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Assessing Spectator Response to Sport Sponsorships at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have a strong tradition and football following, yet they struggle financially and lack sponsorship revenue. HBCU fans are understudied, and investigating their behavior would help athletic departments. The purpose of this study was to determine HBCU football consumers' response to sponsorships. Spectators' team and university identification, awareness, attitude, loyalty, goodwill, gratitude, and trust of sponsors were examined in relation to purchase intentions and positive word of mouth (WOM) of sponsors. Brand loyalty and gratitude led to increased purchase intentions. Brand attitude, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and goodwill led to positive WOM.

Keywords: *HBCU, college athletics, sponsorships, word of mouth, purchase intentions*

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Research Problem

While the sponsorship literature is vast, one college sport audience wielding a potentially powerful market that has yet to be assessed from a sponsorship perspective is that of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). HBCU football games are popular at all NCAA levels. Division I neutral site games, such as the Bayou Classic, receive the most notoriety, and often host up to 65,000 spectators (Grambling State University, 2016). The Southwestern Conference led Division I FCS level in attendance in 2017, averaging more than 13,000 per game (NCAA, 2018). Ten HBCUs were in the top 20 for attendance at that level (NCAA, 2018). At the Division II level, the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference has led the division in attendance for the past 15 consecutive years, averaging about 7,000 spectators per game (SIAC, 2018).

HBCU sporting events are unique and have been identified as overarching cultural experiences with alumni events, band performances, and college fairs (Cianfrone, Pitts, Zhang, Byrd, & Drane, 2010). Despite the popularity, it is widely reported that HBCUs struggle in athletic department funding (Armstrong, 2001; Jones & Bell, 2016; Nocera, 2016). HBCU athletic expenditures have increased significantly over the past 10 years, leading HBCU athletic directors and university presidents to reexamine their athletic departments and funding (Jones & Bell, 2016). Savannah State University's decision to drop from Division I to Division II athletics due to costs is an example of an HBCU institution that restructured its NCAA membership to better fit its current athletic department funding (Suggs, 2017). The rising costs and struggling athletic departments indicate the need for HBCU institutions to acquire additional revenue streams such as sponsorships.

HBCU sports are considered culturally distinct (Armstrong, 2002), yet their consumers are rarely studied (Stone, Cort, & Nkonge, 2012). HBCU consumer response to sponsorship is a needed area of inquiry (Li & Burden, 2009) given the financial state of the HBCU athletic departments. With limited budgets, increased sponsorship revenue could help stabilize athletic department finances, particularly among Division II HBCUs, where funding challenges are even greater. A better understanding of the HBCU football consumer base, specifically their impressions of sponsorships, can help athletic administrators target potential sponsors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine HBCU football consumers' response to sponsorships. This article is beneficial for HBCU athletic department staff members who solicit and activate sponsorships.

Background of HBCU Sponsorships

Many HBCU athletic contests are highly attended; for example, the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference has led Division II in football attendance for 13 consecutive seasons (Reddick, 2016). However, HBCU administrators have not capitalized on the value of their fans to corporate sponsors, missing out on what could be a strong revenue stream (Armstrong, 2001). A majority of HBCU

institutions do not employ an athletic department marketing or external relations employee, despite benefits of employing dedicated staff to secure sponsorships (Jackson, Lyons, & Gooden, 2001; Li & Burden, 2009). With limited support for soliciting sponsorships, HBCU athletic staff members must be strategic and well-informed to compete for corporate sponsors. Consumer research can provide insight on this understudied group to help staff acquire sponsors, formulate sponsorship plans, provide return on investment or objectives, and offer evidence for the need for dedicated marketing personnel for HBCU athletic departments to help drive revenue.

Literature Review

Corporations have multiple goals and seek varied outcomes for sport sponsorships (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). Positive word of mouth (WOM) and purchase intentions are two frequently desired consumer-focused behavioral outcomes of sponsorships (Visentin, Scarpi, & Pizzi, 2016). Positive WOM helps advertise products, as it is a more informal communication stream that comes from friends and family consumers trust, rather than corporations directly (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Purchase intentions are a strong metric for future behavior and a key performance indicator for corporate sponsors. An individual's WOM and purchase intention may be influenced by cognitive (e.g., awareness) and affective (e.g., attitude) responses (see Kim, Lee, Magnusen, & Kim, 2015 for review) or identification levels (e.g., identification with the university or team; Trail & James, 2015). Thus, HBCU athletic department staff members should seek to know consumers' response to sponsors.

The ability of a consumer to recognize brands is an important and often measure/desired outcome of sponsorship effectiveness (Keller, 1993). Researchers have shown brand awareness impacts consumer behavioral response, including purchase intentions (e.g., Cianfrone & Zhang, 2013; Hsiao, Hsu, Chu, & Fang, 2014; Ko & Kim, 2014) and WOM (Koronios, Psiloutsikou, Kriemadis, & Kolovos, 2016). HBCU sponsors would benefit from knowing how their sponsorships are received and if they impact WOM or purchase intentions.

Affective responses by HBCU consumers, specifically whether HBCU consumers have positive attitude toward the sponsors (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), appreciate the support of sponsors of their football programs (i.e., gratitude; Huang, 2015; Meenaghan, 2001), value the goodwill nature of the relationship (Meenaghan, 2001), trust the sponsors, and are loyal to the brands (Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016) are factors that may influence the purchase intentions and WOM of sponsors. Kim et al. (2015) indicated that trust and gratitude are two factors that have been understudied in sport sponsorship and warrant inclusion in future sponsorship studies. Armstrong (1999, 2001) found Black women have a strong brand loyalty to companies that valued and geared marketing campaigns toward the appreciation and respect of their culture. With the interest Black women found

in companies that value their culture, trust and gratitude may be noteworthy at HBCUs because the fans may perceive gratitude for the partnerships that help fund the program.

Finally, personal attributes also may impact sponsorship outcomes. Identification is a consumer's psychological affiliation or attachment with a group or individual, in this case a spectator's identification to their team or university (Trail & James, 2015). Consumers who are highly identified with the team are often shown to have strong sponsorship purchase intentions (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001). For HBCU spectators, university identification may also play a role in influencing purchase intentions or positive WOM. Because of the culturally distinct (Armstrong, 2002) nature of HBCUs, pride in the university may be stronger than in the team itself.

Our study attempts to fill the gap in college athletic sponsorship research by providing an understanding of HBCU football consumers' sponsorship response. HBCU athletic departments are lacking staff, as well as information, to strategically maximize their fanbase to potential sponsors. We were guided by the following questions:

RQ1: What variables impact HBCU football game attendees' purchase intentions of team sponsors?

RQ2: What variables impact HBCU football game attendees' positive WOM of team sponsors?

Method

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, we surveyed fans during pre-game and at half-time at three Division II HBCU football games in 2017. Participants ($N = 138$) completed paper-and-pencil surveys at tailgating locations in and around the stadium, as well as at a table outside the stadium. Researchers used the mall intercept approach to randomly solicit participants.

Instrument

The 51-item survey included 13 demographic and consumption items (Table 1). The 38 identification and sponsorship items were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We measured team and university identification with three items each (Trail, Robinson, Dick, & Gillentine, 2003) and adapted awareness items from Wear et al. (2016). We measured the following affective variables: attitude (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Ko & Kim, 2014), brand loyalty (Wear et al., 2016), goodwill (Dees et al., 2008), gratitude (Huang, 2015), and trust (Ko & Kim, 2014). Sample outcome items include "I am likely to purchase from the team corporate sponsors" and "I say positive things about the team corporate sponsors."

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship Variables

Factor	Item	N	α	M	SD
Cognitive	Brand Awareness		0.75	4.00	1.35
	I can recognize the team's corporate sponsors among other competing brands.	132		4.44	1.88
	I am aware of the team's corporate sponsors.	122		4.29	1.86
	I know what the team's corporate sponsors look like.	116		3.98	1.86
	Some characteristics of the team's corporate sponsors come to mind quickly.	135		4.24	1.89
	I have difficulty imagining the team's corporate sponsors in my mind. (R)	122		4.35	1.90
	I can quickly recall the team's corporate sponsors.	134		3.68	1.92
Affective	Attitude		0.90	5.17	1.36
	Overall, my attitude toward corporate sponsors of the team is positive.	133		5.33	1.62
	Overall, my attitude toward corporate sponsors of the team is positive.	122		5.27	1.53
	Overall, I like corporate sponsors of the team.	129		5.07	1.55
	I think favorably of corporate sponsors of the team.	120		4.82	1.47
	Goodwill		0.87	4.80	1.36
	The team sponsors are involved with their community.	129		4.50	1.47
	Corporate sponsors try to improve the team.	127		5.05	1.69
	The team benefits from corporate sponsors.	120		4.96	1.60
Corporate sponsors care about the fans of the team.	116		4.71	1.57	
Trust		0.72	4.91	1.14	
I can count on the team.	120		4.71	1.50	
The team corporate sponsors have integrity.	121		4.91	1.51	
The team corporate sponsors are reliable.	118		4.86	1.48	
I don't trust the companies that sponsor the team. (R)	131		2.96	1.77	

Table 1 (cont.)

	Gratitude	I have bought products based on my gratitude for the extra effort of the team corporate sponsors.	130	0.84	4.79	1.31
		I have spent more money on the team corporate sponsors because I owed it to them.	119		3.26	1.77
		I am grateful for the team corporate sponsors.	121		5.16	1.59
		I am thankful for team corporate sponsors.	132		5.60	1.61
		I feel a sense of gratitude toward the team corporate sponsors.	130		5.18	1.58
	Brand Loyalty	I consider myself to be loyal to the team corporate sponsors.	132	0.84	4.86	1.51
		The team corporate sponsors would be my first choice.	121		4.68	1.72
		I will not buy other brands if the team corporate sponsors are available.	122		4.89	1.59
Identification	Team ID	Being a fan of the team is very important to me.	133	0.94	5.73	1.49
		I am a committed fan of the team.	132		5.77	1.57
		I consider myself to be a "real" fan of the team.	120		5.63	1.61
	University ID	I identify with the university rather than with any specific team.	123	0.66	5.39	1.40
		I am a fan of all of the university teams and not just a specific sport.	122		4.80	1.80
		I support the university as a whole, not just its athletic teams.	135		5.54	1.72
			135		5.81	1.73
Outcome						
	Purchase Intentions	I am likely to purchase from the team corporate sponsors.	130	0.86	4.97	1.53
		I anticipate doing business with the team corporate sponsors.	129		5.26	1.69
		I make it a point to purchase from the team corporate sponsors.	132		4.81	1.79
	Positive WOM	I say positive things about the team corporate sponsors.	132	0.78	4.90	1.47
		I encourage my friends and relatives to buy team corporate sponsors brands.	132		5.31	1.65
		I recommend the brands of the team corporate sponsors to someone who seeks my advice.	122		4.80	1.61
			133		4.73	1.78

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated on demographics and sponsorship variables. Regression analysis was conducted to examine if awareness, attitude, goodwill, gratitude, trust, loyalty, team identification, and university identification impacted positive WOM and purchase intentions. The sample size was deemed appropriate for the eight predictor variables used, based on Siddiqui's (2013) argument that when using multiple regression analysis, the desired sample size is between 15 to 20 observations for each predictor variable.

Results

The participants were evenly distributed in gender identification (female 51.8%), ranged from 18 to 91 years old ($M = 37.1$, $SD = 20.7$), and were majority Black or African American (79.1%). Many were either current students (41.7%) or alumni (14.4%). More than 30% of respondents had an annual income of \$50,000 or greater and 38% held at least a bachelor's degree. A third of fans reported attending all of the home football games during the previous season and most (71.7%) anticipated attending all of the home football games in the current season.

Figure 1 and Table 1 show the descriptive statistics for the sponsorship related variables. In most cases, the average sponsor survey responses were above the midpoint (4.0) score, reflecting a positive response to the HBCU sponsors. To address RQ1, the cognitive, affective, and identification variables were analyzed to determine impact on purchase intentions. The results of the regression indicated brand loyalty ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$) and gratitude ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$) positively and significantly predicted purchase intentions. To address RQ2, the variables were analyzed to see which positively predicted WOM. The results of the regression indicated attitude ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), brand awareness ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$), brand loyalty ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), goodwill ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$), and trust ($\beta = -.16$, $p < .05$) significantly predict WOM (Table 2).

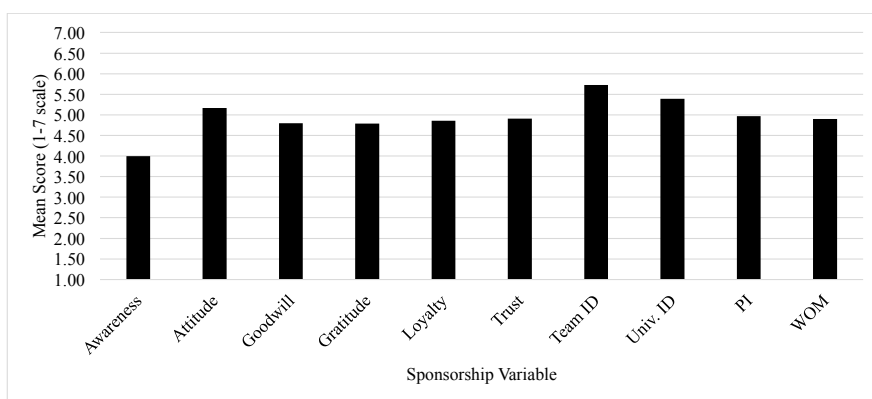


Figure 1. HBCU Spectators' Responses to Sponsorships

Table 2*Indicators of Purchase Intentions and Word of Mouth*

	R^2	Standardized β	t	P
Purchase Intentions	.87			
Attitude	.13		1.31	.19
Brand Awareness	.07		1.45	.15
Brand Loyalty	.24		2.76	.00***
Goodwill	.11		1.15	.25
Gratitude	.45		4.76	.00***
Trust	-.01		-.18	.85
Team ID	.08		1.19	.24
University ID	-.07		-1.15	.25
Word of Mouth	.88			
Attitude	.26		2.72	.00**
Brand Awareness	.11		2.49	.05*
Brand Loyalty	.36		4.20	.00***
Goodwill	.35		3.86	.00**
Gratitude	.02		0.24	.81
Trust	-.16		-2.26	.05*
Team ID	-.01		-0.16	.88
University ID	.11		1.88	.06

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Discussion and Implications

The HBCU fan base is important to study as they have been shown to be culturally distinct (Armstrong, 2002) and avid consumers (Reddick, 2016). We found the demographics and identification of HBCU spectators were consistent with past HBCU studies (Armstrong, 2002; Cianfrone et al., 2010). The spectators were frequent attendees who identified with the team ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.49$) and university ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.40$). These results support past literature indicating HBCU fans have a strong psychosocial involvement to their team and university (Armstrong, 2002). High team identification is important to athletic departments as it can lead to positive consumption, such as attendance and merchandise purchases. However, despite the strong team and university identification findings, neither led to purchase intentions or positive WOM of the sponsors. Overall, spectators had favorable (above the midpoint) responses to the HBCU team sponsors, providing a positive initial assessment of the sponsorship effects.

Through RQs 1 and 2, we sought to understand the factors influencing the sponsorship outcomes of consumers' purchase intentions and positive WOM. Brand loyalty was found to be a predictor of both purchase intentions and positive WOM. This finding suggests HBCU team sponsors' products and services might be among the first choice for these consumers and showed a positive relationship to purchase intentions and positive WOM. Athletic department staff should relay

these benefits of brand loyalty to potential sponsors. Our findings also support research completed by Armstrong (2001) that indicated Black women were loyal to brands they felt valued their culture. Spectator gratitude of the HBCU sponsors also influenced purchase intentions of sponsors. It appears HBCU spectators appreciate companies that invest in their football team. Fans may feel grateful that companies are valuing their events and turn that appreciation to shopping from corporate sponsors' brands, thereby increasing the value for corporate sponsors.

For positive WOM, our research shows brand attitude, awareness, loyalty, goodwill, and trust are all significantly related to WOM among the target population. HBCU athletic administrators can use these favorable findings to promote the benefits of sponsorships to potential partners. For example, as it relates brand awareness, sponsorship proposals that contain activation to maximize awareness of the sponsorship would be most effective. Additionally, related to goodwill, activation should communicate the relationship and how the sponsor is helping the team and university, including both university and team images. A focus should be on improving the attitude and loyalty to the sponsor. Surprisingly, we found trust negatively predicted positive WOM. This indicates sponsors should not focus on a trust relationship with HBCU football consumers, but rather brand attitude, awareness, loyalty, and goodwill when creating sponsorship signage and activation for these consumers.

We found participants were mid-range in their level of awareness of the team sponsors ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.35$). This was the lowest sponsorship response. This finding may have been the result of the limited sponsorship activation at the university studied. While the team had six sponsors, there was little signage for these sponsors in-stadium. The moderate findings suggest, at this university, the athletic departments and sponsors could do more with signage in the stadium to try to increase brand awareness of corporate sponsors. These results indicate the institution is not taking advantage of the unique atmosphere at HBCU football games; institutions can work with the sponsors to increase branding in the stadium and include game day activation and events.

Sponsors would benefit from knowing that HBCU consumers have strong goodwill toward sponsors, consistent with past research on fans at elite college football programs (Dees et al., 2008). Additionally, sponsors could value the opportunity in an HBCU partnership in knowing that fans have a positive attitude toward sponsors of their team and would be likely to talk about the sponsor in a positive manner. Previous studies have found attitude also leading to purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2015). These consumer responses should be indicated in sponsorship proposals to increase the attractiveness of the HBCU fanbase to corporate sponsors.

HBCU athletic departments could use the results from this study to leverage their football consumers to increase corporate partnerships. HBCUs have a strong following that can provide a financial advantage to corporate sponsors via positive

WOM or purchase intentions. It is important to communicate these strengths and work with corporate sponsors to create the right partnerships that can lead to the best deals for both the corporate sponsor and institution.

Limitations and Future Research

While the data for this study were collected from one HBCU program during one football season, it provides a needed exploratory assessment of the HBCU consumer response to sponsorships. The researchers in this study did not differentiate between surveys completed outside the stadium versus inside of the stadium. Specifically in regard to awareness, future research can compare these two groups to better understand sponsorship awareness levels between fans inside and outside venues. As only one institution was used in this study, the university identification and team identification of fans at this institution might differ from other HBCU fans. Additional studies can expand these results to encompass more HBCU athletic programs and fans, at both the Division I and Division II level. Additionally, we solicited responses from fans at the games, so further research can use social media or email distribution lists to reach other consumers. HBCU institutions need data to help them find corporate sponsors and increase revenue for their athletic programs, and additional research can further analyze how these variables are all connected to HBCU athletics. Increased literature can create resources for these low-budget institutions, helping them not only maintain, but build, their athletic programs for success.

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