

2018 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVI)

Beer Sponsors and College Athletics: Fans' Perceptions of Fit, Image, and Attitudes

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25-minute oral presentation
(including questions)

In 2017, the football bowl subdivision (FBS) experienced its largest decrease (3.2%) in attendance in over thirty years (Khan, 2018). As a result, athletic administrators have been forced to increase departmental revenues by other means. One avenue is sponsorship, where spending on college sport has increased by 3-5% over the past 5 years, up to \$1.24 billion in 2017-18 (IEG, 2018). College sports is a particularly attractive setting for potential sponsors, given the wide range of media coverage, fan passion, and direct access to students (a particularly desirable target market for many brands).

One new trend is the integration of beer sponsors. Recently, SportsBusinessJournal reported that thirty-six universities serve beer in their on-campus stadia, while fourteen institutions serve at nearby campus locations (Smith & Lefton, 2017), up from only seven colleges in 2007 (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Major beer producers Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors currently have over 100 partnerships with universities, many of which involve more integrated sponsorship agreements than simply pouring rights. For example, The University of Texas at Austin signed with Corona on a reportedly low seven figure annual deal (Smith & Lefton, 2017), using the moniker "Horns Up, Limes In!"

Commentators suggest university deals with beer sponsors are ill-advised because it makes drinking a focal point (Bernadier, 2017), a proposition supported by health officials concerned with underage drinking and alcoholism (Kruzman & Tulp, 2017). What remains largely unexplored in research are fans' perceptions of college athletic partnerships with beer companies. Given that the majority of college students in the United States are under the legal drinking age, it is reasonable to suggest that fans may not see a fit between beer brands and college athletic departments. Thus, this study will utilize a quasi-experimental design to explore fans' perceptions of image, fit, and attitudes toward beer sponsors in intercollegiate athletics.

Literature Review

The presence of alcohol sponsors in sport has been examined from a variety of ethical, sociocultural and marketing perspectives. The majority of work on college-aged populations has examined effects of alcohol sponsorship on sport participants (Kelly et al., 2014; 2017). In terms of effects on fans, Gee et al. (2016) found that alcohol sponsorship played a substantial role in promoting a drinking culture among spectators. Focusing on brands, McDaniel and Mason (1999) found that alcohol sponsorship in sport was not considered problematic among Olympic Games spectators, and alcohol drinkers tend to have more positive attitudes toward beer sponsorships than non-drinkers (Kropp et al., 1999). As such, it would appear that fans do not have a systematic distaste toward alcohol sponsors. However, this proposition requires testing in the setting of college athletics.

Organizations sponsor sport properties to generate various outcomes, such as positive effects on both brand image and attitudes toward the sponsor, as well as purchasing behaviors (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008). In college sport settings, team identification and attitudes toward commercialism have been found to impact attitudes and intentions toward both sponsors and properties (Eddy, 2014; Zhang et al., 2005). Sponsor fit and congruence between the brands are also important factors in driving affective and conative outcomes (Walraven et al., 2012). Positive fit is said to exist between the two parties if their attributes align (Grohs & Reisinger, 2014), and research suggests that high perceived fit can positively impact attitudes and purchase intentions (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004). To the contrary, lower levels of perceived fit can contribute to negative attitudes toward the sponsor (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Ellen

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et al., 2006). In accordance with the literature above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Sponsor-event fit, image transfer, and attitudes toward the sponsor will be more positive after exposure to a non-beer sponsor than a beer sponsor, when controlling for team identification and attitudes toward commercialism.

H2: Conative loyalty will be more positive after exposure to a non-beer sponsor than a beer sponsor, when controlling for team identification and attitudes toward commercialism.

Methods

The target population for this study are adult college sport fans (age 21 and over) who watch college football live or through media. A screened, non-probability sample will be recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk is a common tool in consumer behavior research, producing reliable data that can be gathered relatively quickly (Buhrmeister et al., 2011). Each participant will be paid 25 cents upon completion, an amount deemed sufficient for high-quality responses on short surveys (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). The survey will be implemented as a quasi-experiment with 2 treatment scenarios. The twenty-four item survey was developed using Qualtrics and includes well-established measures for team identification (Trail et al., 2005), sponsor-event fit, attitudes toward sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000), attitudes toward commercialization (Zhang et al., 2005), and conative loyalty.

In the first section of the survey, participants will indicate his or her favorite college sport team and respond to the team identification, attitudes towards commercialization, attitudes toward sponsorship, demographics, and beer consumption items. Participants will then be randomly assigned to one of two treatment scenarios outlining a fictitious partnership between the university and either a beer company sponsor, or a sponsor in a non-alcohol product category (e.g., automobile, food, or insurance). Exposing respondents to hypothetical partnership scenarios has been executed in previous research (Melero & Montaner, 2016). After reading the scenario, participants will respond to items related to sponsor-sponsee fit, attitudes toward the sponsor, image transfer, and conative loyalty. Data collection will begin on April 15, 2018 and is expected to conclude on May 15, 2018.

Data Analysis & Implications

Factor analyses will be performed and reliability/validity will be assessed for each construct. To test the hypotheses, a MANCOVA will be conducted using team identification and attitudes towards commercialism as covariates. This study will be among the first to examine the influence of beer sponsorships on fan perceptions and behavioral intentions within intercollegiate sport. Further, because sport fans directly impact revenues through game attendance and viewership, these potentially controversial partnerships need to be explored empirically as this revenue stream expands. Additional implications derived from the findings will be presented.

References

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