A New Approach to Measuring Sport Sponsorship Fit: Brand Personality Associations

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Sport sponsorships continue to grow as crucial marketing communication tool and are seen as a feasible contemporary alternative to traditional advertising (Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001). As this space becomes more competitive to associate with a sport team’s brand, clutter begins to dilute the effectiveness of sponsors. It is important for sponsors to differentiate themselves from competitors to ensure they meet sponsorship goals (Madrigal, 2000; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008, Olsen & Thjørnøe, 2011).

Lee and Cho (2009) studied how brand personalities between a sponsor and sporting event influence a consumer's attitude toward a sponsor. While they found support for their hypotheses, an argument can be made that their definition of a “sport event” does not apply to specific teams that take on personalities of their own. For example, the Boston Red Sox and the Miami Marlins are both considered the same sport event – a baseball game – but each team takes on different personality traits that may or may not be attractive to potential sponsors. The Red Sox may be considered “traditional” or “old-fashioned” because of their deep-rooted history, whereas the Miami Marlins may be seen as “modern” or “fresh” since they recently revealed a new logo and built a new modern stadium. It is important individual sport teams define their personality and seek out sponsors who are congruent with similar personality traits (Cornwell et al., 2011).

The need for measuring brand personality in sport has been reiterated by multiple researchers (Greenhalgh, Dwyer, & LeCrom, 2017; Heere, 2010; Lee & Cho, 2012). Sport entities need to be aware of how their brand personality is perceived in order to accurately market and manage their business. Understanding this dynamic has been well established and literature has evolved in the way brand personality is measured. Scales have been developed and tested for practical use, but have only focused on measuring one specific brand perceived by its own managers, fans, and non-fans (Greenhalgh, Dwyer, & LeCrom, 2017; Heere, 2010; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszka, 2013). With minor revisions, these scales could also be used in assessing how two brand personalities fit together. In the sponsorship literature, fit is an important concept for standing out amongst marketing clutter (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008, Olsen & Thjørnøe, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate a set of brand personality traits provided by senior sport managers, and whether these personality characteristics are perceived as congruent with associated sponsors’ brand personalities. The current study proposes a different technique, based on Heere’s (2010) methodology, to measure sponsorship congruence through personality assessment between sponsor brands and a specific team’s brand in order to maximize sponsorship effectiveness. The current study was conducted within the southeast region of the United States.

A Minor League Baseball (MiLB) team was approached and agreed to participate in the study. Brand personality characteristics were collected from senior managers of the MiLB team’s associated sponsors about their individual brand(s). All managers were asked to provide an exhaustive list of personality adjectives they felt their brand represented. As Heere (2010) suggests, because managers are responsible for the creation of brand personality, they would be able to provide a better list of adjectives than a set factor model. These characteristics were then cross-referenced with brand personality characteristics provided by senior managers from the MiLB team, and eight were chosen from an expert panel of judges and confirmed by the team’s senior management. The characteristics used in this study include: family-friendly, affordable, unique/innovative, passionate, caring, ethical/integrity, safe/secure, and socially active. Due to multiple sponsor personalities, the team selected six sponsors in which they felt shared similar brand characteristics with their own. These sponsors fell under the following categories: Soft Drink, Construction, Beer, Quick Service Restaurant (QSR), Healthcare Insurance, and Hospital.

Preliminary results from the six sponsors show that 45.3% of respondents correctly identified the soft drink sponsor, 15.4% correctly identified the construction sponsor, 73.8% correctly identified the beer sponsor, 62.3% correctly identified the QSR sponsor, 65.6% correctly identified the healthcare sponsor, and 38.8% correctly identified the
hospital sponsor. Each of the eight characteristics used to describe the congruence between the sponsor and team were evaluated on a 7-point Likert Scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. Family-friendly was the highest ranked characteristic among the soft drink, QSR, and healthcare sponsors and the MiLB team. Caring was the highest ranked characteristic among the construction sponsor and MiLB team, and socially active was the highest among the beer and hospital sponsors and the MiLB team. Respondents felt that the order of importance in which sponsors should share these characteristics with the MiLB team is as follows (from highest to lowest): family-friendly, affordable, safe/secure, passionate, unique/innovative, caring, ethical, and socially active.

This exploratory study provides a relatively new and unexplored dimension of sport sponsorship fit. Practitioners can also use this methodology to evaluate if a sponsor will fit with their brand, and if the potential sponsor does not fit, which characteristics they can articulate within the activation process to enhance congruence. This sport sponsorship evaluation method provides managers with insight into how consumers perceive not only their brand personality, but how well they fit with their associated sponsors’ brand personalities and vice versa.