New Jerseys: The Impact of Professional Sport Jersey Sponsors on Teams and Sponsors

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Having long been present in professional soccer leagues across the globe, Major League Soccer (MLS) and the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA) began allowing jersey sponsorships within the last 12 years (Allen, 2014; Fox Sports, 2016). This year, jersey sponsorships extended to the highest-profile North American sport league to date – the National Basketball Association (NBA). This gives organizations an opportunity to place their name in perhaps the most visible space offered in the sport setting, something that signage and even facility naming rights cannot provide.

As of November 2017, 14 organizations had taken advantage of this opportunity with the NBA (Mahoney, 2016). Interestingly, a review of these 14 organizations exhibits two distinguishing factors: organization type and location. While nationally-known organizations in the sectors of transportation, finance, and retail dominate much of the sponsorship space among major professional sports, NBA jersey sponsors include a non-profit organization, two food brands, and a fitness technology company. Furthermore, 11 of the 14 sponsoring organizations are headquartered in the home state of their sponsoring team. These include Blue Diamond’s sponsorship of the Sacramento Kings and the Milwaukee Bucks sporting a Harley Davidson logo. Thus, on face, it appears the focus of these sponsorships is on local organizations that operate in a wide variety of sectors, but appear to fit with the team.

Overall, fit has been frequently measured in sport as a determinant of sponsorship outcomes (Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006). However, authenticity has been more recently explored as a better predictor of consumer attitudes toward the sponsorship brand (Cornwall & Charlton, 2015). For instance, Shoffner and Koo (2017) revealed that authenticity can be used to explain differences in fit and should be evaluated instead of fit to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of sponsorship partnerships. Previous literature has also found a positive relationship between brands’ authenticity and their local identification (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008; Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer, & Technische, 2012). The focus on regional identity is something that has become especially popular in recent years. The increased mobility in North America over the past half century has resulted in “neolocalism,” individuals’ desire to experience things close to home. This has resulted in a heightened focus on local goods and services and has also contributed to the popularity of microbreweries and consumption of regional foods (Shortridge & Shortridge, 1994).

Based upon the current sponsorship trends and previous research, the purpose of the current study is to (a) evaluate consumer perceptions of fit and authenticity between the sponsor logo and the NBA team, (b) assess differences in affective, cognitive, and conative outcomes toward the sponsor and the NBA team derived from high and low fit and authenticity groups regarding the sponsorship partnership, and (c) examine high and low fit and authenticity as a predictor of affective, cognitive, and conative outcomes toward the sponsor and NBA team.

To determine the potential impact of jersey sponsorships, the current study will use a between-groups experimental design to evaluate the purposes of the study. First, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) will be used to assess differences in fit and authenticity between the 14 sponsorship partnerships. Second, Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) will be used to evaluate differences between high and low fit and high and low authenticity groups. Finally, Multiple Regression Analysis will be used to evaluate high and low fit and high and low authenticity groups as predictors of consumers’ brand image of the team and sponsor, attitude toward the team and sponsor, and behavioral intentions toward the team and sponsor.

For the study, the following constructs will be measured and include: image fit (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), authenticity (Morhart, Guevremont, Girardin, & Grohmann, 2015), brand image of the team (Woisetschlager &
Michaelis, 2012), personal liking of the team (Speed & Thompson, 2000), behavioral intentions toward the team (Inoue & Havard, 2014), brand image of the sponsor (Koo et al., 2006), attitude toward the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000), and behavioral intentions toward the sponsor (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Covariates for the study will be used and include fan involvement regarding the NBA team (Heere & Dickson, 2008) and prior attitude toward the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

The sample and procedure for the study will utilize a general consumer sample from Amazon Mechanical Turk (Mturk). Furthermore, the current study seeks to target potential adult consumers. The study will sample consumers from the United States only and will consist of two parts. First, a pretest will be conducted to verify differences in image fit and authenticity based on the 14 sponsorship partnerships that are currently being used in the NBA. Second, the main study will evaluate differences in cognitive, affective, and behavioral intentions toward the sponsor and NBA team based on the high and low fit and high and low authentic partnerships. Finally, the main study will evaluate high and low fit and high and low authenticity groups as predictors of cognitive, affective, and behavioral intentions toward the sponsor and NBA team.

The current study seeks to evaluate differences in sponsorship authenticity and the impact of authenticity on fans’ affective, cognitive, and conative outcomes toward the sponsor and team. As sport sponsorships continue to evolve, team jerseys have become the latest opportunity for organizations to attempt to achieve their sponsorship goals. While much previous literature has examined sponsorships of sporting events (Walker, Hall, Todd, & Kent, 2011) and facilities (Clark, Cornwell, & Pruitt, 2002), research has yet to examine jersey sponsorships. This is an especially important area of focus as jersey sponsorships are speculated to become the norm in major professional North American sport leagues (Thomaselli, 2010).

The authors of this study hypothesize that sponsors with a local connection and high fit with their team will be highest-rated among fans and will perceived as an authentic partnership. Such sponsors are also expected to positively impact fans’ attitudes toward the team and sponsor and also impact their sponsor and team-related behavioral intentions. If these hypotheses are confirmed, it will give credence to organizations’ focus on these local organizations that fit with their team. While previous literature provides support for these expected results, the novelty of jersey sponsorships yields a level of uncertainty for predicting potential outcomes; thus, if the study yields an unexpected result, the findings will provide rationale for other types of sponsorships and also generate additional questions concerning jersey sponsorships. No matter the result, this study addresses an important, novel context of sport sponsorships and will also create a foundation for future work in this area.