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Naming-rights Sponsorship Outcomes and the Role of Fan Connections to College Campuses and Stadia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the immense focus on revenue generation in college sport, only a small number of NCAA Division I institutions have come to agreements with naming-rights sponsors for their football stadia (Popp, Eddy, & McEvoy, 2015). The key underlying issue is that many institutions are concerned about the effect a corporately-named football stadium will have on key stakeholders, and whether this commercialization will be seen as an attack on tradition (Bentubo, 2007). However, fans' attitudes toward naming rights relative to their perceptions of tradition and their attachment to college football stadiums are two areas which have received some attention in the literature, but are still not well understood (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Eddy, 2014).

While constructs such as team identification, attitudes toward sponsorship, and attitudes toward commercialism have received regular attention in the sponsorship literature, the attention to fan's perceptions toward tradition, team history, and the stadium itself has been more scattered (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Walraven, Koning, & van Bottenburg, 2012). The same can be said of the more general consumer behavior literature, although Boyle and Magnusson (2007) did find that a team's history and venue contributed to fans' social identity formation. Lee, Lee, Seo, and Green (2012) also found that the stronger the sense of home (or place attachment) amongst fans, then the greater their satisfaction with the stadium experience. Shifting the focus to naming-rights sponsorships, Eddy (2014) and Woisetschlager, Haselhoff, and Backhaus (2014) found that as fans felt more strongly about tradition, they tended to exhibit more negative feelings toward naming-rights sponsorships.

On the relationship between sponsorship outcomes and fans' connection to the stadium, Chen and Zhang (2012) examined what they called stadium identification (based loosely upon team identification), Eddy (2014) included the stadium as part of a team's tradition, and Delia (2014) briefly discussed the Carrier Dome as a landmark. Collectively, these studies loosely agree that the stronger a fan's connection to their favorite team's home stadium, the more negative they are towards the idea of naming-rights sponsorships. However, it has been acknowledged that more

research is needed on the role that the stadium plays in the processing of a naming-rights sponsorship (Chen & Zhang, 2012; Eddy, 2014).

The purpose of this presentation is to propose two conceptual models to better explain the efficacy of naming-rights sponsorships in college sport settings; one for settings where the stadium currently bears a corporate name, and one for those facilities that do not have a naming partner. Theoretically, these models will provide frameworks for deeper understanding of fans' attitudes toward tradition/history in college sports and fans' attitudes toward naming-rights sponsorship, and could further distinguish naming-rights sponsorships as a distinct sub-area of study within sponsorship research. From an industry standpoint, it is expected that future empirical findings that utilize these frameworks will help practitioners better understand how fans perceive stadiums, the importance of the stadium as a way of connecting with their favorite teams, and the role that connection plays in fans' processing of naming-rights agreements. Additionally, findings could provide evidence that college athletic administrators can use in evaluating the feasibility of future naming opportunities.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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