

## 2017 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XV)

### The Influence of Controversial Sponsorships on Sport Teams

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**8:00-8:50 AM, Washington Ballroom**

**50-minute poster presentation**

**(including questions)**

There is a sponsorship shift developing in sport that could threaten revenue streams for sport teams, leagues, and athletes. For three decades, sport sponsorships have been a successful non-traditional marketing medium that allowed businesses an opportunity to reach a live, engaged, targeted audience (Belzer, 2013). Previous research of successful sport sponsorships attributes success to appropriate “fit” or congruency between a business and sport entity (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2007; Ko & Kim, 2014). Fit could be natural or forced between two organizations. Natural fit may include image or functional fit where the brands are similar or the athletes use the sponsor’s product during events. Forced fit occurs during sponsorship activation and messaging where the sponsor’s product fit is explained to the consumers through announcements, billboards, promotions, and other communication efforts.

Consumers consciously accept these congruent sport sponsorships as the new marketing norm (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003). Now however, sport consumers are exposed to numerous congruent sponsors, creating marketing clutter within sporting events. Therefore, consumers rarely register sponsors beyond the event itself. As a result, return on investment (ROI) for the sponsor can be questioned. Most sponsors are looking for ROI within a sport sponsorship in the form of awareness, sales, and/or brand equity. Farrelly et al. (2005) stressed that recognition of a sponsor is crucial for fulfilling consequent ambitions. If sport consumers are not recognizing well-fitting sponsorships, those sponsors who are spending large amounts of money may not be seeing any form of ROI, which makes the sponsorship irrelevant and a waste of a company’s money and resources.

Within the past 10 years, non-congruent avenues of marketing, or shock advertising, have been examined in advertising literature (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013). Shock advertising is described as an attempt to surprise an audience by purposefully violating societal norms and personal ideals to capture the attention of an audience (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013). A change in societal norms may lead to public controversy or disagreement (Madni, Hamid, & Rashid, 2016). This type of non-congruent advertising may consist of offensive messaging, sex and decency issues, taboo in advertising, and advertising controversial products (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013). For example, some not-for-profit organizations have utilized shock advertising to instill fear in consumers in order to change attitudes toward an accepted norm (Parry, Jones, Stern, & Robinson, 2013). For example, the ASPCA runs commercials that include shocking images portraying animal cruelty with the intention of raising awareness and funding to prevent animal abuse. Additionally, an anti-tobacco company called Truth shows graphic images of how smoking can cause damage to a body.

For profit businesses also use shock advertising. For example, Calvin Klein has used controversial advertising for decades with their half-naked models in television commercials and on advertising billboards. Calvin Klein’s main product, underwear, is an already considered a controversial product (Waller, 2005), and the company adds controversial messaging to communicate their brand. In 1995, Calvin Klein was criticized for running controversial advertisements featuring children causing a societal outrage alleging child pornography (Waller, 2005).

Sporting entities may be choosing “safe” congruent sponsors for fear of the negative backlash companies like Calvin Klein have received. Even though the shock value of a non-traditional, non-congruent sponsor may encourage positive attitudes towards a sport team (Dahl, Frankenberger, & Manchanda, 2003), rarely do sport organizations consider this type of sponsorship. If executed well, sport teams may produce good will for the sponsor and create a message that encourages a shift in societal norms. The implications of this could include more press, increase in sales, and a change in attitude perceptions toward both the sport entity and potential controversial sponsor. The

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purpose of this paper is to examine the impact that a shocking, controversial sponsor actually had on consumer attitudes toward a sport entity. The researchers hypothesize that (H1a) image association between the controversial sponsor and sport team will have a negative effect on consumers' attitudes toward the sport team, (H1b) the image association between the controversial sponsor and sport entity will have a negative effect on future behavioral intentions in relation to the sport team (e.g. attending future games), (H2a) a positive activation message between the controversial sponsor and sport entity will have a positive effect on attitudes toward the sport team, (H2b) a positive activation message between a controversial sponsor and sport entity will increase future behavioral intentions in relation to the sport team.

A between-subjects experimental design will be used to test for attitudes toward a fictional sport team whose controversial advertiser is a gun manufacturer. The authors chose a gun manufacture as their product in itself is controversial and the importance of gun safety is a current issue in America. In defining this experimental sample, it was important to center the communication in a population in which gun control had relevance and application. The Southeastern United States is typically pro-gun and is a realistic target market for an armory. A sample will be drawn from the Southeastern United States with an age requirement of at least 18 years old, the age at which one can legally purchase a firearm (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005).

Press releases will be used in this study to communicate the sponsorship details between a fictional sport team and an armory. This study only looks at professional sports. Before creating a fictional team, the authors examined the area's professional sport teams in order to create a realistic fictional team. There is a prominent Minor League Baseball team in the Southeast area that will be mimicked in the press releases. Participants will receive one of two press releases communicating either the sponsorship without any messaging (image association) or the sponsorship with a gun safety message. After reading the press release, participants will be asked to fill out a survey measuring their attitudes toward the sport team and their behavioral intentions.

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