Measuring the Connection Between College Basketball Fans and League Sponsors

Nels Popp, University of North Carolina
Chad McEvoy, Northern Illinois University
Liz Sattler, St. Ambrose University

Abstract

Sponsors of NCAA Division I conferences often have limited access to activation opportunities within members' sports venues, limiting their reach to team fans. One purpose of this study was to determine if recognition rates of conference sponsors differ between sporting events held at campus sites and at a conference-wide tournament held at a neutral location. A second purpose was to determine if the perception of a conference's strength impacted spectators' intent to purchase conference sponsor products. A total of 3,142 surveys were collected from spectators at school sites and the post-season basketball tournament of an NCAA Division I conference. Results of the survey indicated recognition rates do consistently improve at the tournament compared to campus venues. In addition, a significant correlation was found between measures of conference affinity and intent to purchase sponsor products.

Background

In 2015, IEG projected global spending on sponsorship to rise to $57.5 billion. In 2014, $14.35 billion was spent on sport sponsorships in North American alone (IEG, 2015). Because corporations are investing such large amounts in these partnerships, sport properties are increasingly under pressure to accurately gauge the effectiveness of such sponsorships. Delivering value to sponsors allows rights-holders to more effectively renew such agreements (Sutton, Lachowetz, & Clark, 2000). Evaluating sponsorship effectiveness, however, is often times difficult to measure for several reasons, as outlined by Crompton (2004) and Maestas (2009). One reason it is difficult to measure sponsorship effectiveness is the plethora of sponsorship platforms available to potential rights-buyers. Sponsors looking to engage in sport sponsorship marketing can spend their dollars with many properties, with each platform providing unique opportunities and limitations. As Irwin, Sutton, and McCarthy (2008) point out, sport sponsorship platforms include: (a) governing bodies, (b) teams, (c) individual athletes, (d) media channels, (e) sport facilities, (f) events, and (g) specific sports.

Many individual professional sport teams, college athletic programs, or special event organizers have great control over the implementation and execution of sponsorship agreements and activation because they control some of the most visible and effective on-site inventory utilized to execute the terms of those agreements. On the other hand, sport leagues, national governing bodies, and college athletic conferences may manage many assets, but are all examples of properties which have limited on-site access to spectators because they rarely manage the key sponsorship activation platform of venue. These sport organizations might manage championship events, but most of the competitions within their governance are conducted in venues out of their direct control. For example, a collegiate conference might oversee a neutral-site, post-season basketball tournament, but most of the conference games in a season are played at individual schools' venues. In fact, history has shown individual teams and venue owners have sold sponsorships to direct competitors of league-wide sponsors. For example, Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones orchestrated a sponsorship agreement between Texas Stadium and PepsiCo, despite Coca-Cola's status as official soft drink sponsor of the NFL (SportsBusiness Journal, 1995). Another example includes the Chicago Fire's stadium naming rights deal with Toyota which circumvented Major League Soccer's league-wide sponsorship with Honda (Mickle, 2008).

College athletic conferences are a prime example of this dichotomy. Sponsors are attracted to the highly identified fans, and hard-to-reach demographic categories, college sports provide. This is a strong selling point for college athletic departments. However, conferences have a more difficult time demonstrating their reach to sponsors. While college conferences sell league sponsorships, they may not be able to offer a sponsor exclusivity in a specific goods or service category at member schools. They might also not be able to sell common or attractive inventory at individual school sites, even though school venues are where the majority of conference fans enjoy league contests. For example, common sponsorship categories include financial institutions or quick service restaurants. While a conference office might secure a bank or fast food chain as a league sponsor, they may not be able to provide signage at league venues because individual schools have signed exclusive agreements with sponsor competitors. Similarly, a league-wide sponsor might be interested in leveraging opportunities such as on-site sampling or a halftime contest taking place on campus. However, if an individual school has already sold those rights to a local sponsor, or does not want to offer that inventory, it will not be possible for the conference office to also sell that inventory. Research has shown that on-site activation is crucial for maximizing sponsorship effectiveness. For example, in 2013, Hyundai's "Show Your Loyalty" campaign on college campuses resulted in 65% of fans surveyed who were at least "somewhat likely" to consider purchasing a Hyundai vehicle after interacting with the brand at one of the football games (IEG, 2014). In addition, a 2012 Turkey Intelligence sponsor inventory study of fans at Soldier Field found that having multiple points of engagement with sponsors increased the likelihood of sponsor recall (Seiferheld, 2013). Because their opportunities for campus on-site activation are limited, conference offices must either limit sponsorship opportunities to conference events such as post-season tournaments or they must work closely with member schools to assure sponsor messaging is conveyed effectively at campus sporting events.

Such an arrangement begs the question of how effective collegiate conferences are in providing sponsorship awareness for league sponsors at member schools. The purpose of this study is to examine that specific question. In addition, the current study sought to gauge how spectator recognition rates of sponsors compare to recognition rates reported by spectators attending league controlled events, such as post-season tournaments. League sponsors expect to reap benefits at conference schools, but it is hypothesized in this study that such benefits may be impaired or diminished by the extra layer of sponsorship execution between the property (conference) and the brand (sponsor). A third purpose of this study was to determine if spectator affinity measures, such as perceived conference strength, correlate with intent-to-purchase from sponsors.

Literature Review

In the context of the sport industry, sponsorship has been identified as "the provision of assistance by a commercial organization (sponsor), in cash or kind, to a sports property (sponsee), in exchange for the rights to be associated with the sports property for the purpose of gaining commercial and economic advantage" (Tripodi, 2001, p. 96). Activation of a sport sponsorship is the actual communication and association of a sponsor brand to the sports property and therefore, its consumers. Examples of sponsorship activation include brand exposure, consumer experiences and contests, as well as product usage (Fortunato, 2013). Companies have many reasons to engage in sponsorship with a sports property. In their early work examining sponsor objectives, Irwin and Asimakopoulos (1992) outlined many of the most common sponsor goals and developed a scale to measure sponsor objectives. Since that time, many other researchers have examined sponsor motives and objectives in a variety of sport settings such as the Olympic Games (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2004), U.S. women's sports (Lough & Irwin, 2001), niche sports (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013), high school football (Peterson & Pierce, 2014), and NCAA Football Championship Subdivision athletic departments (Weight, Taylor & Cuneen, 2010). While sport sponsorship has continued to flourish and corporations spend millions of dollars in an effort to meet marketing objectives, measuring effectiveness remains a challenge, articulated by both Crompton (2004) and Maestas (2009).

Sponsor Recognition Research

A common methodology employed to measure effectiveness of sponsorship is to survey spectators on either sponsor recall or recognition. Sponsorship recall requires spectators to name as many sponsors of an event or team with no assistance, while sponsorship recognition asks spectators to select official sponsors from a list which contains both sponsor names and "foils" or "dummies." Numerous studies have used either recall or recognition methodology to measure the effectiveness of sport sponsorships in a variety of sport settings. Market research company Turnkey Sports & Entertainment frequently submits recall and recognition studies of majors sport leagues to the Sports Business Journal, gauging spectators' sponsorship awareness rates for the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, and NASCAR. Academic research employing either recognition or recall methodology to measure the effectiveness of sport sponsorships include studies examining collegiate women's basketball (Maxwell & Lough, 2009), professional tennis tournaments (Bennett, Cunningham, & Dees, 2006), amateur state games (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006), Division I football games (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), action sports events (Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002), and LPGA tournaments (Cuneen & Hannan, 1993), among others.

Actual sponsor recognition rates within these studies vary widely. A recent sponsor recognition survey conducted by Turnkey Intelligence (SportsBusiness Journal, 2014) suggested official PGA Tour sponsors enjoy recognition rates ranging from 14.1% to 57.6% among avid fans. Surprisingly, D'Alesandro (2001) reported only 40% of race fans at the Coca-Cola 600 NASCAR event identified Coca-Cola as a sponsor. By comparison Bennett et al. (2006) reported sponsor recognition rates ranging from 65.4% to 100% for eight sponsors of the 2003 ATP Houston Open. In Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) sponsor study of a state games competition, recognition rates ranged from 3% to 45% and in Pitts and Slattery's (2004) examination of college football fans, sponsor recognition rates ranged from 1% to 80%, with a mean of 35.2% for nine sponsors.

A handful of sponsor recognition studies have examined the effect of time on recognition rates. Turco (1996) found spectators exposed to signage at college basketball games over the course of a season had greater recognition rates at the end season compared to early season rates. Pitts and Slattery (2004) also found at least some increase in nearly all sponsor recognition rates among college football season ticket holders polled early in the season and after the season had concluded. In their longitudinal study of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League, Walraven, Bijmolt, and Koning (2014) found spectator recognition rates increased over time and were often highest in the second year of the sponsorship. Finally, Maxwell and Lough (2009) found the number of home games attended throughout a season had a significant positive impact on the spectator's ability to recall sponsor signage at two NCAA Division I women's basketball games. These studies suggest prolonged exposure to sponsor messages does increase recognition rates among avid fans.

Measuring sponsorship recall and recognition rates is important for both corporate sponsor brands and sports organizations in order to gauge sponsor awareness levels among fans. Scholars suggest improved sponsorship awareness among fans can aide a sponsor's ability to meet specific marketing objectives such as heightened brand exposure, image enhancement, and increased product sales (Crompton, 2004; Maxwell & Lough, 2009; Meenaghan, 2001). Understanding sponsor awareness levels among fans is also important for sports organizations as they continually seek to retain sponsors and improve the sponsorship activation process.

Fan Affinity

Sandage (1983) suggested one way to measure sponsorship effectiveness directly is by gauging whether customers will consume a new product after being exposed to it via sponsorship, or indirectly by measuring the response consumers have toward a product after being exposed to it through sponsorship. When attempting to analyze sponsorship effectiveness in sport settings, a number of scholars have examined whether or not the level of a fan's affinity toward the sport organization has an impact on intent to purchase sponsor products or services. Previous literature does suggest a positive correlation between a fan's level of involvement and their intent to purchase products or services from sponsors. Hitchen (1998) found highly committed fans of both the NFL and NASCAR were twice as likely as non-fans to switch brands after viewing a sponsor. Similarly, Gwinner and Swanson (2003) found among fans surveyed at a Division I football game, those who registered as highly identified were more likely to support team sponsors than those with lower levels of fan identification. Cornwell, Relyea, Irwin, and Maignan (2000) examined the impact of both involvement with a sport and enthusiasm toward a sport on sponsorship recall and recognition. Their research found indirect influence of involvement on sponsor recall; respondents involved in a sport were not necessarily more likely to recall sponsors at events, but were more likely to attend multiple events which did improve recall rates. Enthusiasm toward a sport, on the other hand, directly influenced respondent's rates of sponsor recall. From a participation context, Eagleman and Krohn (2012) found high identified road race participants were more likely than low identified participants to say they would purchase products from race sponsors. These studies suggest that higher levels of fan affinity are correlated with intent to purchase sponsor products or services.

Few studies have examined whether a fan's perception of team or league prestige has an impact on intent to purchase sponsor products or services. In their study of Australian Football League (AFL) fans, Lings and Owen (2007) found fan perceptions of individual team prestige did correlate positively with their intention to purchase sponsor products or services. Meanwhile, Alexandris et al. (2007) investigated the impact of spectators' attitudes on their intent to purchase from sponsors of a Greek professional basketball league's all-star game. One significant predictor of intent to purchase in the study was attitude toward the event; fans who were greater supporters of the event indicated they were more likely to buy sponsor products.

As illustrated above, sponsor recall and recognition studies are commonplace in the sport management literature. This body of literature has also suggested a connection between team affinity and intent to purchase from official sponsors of those teams. This connection, however, has only been empirically examined in limited settings. Previous research has neither investigated recognition rates of NCAA Division I conference sponsors at the campus level nor the likelihood of fans from individual schools purchasing products from those sponsors.

Purpose

The current study looks to examine the following research questions regarding the sponsorship of an NCAA Division I college conference.

RQ1: To what degree are conference sponsors recognized by spectators at individual conference school events?
H1: We expected conference sponsors to realize low recognition rates at individual school sites. Fan affinity on campus is likely to be directed toward individual schools more so than the conference, therefore making it more difficult for conference sponsors to connect with fans at individual schools.

RQ2: How do recognition rates differ at school sites compared to the conference's post-season men's basketball tournament?
H2: We expected recognition rates to be considerably higher at the conference-controlled post-season tournament than at individual school sites.

RQ3: Are fans who are more highly identified with, and have a greater fan affinity toward, the conference more likely to purchase goods and services from a sponsor compared to the sponsor's competitors?
H3: We expected a slight positive correlation between fan identity/affiliation and preference of sponsor over competitors based on previous literature.

Methodology

A sponsorship evaluation survey was specifically developed for this study in consultation with the leadership team of an NCAA Division I athletic conference. Because the data gathered in this particular study was collected at ten different campus sites, the survey instrument utilized sponsorship recognition instead of sponsorship recall. This approach allowed for cross comparison analysis among the varying campus sites. The survey listed 12 official league sponsors and eight foil, or dummy, sponsors, all of which were direct competitors of one of the league sponsors. Respondents were asked to indicate which sponsors were indeed league sponsors. Utilizing a split-halves technique, two versions of the survey were created, re-ordering the sponsor list, to improve reliability of the instrument. The survey also included several intent-to-purchase questions and Likert-type scale questions measuring respondents' affinity for, and opinions of, the conference. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate (a) the quality of men's basketball in the conference; (b) their level of college basketball fandom; (c) their level of fandom of the conference; (d) their likelihood of choosing to buy products that sponsor their favorite conference team; and (d) their likelihood of choosing to buy products that sponsor the conference--all on seven-point Likert-type scales. Respondents were also asked if they were more likely to choose goods or services from a conference sponsor and if they were more likely to choose goods or services from their favorite team's sponsor. Respondents could answer "yes," "no," or "it doesn't matter" to these items. Demographic information such as gender, age, education level, and household income was also collected. In total, the survey contained 23 items.

A total of 300 surveys were handed out at one men's basketball home game for each of the ten member schools in the league. A stratified random sampling technique was used to distribute surveys in order to obtain a representative cross-section of consumers relative to students/non-students, donors/non-donors, and product usage level. Each arena was divided into sections and members of the research team handed out surveys to fans seated in those sections approximately 30 minutes prior to the beginning of the game. Arena sections specifically targeted included: (a) lower bowl, prime seating sections which were comprised primarily of high-priced season ticket holders and major donors; (b) student seating sections; (c) upper bowl, center court seating sections which were comprised primarily of low-priced season ticket holders as well as some single game buyers; and (d) upper bowl baseline seating sections, which were comprised primarily of single game ticket purchasers. While each arena structure and attendee composition differed from school to school, efforts were made to distribute surveys equally amongst types of sections. Surveys were collected from participants before games began. In addition, 600 surveys were distributed in a similar manner at the conference tournament, with 100 surveys handed out before each of four quarterfinal games and two semifinal games. Efforts were made to get representation from fans attending the games of only their favorite team, fans attending multiple games of the tournament regardless of fan affiliation, and student attendees.

Descriptive statistics were examined to answer the first research question of how well did spectators at school sites identify conference sponsors. To answer the second research question, the researchers compared sponsor recognition mean scores at school sites to responses from the conference tournament. An ANOVA test was conducted to determine if group mean differences of recognition rates between school and conference sites were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. To answer the third research question, the researchers analyzed data in two ways. The first was to examine a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient table showing the relationship between fan affinity items and items measuring the likelihood of purchase from sponsors. The second was to determine if group mean differences existed for how respondents answered the question of whether they were more likely to buy from a conference sponsor based on how strong they perceived the conference. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) statistical tests were utilized for this. Likelihood of buying from a conference sponsor served as the independent variable. Respondents were asked if they were more likely to choose goods or services from a conference sponsor than a competitive brand, and could respond with either "yes", "no", or "either way, it doesn't matter." Respondent Likert-type scale agreement ratings for the statement "I believe that conference basketball is a high quality product" served as the dependent variable.

Results

Of the 3,600 surveys distributed, 3,142 usable surveys were returned, for a response rate of 87.3%, with 2,578 surveys returned at school sites (85.9% response rate) and 564 surveys returned at the conference tournament (94.0%). Of the 300 surveys distributed at each school, between 232 and 285 responses were collected, meaning responses rates ranged from a low of 77.3% to a high of 95.0% at the schools. Males comprised 60.9% of the total respondents, while females represented 39.1%. Regarding age, 20.9% of respondents were traditional college ages, between 18-23, while over one-half (51.9%) were 50 or older. Over 95% of spectators were Caucasian. Slightly greater than one-half of respondents (52.3%) had completed a college degree and 46.3% reported an annual household income of greater than $80,000.

In regards to research question one, 82.5% of respondents at school sites correctly identified the league's primary title sponsor. Recognition rates for the other 11 sponsors were much lower, ranging from 3.8% to 33.3%. The percentage of fans indicating foils as sponsors ranged from 6.4% to 25.3%. For complete results, see Table 1.

Table 1:
Recognition Rates of Conference Sponsors at School Sites

Sponsor	Recognition Rate
Title Sponsor	82.5%
Foil 1	13.2%
Foil 2	10.0%
Foil 3	6.4%
Soft Drink Sponsor	33.3%
Foil	11.8%
Convenience Store Sponsor	32.6%
Beer Sponsor	27.3%
Foil	6.5%
Quick Service Restaurant Sponsor	26.0%
Foil	12.4%
Foil	25.3%
Dairy Sponsor	16.1%
Energy Drink Sponsor	15.9%
Foil	8.1%
Financial Institution Sponsor	13.3%
Pet Food Sponsor	10.5%
Electric Company Sponsor	9.9%
Energy Company Sponsor	6.4%
Train Sponsor	3.8%
Sponsor Average (non-foils)	23.1%

To answer the second research question, recognition rates of sponsors were first tabulated from only the responses at the conference tournament. At that site, 91.2% of fans correctly identified the league's title sponsor, while recognition rates for the other 11 sponsors ranged from 11.3% to 53.6%. At the conference tournament, the percentage of fans indicating foils as sponsors ranged from 6.0% to 13.3%. Among the 12 actual sponsors, recognition rates improved for 10 of them at the conference tournament. Two sponsors saw decreases in their recognition rates at the tournament, although the decreases were relatively small. Among the foils, only two saw a slightly higher recognition rate, while many of the other decreases were relatively large. All but one of the sponsors increased its margin of recognition over its foil at the conference tournament. An ANOVA test was conducted to determine if the group mean differences in recognition rates were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level. As shown in Table 2 below, of the 10 increases in recognition, nine were statistically significant. Among the two decreases in recognition, one was significant. Also, four of the eight foil sponsors were recognized at significantly lower rates.

Table: 2 *Comparison of Sponsor Recognition Rates at School Sites vs Conference Tournament*

Sponsor	School Mean Recognition Rate	Conference Recognition Rate	Difference	*F*	Sig.
Title	82.5%	91.2%	8.70%	25.667	.000*
Foil 1	13.2%	13.3%	0.10%	.003	.955
Foil 2	10.0%	6.0%	-4.00%	8.334	.004*
Foil 3	6.4%	6.2%	-0.20%	.028	.867
Soft Drink	33.3%	40.5%	7.20%	10.228	.001*
Foil	11.8%	6.0%	-5.80%	15.386	.000*
Convenience Store	32.6%	42.9%	10.30%	20.669	.000*
Beer	27.3%	49.6%	22.30%	106.229	.000*
Foil	6.5%	8.0%	1.50%	1.571	.210
Quick Service Restaurant	26.0%	24.5%	-1.50%	.574	.449
Foil	25.3%	10.2%	-15.10%	59.330	.000*
Foil	12.4%	7.3%	-5.10%	11.297	.001*
Dairy	16.1%	21.2%	5.10%	7.963	.005*
Energy Drink	15.9%	12.4%	-3.50%	4.208	.040*
Foil	8.1%	7.3%	-0.80%	.415	.520
Financial Institution	13.3%	28.1%	14.80%	73.890	.000*
Pet Food	10.5%	53.6%	43.10%	663.690	.000*
Electric Company	9.9%	11.3%	1.40%	.968	.325
Energy Company	6.4%	13.5%	7.10%	31.054	.000*
Train	3.8%	16.2%	12.40%	121.496	.000*
Sponsor Average (non-foils)	23.1%	33.8%	10.65%		

Note. * $p < .05$

To answer research question three, correlation coefficients were examined to determine the relationship between respondents' affinity for conference basketball and their willingness to purchase products from conference sponsors. All correlations were positive and significant at the .01 level. Correlation coefficients ranged from .252 to .357, indicating weak to moderate levels of strength. See Table 3 for details.

Participants were also asked if they were more likely to choose goods or services from conference sponsors than competitor brands. In response to this item, 743 respondents said yes, 425 said no, and 1,917 said either way, it didn't matter. Mean scores were examined among those three response groups for the item "I believe that conference basketball is a high quality product." On a 7-point Likert-type scale, the group mean score for the "yes" group was

Table 3: *Intercorrelations Between Scales of Spectator Affinity and Intent to Choose Sponsor Products*

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6
Respondents (*n* = 3,142)						
1. Quality of Conference Basketball	--					
2. I am a college basketball fan	0.22*	--				
3. I am a fan of the Conference	0.37*	0.68*	--			
4. I believe Conference Basketball is a high quality product	0.52*	0.53*	0.73*	--		
5. I choose products that support my favorite team	0.29*	0.26*	0.35*	0.34*	--	
6. I choose products that support the Conference	0.30*	0.25*	0.36*	0.36*	0.88*	--

Note. * $p < .01$

6.19, the group mean score for the "no" group was 5.41, and the group mean score for the "either way, it doesn't matter" group was 5.73. The results of an ANOVA test showed these group mean differences were statistically significant at the .05 level, $F(2, 3082) = 59.17$, $p = .000$. A Tukey post hoc analysis revealed significant differences between all three groups.

Discussion

League-wide sponsorships represent an important revenue stream for many NCAA Division I athletic conferences. For example, Smith (2010) reported the Atlantic Coast Conference's football championship sponsorship was sold to Dr Pepper for upwards of $3 million a year, and suggested most corporate naming rights to Division I conference basketball tournaments are low seven figure deals. Brown, Rascher, Nagel, and McEvoy (2010) cite financial reports illustrating that nearly a decade ago, the Southeastern Conference generated nearly $2 million in conference sponsorship while Conference USA sold just over $1 million in corporate partnerships. While conferences are able to generate significant sponsorship dollars, they are somewhat limited in the type of inventory they can sell, as leagues do not own rights to most assets related to on-campus venues. Corporate brands purchasing league sponsorship rights often desire to penetrate campus markets and want to know the true value of their acquired assets. Measuring sponsorship effectiveness, however, is a challenge for conference administrators.

To date one of the more widely used tools to gauge sponsorship effectiveness is spectator recall and recognition instruments. In the current study, researchers examined spectator recognition rates of conference sponsors at both campus sites and at the conference post-season basketball tournament to determine how well sponsors were recognized at both locations. Results from this study showed varying degrees of sponsor awareness on campus sites, although the league's title sponsor was highly recognized on campus at a rate of 84.2%. This compares very favorably to title sponsor recognition rates with other sport organizations cited in the literature. For example, D'Alesandro (2001) reported 60% of spectators at a Coca-Cola 600 NASCAR race could not identify Coca-Cola as a sponsor of the event. By comparison Bennett et al. (2006) reported sponsor recognition rates ranging from 65.4% to 100% for eight sponsors of the 2003 ATP Houston Open while Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) reported recognition rates of sponsors at a State Games competition to range from 3% to 45%.

At the league-controlled conference basketball tournament, nearly all sponsors saw statistically significant improvements in recognition rates. While this result was expected, it provides support for the conference's sponsorship activation efforts. Recognition only measures one element of sponsorship and may not sufficiently address all specific sponsor objectives, but it is a good place at which to start the discussion between properties and brands. This study offers practitioners a baseline as to what sponsors might expect in similar studies at different locations.

The results of the study also suggest highly identified fans possessing high league affinity are more likely to consume sponsor products compared to lower identified fans. While correlation coefficients between affinity measures and likelihood of patronizing sponsors were moderate, they were positive, indicating the more highly fans thought of the league and college basketball in general, the more likely they were to purchase from sponsors. These correlations combined results from both campus attendees and tournament attendees. Results of the ANOVA test showed that fans indicating they were likely to buy products from conference sponsors saw the league as a higher quality product than fans who were not going to buy sponsors' products or were ambivalent. This is an important result for sponsors and conference administrators. The finding seems to indicate the greater affinity conference and school marketers can build with supporters, the more valuable those fans become to potential sponsors. In fact, when examining the data further, the researchers found those respondents who strongly agreed the conference was a high quality product (as indicated by a 6 or 7 on a 7-point Likert-type scale) were over twice as likely to say they would buy conference sponsor products (29.4%) as respondents who marked a five or lower on the same item (14.4%). Conversely, respondents who strongly agreed the conference was a high quality product (again, by indicating a 6 or 7) were nearly half as likely to say no to buying a product because it was a conference sponsor (10.8%) as were respondents who marked a five or lower on the same item (19.3%).

Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study suggest it would financially benefit league officials and sponsors to develop ways to create more league affinity among spectators, particularly at campus sites. Results of this study support the notion it is financially advantageous for conference marketers to continue to grow league branding messages on campuses to supplement individual school branding efforts. When fans at campus locations believe a conference is strong, they are more likely to also patronize league sponsors, a primary objective for nearly all companies engaging in league-wide sponsorships.

In addition to continually improving the image and status of a collegiate conference, another implication for practitioners from this study is to actually leverage high league affinity rates within sponsorship sales materials and proposals. When meeting with prospective league sponsors, marketers can tout the relationship between league affinity and intent-to-purchase. If fans who feel a collegiate conference possesses a high level of quality are more likely to purchase from sponsors, those responsible for selling corporate partnerships should utilize these findings to support two initiatives. The first is to conduct efforts measuring and depicting the strong affinity spectators have for a league. Data illustrating fans' feelings toward the league or conference (as well as the teams participating in it) should be woven within sponsorship proposals. Second, marketing efforts should be made to accentuate the level of the conference in spectators' eyes, including things like playing more games on national television or against high quality opponents in non-conference competition. Many NCAA Division I college conferences currently make efforts to market in this way, but the results of this study demonstrate such efforts have the ability to influence purchasing decisions by spectators for sponsor products, a valuable metric for sponsors. By using the results of this study, college marketers and third party sponsorship sales vendors (such as Learfield and IMG College), can tangibly show prospective sponsors the increased likelihood of fans buying sponsor products and services.

Limitations and Future Research

While the results of this study provide college athletic administrators and sponsors valuable insight, the study does have limitations. The intent of this study was to determine whether recognitions rates varied between schools and a conference basketball tournament. However, sponsor activation was not measured, which certainly would have an impact on sponsorship effectiveness. Future studies should build from the current results and examine more closely the relationship between activation type and sponsorship effectiveness. Second, the current study utilized respondents' self-reported intent-to-purchase questions. This methodology is typically less accurate than measures of actual spending habits of respondents. Tracking actual purchasing behavior is difficult to conduct but future researchers may look for ways to examine actual purchases made by respondents after exposure to conference sponsors.

References

Apostolopoulou, A., & Papdimitriou, D. (2004). Welcome home: Motivations and objectives of the 2004 Grand National Olympic Sponsors. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 13*, 180-192.

Bennett, G., Cunningham, G., & Dees, W. (2006). Measuring the marketing communication activations of a professional tennis tournament. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 15*, 91-101.

Bennett, G., Henson, R.K., & Zhang, J. (2002). Action sports sponsorship recognition. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 11*(3), 185-196.

Brown, M. T., Rascher, D. A., Nagel, M. S., & McEvoy, C. D. (2010). *Financial management in the sport industry*. Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway.

Cornwell, T.B., Relyea, G.E., Irwin, R.E., & Maignan, I. (2000). Understanding long-term effects of sports sponsorship: Role of experience, involvement, enthusiasm and clutter. *Sports Marketing & Sponsorship, 2*(2), 127-143.

Crompton, J. L. (2004). Conceptualization and alternate operationalizations of the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness in sport. *Leisure Studies*, *23*(3), 267-281.

Cuneen, J., & Hannan, M. (1993). Intermediate measures and recognition testing of sponsorship advertising at an LPGA tournament. *Sports Marketing Quarterly, 2*(1), 47-56.

D'Alesandro, D.F. (2001). Beyond the mother-in-law strategy: Avoiding consumers' indifference. *Sponsorship Report, 20*(6), 4-5.

Eagleman, A. N., & Krohn, B. D. (2012). Sponsorship awareness, attitudes, and purchase intentions of road race series participants. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *21*(4), 210-220.

Fortunato, J.A. (2013). Sponsorship activation and social responsibility: How MasterCard and Major League Baseball partner to Stand Up To Cancer. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, *2*(3), 300-311.

Greenhalgh, G.P., & Greenwell, T.C. (2013). Professional niche sport sponsorship: An investigation of sponsorship selection criteria. *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship, 14*(2), 77-94.

Gwinner, K., & Swanson, S. R. (2003). A model of fan identification: Antecedents and sponsorship outcomes. *Journal of Services Marketing*, *17*(3), 275-294.

Hitchen, A. (1998). *Who does sponsorship persuade most?* Paper presented at IEG Sponsorship Conference "Meta-Sponsorship," March, Chicago, IEG.

IEG. (2015). Sponsorship and spending report: Where the dollars are going and trends for 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.sponsorship.com/IEG/files/4e/4e525456-b2b1-4049-bd51-03d9c35ac507.pdf.

IEG. (2014, February 24). Hyundai sees success from college sports platform. *IEG Sponsorship Report*.

Irwin, R.L. & Asimakopoulos, M.K. (1992). An approach to the evaluation and selection of sport sponsorship proposals. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 1*(2), 43-51.

Irwin, R.L., Sutton, W.A., & McCarthy, L.M. (2008). *Sport promotion and sales management.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Lings, I. N., & Owen, K. M. (2007). Buying a sponsor's brand: The role of affective commitment to the sponsored team. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *23*(5/6), 483-496.

Lough, N.L., & Irwin, R.L. (2001). A comparative analysis of sponsorship objectives for U.S. women's sport and traditional sport sponsorship. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 10*(4), 202-211.

Maestas, A.J. (2009). Guide to sponsorship return on investment. *Journal of Sponsorship, 3*(1), 98-102.

Maxwell, H., & Lough, N. (2009). Signage vs. no signage: An analysis of sponsorship recognition in women's college basketball. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *18*(4), 188-198.

Mickle, T. (2008, February 25). *MLS teams to sell auto category*. SportsBusiness Journal, retrieved from http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2008/02/20080225/This-Weeks-News/MLS-Teams-To-Sell-Auto-Category.aspx?hl=Tripp%20Mickle&sc=0.

Meenaghan, T. (2001). Understanding sponsorship effects. *Psychology & Marketing, 18*(2), 95-122.

Miloch, K.S., & Lambrecht, K.W. (2006). Consumer awareness of sponsorship at grassroots sport events. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 15*(3), 147-154.

Peterson, J., & Pierce, D.A. (2014). On-site sponsorship activation analysis in Texas high school football stadiums. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 85*, 120.

Pitts, B., & Slattery, J. (2004). An examination of the effects of time on sponsorship awareness levels. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 13*(1), 43-54.

Sandage, C. (1983). *Advertising theory and practice*. Homewood, IL: Richard Irwin, Inc.

SBJ. (Aug. 3, 1995). *No more coke for Cowboys as team signs deal to serve Pepsi*. SportsBusiness Journal, retrieved from http://m.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/1995/08/3/Sponsorships-Advertising-Marketing/NO-MORE-COKE-FOR-COWBOYS-AS-TEAM-SIGNS-DEAL-TO-SERVE-PEPSI.aspx?hl=Dallas%20Cowboys&sc=0.

Seiferheld, S. (Apr. 22, 2013). *Total recall: Which on-site factors make fans remember brands?* SportsBusiness Journal, retrieved from http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2013/04/22/Opinion/From-the-Field-of-Sponsorship.aspx.

Smith, M. (Oct. 4, 2010). *ACC discusses selling tourney title.* SportsBusiness Journal, retrieved from http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2010/10/20101004/This-Weeks-Issue/ACC-Discusses-Selling-Tourney-Title.aspx?hl=ACC%20Dr.%20Pepper%20Football&sc=0

Sutton, W.A., Lachowetz, T., and Clark, J. (2000). Eduselling: The role of customer education in selling to corporate clients in the sport industry. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship 2*(2), 145-158.

Tripodi, J.A. (2001). Sponsorship: A confirmed weapon in the promotional armoruy. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, 3*(1), 95-116.

Turco, D. (1996). The effects of courtside advertising on product recognition and attitude change. *Sports Marketing Quarterly, 5*(4), 11-15.

Walraven, M., Bijmolt, T. A., & Koning, R. H. (2014). Dynamic effects of sponsoring: How sponsorship awareness develops over time. *Journal of Advertising*, *43*(2), 142-154.

Weight, E., Taylor, K., & Cuneen, J. (2010). Corporate motives for sport sponsorship at mid-major collegiate athletic departments. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics, 3*, 119-130.