Effects of Emotional Connections to a Team’s Tradition and Stadium on Naming-Rights Outcomes

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Naming-rights sponsorships have been well-established in professional sports since the early 1990’s, but have been less quickly adopted by college athletic departments. However, recent agreements (since 2015) at the University of Washington, University of Kentucky, and University of Southern California indicate a potential shift to more lucrative agreements (Eddy, 2017) than those of the last decade at the University of Louisville and University of Minnesota (Kunnath, 2013). Despite this recent flurry of activity in the naming rights market, as well as the increased focus on revenue generation in college sport, only a relatively small number of NCAA Division I institutions have come to agreements with naming-rights sponsors for football stadia (Popp, Eddy, & McEvoy, 2015). Until 2014, football stadiums were fetching lower prices for naming-rights agreements than arenas - this was due, in part, to sponsors being more willing to pay more for facilities with multiple tenants (Popp, DeSchriver, McEvoy, & Diehl, 2016).

A key underlying issue is that institutions are concerned about the effect a corporately-named football stadium will have on stakeholders, and whether this commercialization would be considered an attack on tradition (Bentubo, 2007). Thus, it is possible that more schools could be interested in naming rights, but market rates have not sufficient to outweigh the perceived risk of alienating their fan base. Fans’ attitudes toward naming rights relative to their perceptions of tradition and their attachment to college football stadiums have received some attention in the literature, but are still not well understood (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Eddy, 2014).

The broad purpose of the study is to advance the literature focused on the efficacy of naming-rights sponsorships, particularly in college football, which has only recently begun to gain traction as a pertinent area of research. Specifically, the study will focus on fans’ attitudes toward naming rights relative to their perceptions of tradition and their attachment to college football stadiums. Further, as opposed to the hypothetical scenarios common in college sport naming-rights research (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Eddy, 2014; Reysen, Snider, & Branscombe, 2012), this study will focus on fans of teams that play in corporately named stadia.

While constructs such as team identification and attitudes toward sponsorship have received regular attention in the sponsorship literature, work on fans’ perceptions toward tradition, team history, and stadiums has been more scattered (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Walraven, Koning, & van Bottenburg, 2012). Eddy (2014) and Woisetschlager et al. (2014) were among the few to investigate how fans’ sense of tradition affects their attitudes toward corporate stadium names. They found that fans who felt more strongly about their team’s sense of tradition indicated more negative feelings toward naming-rights sponsorships. In the more general consumer behavior literature, Boyle and Magnusson (2007) found that positive feelings toward a team’s history and venue contributed positively to fans’ social identity.

Several studies on college naming-rights have also included some (often indirect) element of stadium attachment (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Delia, 2014; Eddy, 2014). They loosely agree that there seems to be an inverse relationship between stadium attachment and attitudes toward naming-rights, but that more research on this proposition is also needed (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Eddy, 2014). Place attachment, the emotional connection that people have toward a physical location (Charleston, 2009), may be a useful construct for this task. Lee, Lee, Seo, and Green (2012) noted that stronger place attachment (operationalized as a sense of home) increased fans’ satisfaction with the stadium experience. Another factor which has gone unexamined vis-à-vis college naming-rights is the attachment that fans have toward the university itself (Kwon, Trail, & Anderson, 2005). Stadiums often act as important landmarks for the university, so it is plausible that attachment to the university could affect how naming-rights sponsorships are
processed. Based on these findings, two research questions will guide the study:

RQ1: What are the effects of attachment to the university, sense of home, and team history, mediated by team identification, on attitudes toward the sponsor?

RQ2: What are the effects of attachment to the university, sense of home, and team history, mediated by team identification, on sponsor behavioral intentions?

Data collection will take place following the 2017 college football season through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is an online marketplace where researchers can recruit paid workers to complete “Human Intelligence Tasks.” The research team will hire workers who are college football fans to complete an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. MTurk has been used to study numerous topics including risk taking, human networking, and daily fantasy football participation (Dwyer & Weiner, 2017; Eriksson & Simpson, 2010; Suri & Watts, 2011). Since college sport fandom is ubiquitous and much fan-to-fan interaction occurs online (Clavio, 2008; 2011), online solicitation through MTurk was deemed acceptable to reach an appropriate sample. The platform has also been found to provide valid and reliable results, especially when targeting diverse populations (Casler, Biekel, & Hackett, 2013). Geographical limitations, minimum worker approval ratings, and IP protocol limiters will be utilized to ensure data quality (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Potential respondents will also be offered $.50 (USD) to complete the survey.

The survey items for the instrument (30 total items) are adapted from past measures of attachment to the university (Kwon et al., 2005), sense of home (Lee et al., 2012), team history (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007), team identification (Woisetschlager et al., 2014), attitudes toward the sponsor (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012), and sponsor behavioral intentions (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012). Demographics will also be collected, and attention checks will be used to identify inattentive respondents and improve data quality (Peer, Vosgerau, & Acquisti, 2014).

Since the measures are being adapted from reliable scales in the literature, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) will be used to assess the structure and fit of the items within their latent factors. Internal consistency will be assessed by examining Cronbach’s alpha scores, and average variance extracted (AVE) scores will be used to establish convergent and discriminant validity. Once an appropriate factor structure has been confirmed, structural equation modelling (SEM) will be used to test the proposed model. Since there are a number of direct/indirect effects to be examined, and team identification is expected to act as a mediator, SEM was deemed the appropriate method of analysis.

The findings in this study will be important theoretically, as the study will add to the sparse literature on the role of history and the stadium as points of attachment for college football fans, particularly in relation to sponsorship outcomes. From an industry standpoint, it is expected that the results of this study will help practitioners better understand how fans connect with their favorite teams and stadiums, and their subsequent responses to naming-rights agreements. Additionally, the study will provide more evidence that college athletic administrators can use in evaluating the feasibility of future naming opportunities.