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Joseph Little

Grand Valley State University

Mark Kubik

Grand Valley State University

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Fan Reaction to Sponsoring Rival Sports Teams: The Case of West Michigan College Football Fans

Joseph Little, Ph.D., Department of Marketing
Mark Kubik, M.B.A., Department of Marketing



Joseph Little



Mark Kubik

Introduction

A local business sponsoring a little league or high school sports team or even the “company softball team” is often the means by which a team is able to purchase necessary equipment and supplies for the team to compete. Perhaps you as a business leader have been approached and sponsored such a team.

However, during a recent college football season, an automobile manufacturer ran an advertising campaign in the Grand Rapids media market. The automobile manufacturer boasted that they were proud sponsors of the University of Michigan Football program, even though Michigan State University is much closer in proximity to Grand Rapids than the University of Michigan. A recent survey of 206

Grand Rapids Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) residents indicated that 46% were Michigan State fans, 30% were Michigan fans, 19% indicated they were not fans of either team, and 6% indicated they were fans of both teams, as shown below in **Figure 1**. Ironically, the automobile manufacturer was running television advertising boasting about sponsoring a team where 65% of the residents in the area were not fans. Furthermore, there is an obvious fierce rivalry between the two schools’ athletic programs.

Thus, the question, “Can sponsoring a sports team negatively affect the perception of the company among rival fans?” begs to be answered. Furthermore, “Will this negative perception of the sponsoring company affect the consumers’ willingness to purchase products from the sponsoring company?” While previous research has studied these questions, (Angell, Gorton, Bottomley, & White, 2016; Bergkvist, 2012; Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Olson, 2018), the current article introduces and tests a new model for fans’ reactions to rivalry sports sponsorships inasmuch as the results of previous research are somewhat contradictory.

The model being introduced, **Figure 2** below, is based on the consumer animosity model (Klein, Ettenson and Morris 1998) and the affect transfer model (Shimp, 1981). This model suggests that when a company is associated with an institution, such as a university football team (or any sports team), toward which the negative affect (anger) is directed, that company will be negatively affected by the association with that institution.

Figure 1: Grand Rapids MSA College Football Fandom

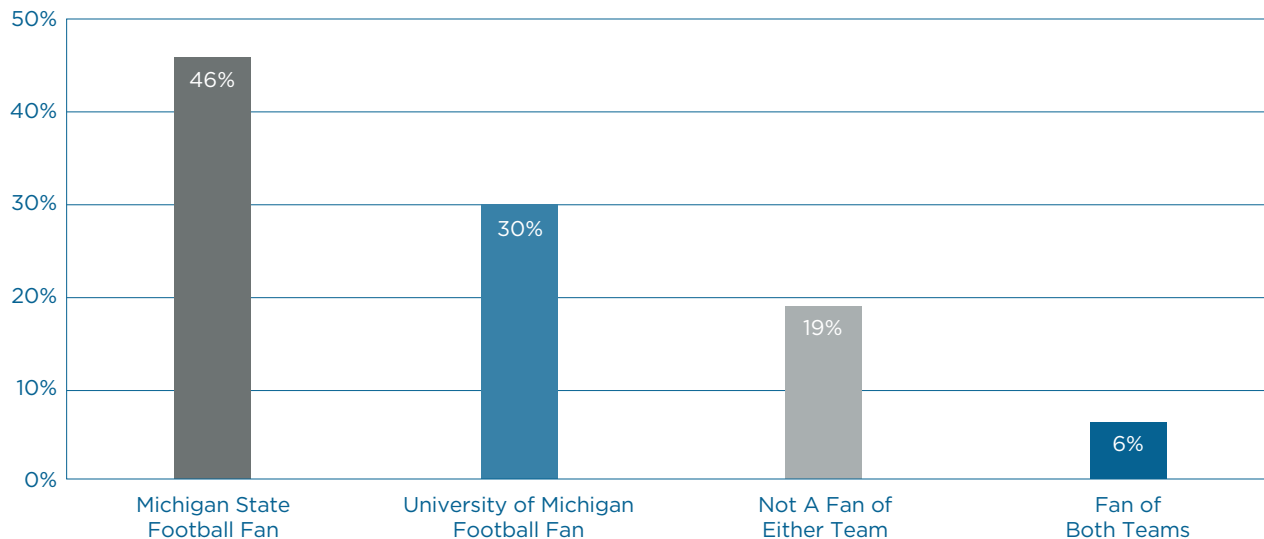
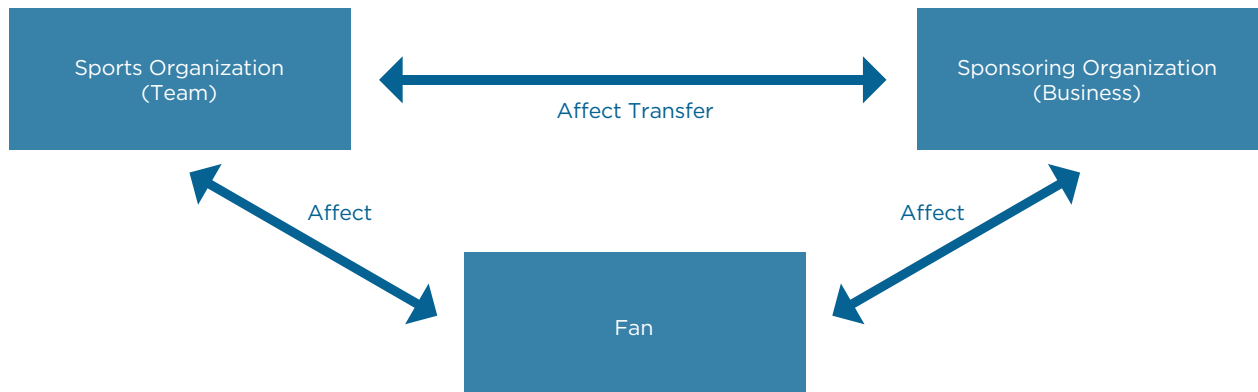


Figure 2: Affect Transfer Process/Consumer Animosity Model for Sponsorships



Methods

We surveyed 206 Grand Rapids, MI, MSA residents used as participants in the experiment. Each participant was given a list of brands (Toyota, Apple, and Coca-Cola) for which they answered their willingness to purchase each brand's products. Each participant also answered a questionnaire to measure their attitude towards their rival football team. Three weeks later, the same participants were again given the same measures for the brands but this time were told that each brand (Toyota, Apple, and Coca-Cola) was a sponsor of their rival football team before they filled out the survey. To investigate the hypotheses, the data was then used in a paired-t sample to analyze the difference in attitude before and after the realization that these firms were sponsors of each participant's rival football team.

Results

Results indicate that the mean animosity score for participants' rival football team was high (**Table 1**). A mean of 8.233 indicates a strong dislike of their rival football team. Also, results indicate that between Time 1 (before the participant was informed of the brands' sponsorship of their rival team) and Time 2 (three weeks later, when they were informed of the brands' sponsorship of their rival team) there was a significant drop in willingness to purchase each brands' products (**Table 2**). A higher mean indicates that there was a greater drop in fans' willingness to purchase tested brand products. As you can see, each brand showed a significant decrease in willingness to purchase the brands' products after the revelation that they sponsor the participants' rival team.

Table 1: Fans' Affect towards Rival Team

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Rival Team Affect	206	4.00	28.00	8.2330	5.73173

Table 2: Growth in Annual Patents by Location of Assignee

Brands (Time 1 – Time 2)	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1 CokeSum - CokeSum2	2.69903	4.96099	.34565	7.809	205	.000
Pair 2 AppleSum - AppleSum2	3.45631	4.71485	.32850	10.522	205	.000
Pair 3 ToyotaSum - ToyotaSum2	3.94660	4.50388	.31380	12.577	205	.000

Conclusion

The research indicates that a consumer's willingness to purchase from a sponsor of a rival team is significantly lowered when the consumer becomes aware of the sponsorship. Marketing professionals who manage sports sponsorships should take this into consideration. For example, placing advertisements that boast about sponsoring the University of Michigan Football team in West Michigan may result in Michigan State Football fans being less willing to purchase products from that sponsoring organization. Therefore, any promotional plan that carefully selects the proper markets to promote sponsorships is highly recommended. ■

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