“Why Can’t We Be Friends”? An Examination of Academic and Industry Alignment in Sport Sponsorship

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Within the complex marketing environment, sports sponsorship is a central component, estimated at $20 billion by 2022 (PWC, 2018). As a result, this sector of sport has been relevant to both academia and industry, which is supported by the significant body of scholarly and practitioner-based literature.

The academic literature on sport sponsorship has been comprehensively examined through three reviews. Cornwell and Maignan (1998) performed an initial systematic sponsorship review. Given the relative novelty of research on sponsorship, the literature either described the development of sponsorship or defined its main characteristics. Bjorn Walliser (2003) extended the initial review by including international studies. He focused on the evolution of sponsorship and found the definition of sponsorship had matured. Finally, Spais and Johnston (2014) examined how scholarly sponsorship research evolved by using computer-assisted text analysis. They found the amount of sponsorship articles more than doubled in two-thirds the time.

These three broad reviews focused on research and direction for future investigations, however there is a wealth of industry articles and a topical review of this literature does not exist. The abundance of articles provides an opportunity to assess the alignment between sponsorship theory and practice. Due to the communication gap that frequently exists within the sport sector, the purpose of this study was to extend previous reviews by integrating industry articles and assess alignment of topics across sectors of the sport sponsorship landscape.

Following the methods of previous reviews, searches were performed using Business Source Complete and ISI Web of Knowledge between January 2014 and March 2019. In addition, a manual search of Sports Business Journal (SBJ) was conducted for the same timeframe. A total of 466 articles were identified with 200 being in academic journals and 266 in industry publications.

Next, articles were categorized into 14 themes. Because the number of academic and industry articles were different, the comparison was made using the percentage each topic was discussed in academic versus industry publications. Using the differences in percentages, the themes were classified as industry-heavy, balanced and academic-heavy. Industry-heavy topics included: Digital and Social, eSports, Gambling, Jersey Sponsorship, and Activation. The balanced topics included: Termination, Endorsement, Naming Rights, Women’s Sports, and Measurement. Academic-heavy topics included: Identification, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Ambush Marketing, and Rival.

This review identified different themes than those in previous reviews. However, the findings are consistent with the most recent review by Cornwell and Kwon (2019), who found that there is a surplus of academic articles related to consumer behavior (e.g. the topic, “Identification” in the current study).

One reason for the imbalance is the academic publishing process is lengthy, so academia has not had a chance to publish research on new or hot topics such as eSports and gambling. On the other hand, industry has limited access to academic information. Ideally academia and industry would focus on the same topics. The few topics that are balanced may provide a roadmap for integration of theory and practice within sport sponsorship. Implications and future research direction will be discussed.