within North American society, an unsponsored event is often viewed as second rate and of little significance (Lamont & Dowell, 2007). For many, corporate support is so critical that a number of sport organizations who could not secure sufficient sponsorship funding were forced to cease operations (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). Therefore, it is imperative for sport organizations seeking sponsorship support to have a firm understanding of the corporate objectives companies look to achieve through sport sponsorship.

Yet the vast majority of the sponsorship literature has focused on fans and their perceptions (directly and indirectly) of sponsorship efficacy. Prior research has focused predominantly on surveying fans to determine if a given sponsorship was successful in: increasing fans’ awareness of the sponsor, changing fans’ perceptions about the sponsor, and/or increasing fans’ likeliness to purchase the sponsors goods/services (cf., Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013; Floter, Benekenstein, & Uhrich, 2015; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Hong, 2011). However, findings from these studies do little to help guide sport organizations in their quest to secure corporate support. The greatest limitation to fan-focused sponsorship research is that they omit an understanding of the objectives a sponsor was trying to achieve through a given sponsorship.

Few researchers have sampled sponsors directly to better understand the objectives sponsors aim to achieve when through sport sponsorship (cf., Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2004; Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013; Irwin & Asimakopoulos, 1992; Lough & Irwin, 2001; Lough, Irwin, & Sutton, 2000). Yet, sport organizations would be able to create the most well received sponsorship proposals if they were informed of the objectives sponsors aim to achieve through sponsorship. Finally, none of the sponsor-focused studies investigated the sponsorship relationship at the collegiate level.

Lough et al. (2000) were able to determine that sponsor in the U.S. had placed more importance on tangible sponsorship objectives (e.g., increasing sales/market share) while sponsors of Canadian sport properties placed a greater importance on less tangible objectives (e.g., target market awareness). The literature, albeit small, has indicated that sponsors look to achieve divergent objectives based on the type of sport they sponsor. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to reexamine the the sponsorship lifecycle theory (SLC) (Lough & Irwin, 2001) by investigating the sponsorship objectives importance, the perceived performance, and overall satisfaction of collegiate athletics sponsors at the NCAA DI, DII, and DIII levels as well as within Canada’s U Sports systems. Based on the SLC framework the follow three research questions will guide the current study:

RQ1: Is there a statistically significant difference between the sponsors of NCAA DI, DII, DIII, or U Sports schools on the level of importance placed on each of the 12 sponsorship objectives?

RQ2: Is there a statistically significant difference between the sponsors of NCAA DI, DII, DIII, or U Sports schools on the level of perceived performance on each of the 12 sponsorship objectives after controlling for importance level?
RQ3: After controlling for the level of importance sponsors placed on each objective, what objective’s perceived performance predicts overall sponsor satisfaction for NCAA DI, DII, DIII, and U Sports schools.

Methods
Participants and Data Collection
A formal relationship was created between the research team and USports, Canada’s equivalent to the NCAA, where each of USports 52 members were solicited (athletic directors and/or directors of marketing) for participation in the study. Similarly, personal relationships with several NCAA schools at the DI, DII, and DIII levels were utilized for data collection. The contact at each school was provided with a template email explaining the study and containing a link to the survey and was asked to send this information to each of their corporate partners. Data is currently being collected and will conclude by December 2017.

Measures
The survey instrument includes four distinct sections. First, sponsors will report their overall satisfaction. This four-item measure was adapted from Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsigilis, Karvounis (2013), as the wording of the questions were slightly changed to assess the sponsor’s satisfaction with their decision to sponsor the school. The second section of the survey assesses the level of importance sponsors placed on 12 corporate objectives (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). Next, sponsors assessed how well they deemed the sponsorship achieved each of the 12 objectives. All three of the previously described sections will be measured on a 7 point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The fourth and final section will collect demographic information about the sponsor including their industry, company size, and company scope.

Analytic Strategy
To address RQ1, a MANOVA will be run to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the four levels of schools (NCAA DI, DII, DIII, and U Sports) on the importance sponsors placed on each of the 12 objectives at the p < .05 significance level. Similarly, RQ2 will be assessed via a MANOVA, with the school’s level acting as the independent variable and perceived performance the dependent variable. In an effort to assess RQ3, a new variable will be created by subtracting the importance score each sponsor provided for each of the 12 objectives from the corresponding performance score sponsors’ reported for each objective. These new 12 scores will be included as predictor variables in a multiple regression and the composite overall satisfaction score (mean of the 4-items measuring overall satisfaction) will serve as the outcome variable. A total of four regressions will be run, one for each level of school.

Significance to the Field
Findings from the current study should provide a plethora of benefits: both practically and theoretically. First, the current study fills a gap by illuminating the objectives sponsors deem important within the collegiate landscape as opposed to the typical fan-focused sponsorship strategy. Theoretically, the current work expands the sponsor-focused research by including a measure of overall satisfaction as well as controlling for the level of importance a sponsor placed on each objective when determining a sponsorship’s ability to achieve sponsors’ objectives. For example, it is unfair to state that a sponsorship was a failure because it was unable to increase the sponsors’ sales/market share if the sponsor placed a low level of importance on this objective. Furthermore, in line with NASSM purpose, the current study provides a truly North American approach bridging the gap between U.S. or Canadian concentrated work.