Fan Perceptions of CSR-Link Sponsorship: The Case of Mega Event Sponsor

Yoseph Mambo, Louisiana State University
Kwame Agymang (Advisor), Louisiana State University
Damon Andrew (Advisor), Louisiana State University

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Relevance/significance of the topic to sport management
A primary goal of sponsorship is to generate positive consumer thoughts about the sponsor (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). Sport sponsorship is a powerful marketing technique employed by organizations to build relationships with stakeholders and sustain a competitive advantage (Cornwall, 2008). Recent studies relating to sport sponsorship include the notion that alignment with mega events such as Federation International of Football Association (FIFA) or the Olympics is widely preferable due to the large number of audiences and customers attending these games (Palmer, Quester, & Carolin, 2017). For example, FIFA became one of the prominent sport governing bodies to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by committing a significant share of income to CSR-related programs (Bradish & Cronin, 2009). One of FIFA’s core business plans focuses on various CSR initiatives to build their image through global celebrity power and influence of football stars around the world (FIFA, 2004). Walliser (2003) asserts that the impact of sponsorship to enhance image transfer between sponsors and properties has received much academic attention. While a sport property’s proactive engagement with the community likely results in positive image values as well as wide array of benefits (Plewa et al., 2016), we know little about whether the sponsoring company can bolster a positive image by associating itself with mega events. The purpose of this study was to better understand fans’ perception of the sponsors’ CSR-linked sponsorship activities and the potential implication of such perceptions on fans future behavioral attitudes.

Review of relevant literature
There is a presumption that consumers will respond favorably to organizations for their support of social responsibility initiatives (Levy, 1999). Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) argued that consumers have positive perceptions towards ethical business practices. As such, the notion of CSR has been discussed in the management and marketing literature as a mechanism for fostering positive perceptions. Furthermore, researchers have reported a robust connection between CSR activities and consumers’ future attitudes (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Klein & Dawar, 2004). Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) found proactive social responsibility programs by an organization resulted in improved consumer responses to firms. Research suggests implementation of CSR activities by sponsors plays an important role in establishing their credibility as socially responsible citizens (Plewa & Quester, 2011). When sponsors partner or support a sport property’s attributes, sponsors seek image transfer (Crompton, 2014). Researchers studying the benefit to a sponsor’s image from associating with a particular sport property have reported positive attitudes toward the sponsor (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Harvey et al., 2001). Such findings though, pertain to the association with the sport property in particular, and have not extended to examine the impact for the sponsor from associating with the sport property’s CSR activities. Past studies have explored the relationship between sport properties’ CSR initiatives and customer relations (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Giannoulakis & Drayer, 2009), attitude toward the property (Beren, Riel, & Bruggen, 2005; Sung & Lee, 2016), and building consumer identification with the organization (Pérez, del Mar García de los Salmones, & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). The impact from CSR activity has been studied in relation to the sport property, but not necessarily via a sponsor relationship. The expectation is that there would be a positive impact on a sponsor’s image from associating with a sport property’s CSR activities, but research demonstrating such an effect is lacking. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Fans’ awareness of a sponsor’s CSR-link sponsorship is more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the sponsor.

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H2: Fans who have a positive belief regarding CSR-link sponsorship are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the sponsor.

H3: Fans' attitude toward the sport property is more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the sponsor.

H4: Attitude toward the sponsor will mediate the relationship between fan’s awareness of the sponsors’ CSR-link sponsorship and purchase intentions.

H5: Attitude toward the sponsor will mediate the relationship between fan’s awareness of the sponsors' CSR-link sponsorship and sponsor’s image.

H6: Attitude toward the sponsor will mediate the relationship between belief regarding CSR-link sponsorship and purchase intentions.

H7: Attitude toward the sponsor will mediate the relationship between belief regarding CSR-link sponsorship and sponsor's image.

A total of 366 general sport fans were recruited from 12 countries through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Turkprime). Speed and Thompson (2000) claim that the use of a real company name in sponsorship research is likely to bias results due to the previous knowledge about the association between a sponsor and a sponsored property. As such, a fictitious sponsor was used in an attempt to control individual’s dispositional attitudes, which may alter one’s perception toward a sponsor. Participants were presented information about the sponsoring brand and its involvement in sponsorship and CSR activities. In order to measure participants’ unaided awareness about the sponsor CSR-link sponsorship activities, respondents had to identify both the sponsor name and the property before being automatically redirect to the next survey (Zaharia, Biscaia, Gray, & Stotlar, 2016). Items were adapted from previous sport sponsorship contexts measured five constructs: attitude toward the sponsor (Mackenzi & Lutz, 1989), sponsor image (Gladden & Funk, 2002), attitude toward the sport property (Gladden & Funk, 2002), beliefs about sponsorship (Alexandris et al., 2007), and purchase intentions (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). The analyses were conducted with R 3.3.2 version.

A confirmatory factor analysis achieved an acceptable fit for data based on the selected approximation fit indices ($\chi^2$/df = 272.497/121 = 2.252, CFI = .953, TLI = .941; RMSEA = .064). All measurements showed adequate AVE scores (> .50; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, all factor loadings ranged from .610 to .941 and were all significant (p < .001). After CFA was conducted, the structural equation model (SEM) analysis were applied to test the proposed hypotheses. The results indicated a good fit of the research model to data ($\chi^2$/df = 240.355/110 = 2.185, CFI = .959, TLI = .950; RMSEA = .063). Finally, none of the correlations between constructs was greater than .85, providing evidence of discriminant validity (Kline, 2005). Based on the significance of the path coefficients, hypothesis H2, H3, H5, H6, and H7 were supported (p < .05). However, fans’ awareness of sponsors’ CSR-link sponsorship was not a significant predictor of attitude toward the sponsor ($\beta$ = 0.04, p = .065).

Discussion/Contributions/Conclusions

Our discussion, currently in progress, has provided some initial evidence to support belief regarding to CSR-link sponsorship can positively impacted attitude toward the sponsor. More specifically, CSR-link sponsorship by the sponsor would positively influence consumers’ behavioral intentions such as purchase intentions and positive attitude toward the sponsor image. More theoretical implications, managerial strategies, limitations, and future research will be discussed at the presentation.