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Sponsorship Effectiveness in Ultimate Fighting Championship [Abstract]

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Motivation

The purpose of the current study is to determine the level at which ultimate fighting championship (UFC) event viewers recall and recognize fighter and event sponsors. We seek to answer several questions: (a) Are the main sponsors of the individual fighters more memorable to consumers than event sponsors? (b) What causes an event sponsor to be remembered? (c) How does involvement, sponsor/event fit, and sponsor recognition influence purchase intentions? Many researchers have advanced the sponsorship effectiveness literature through recall and recognition research (e.g. Barros, de Barros, Santos, & Chadwick, 2007; Bennett, Hensen, & Zhang, 2002; Nufer & Buhler, 2010; Walsh, Kim, & Ross, 2008). However, there is little understanding of UFC event sponsorship effectiveness. Over the past decade UFC's popularity has caused television broadcasts to increase tremendously. "UFC television events now draw better cable ratings in key demographics than NBA, NHL, and MLB games" (Kim, Greenwell, Andrew, Lee, & Mahony, 2008, p. 109). "Brand recall is unaided" (Walsh et al., 2008, p. 206) and when consumers are able to recall a sponsor they are "enhancing brand preference for the sponsors products" (Barros et al., 2007, p. 169). Recognition studies focus on aided recall from a list of potential sponsors (Bennett et al., 2002).

Methods

This study used a convenience sample of students enrolled in a sport management course at a large southwest university. The current sample consists of 60 participants, mainly white (73%) male (60%), with an average age of 21 years old. This sample size will increase after August 22, 2011, as we will be collecting more participants on this date. Participants were asked to watch a 25 minute pre-recorded fight. The video was selected because it included the entire main-event of UFC 79 (i.e. pre-event videos, fighter walk-ins and introductions, fight, and the post-fight interviews). Both fighters received approximately the same amount of sponsorship exposure during the video. Fighter sponsors were shown on the clothing of training staff and fighter, as well as their sponsor posters. Event sponsors were seen throughout the video. After the video they were asked to recall as many sponsors of the fighters as they could remember, without help. The same method was used for event sponsor recall. Then they were asked to select correct fighter sponsors from a list of 10 brands, five actual and five pseudo sponsors. The same method was used for the event sponsors recognition. Then they responded to questions about sponsor/event fit ($\alpha=.879$), purchase intentions ($\alpha=.785$), and involvement ($\alpha=.943$).

Results

Of all fighter sponsors, the winning fighter's clothing sponsor was recalled the most (63%). Only 17% recalled the losing fighter's clothing sponsor, even though both had equal exposure. The rest of the fighter's sponsors were rarely recalled. Interestingly, recognition rates increased for the losing fighter's clothing sponsor (17% to 58%). Likewise, the winning clothing sponsor received a 24-percentage point. The most commonly recalled event sponsor was Harley Davidson and Mickey's Fine Malt Liquor, with 40% of participants recalling both. Another major sponsor, Lumber Liquidators, was recalled by 18.3 percent of the sample. During recognition, Harley received a 22-percentage point increase, Mickey's 17-percentage point increase, and Lumber Liquidators 23-percentage point increase. To determine predictors of purchase intentions, we used a linear regression. Purchase intentions were positively predicted by involvement ($\beta=.281$, $p=.022$), sponsor/event fit ($\beta=.330$, $p=.006$), and event sponsor recognition ($\beta=.1.97$, $p=.103$) ($F=6.697$, $df = 56$, $p<.05$). There were no issues with multi collinearity ($VIF<1.08$, $CI<13.37$).

Implications

The winning fighter's clothing company was recalled and recognized at a higher rate than that of the losing fighter. This might suggest that favorable attitudes toward the winning fighter might cause the consumer to remember the fighter's sponsors. This might be further explained by the participants remembering the losing fighter's clothing company at a higher rate, only after they were reminded. Results of the event sponsor recall and recognition have several interesting implications. Harley Davidson had a large logo on the center of the ring, and was the main sponsor of the event. They also had virtual logos during the introduction of the fighters. Mickey's was recalled at the same rate as Harley, even though Mickey's largest logo was smaller than Harley's. Mickey's logo was seen more than Harley's, due to where the fighters spent most of the fight. Therefore, sponsors should be aware that their logos might be recalled more often if they are in the view of the consumers. Fights that occur predominantly standing up, may have a wider camera shot of the ring; so larger logos may be more visible. However, fights that occur primarily on the ground, such as this study's fight (GSP/Hughes), may have closer camera angles, which may not show all the sponsors. Therefore, sponsors should also be aware of the type of fighters performing before negotiating the sponsorship deal. Our linear regression reveals that when consumers are more involved, find there to be a higher sponsor/event fit, and are able to recognize the sponsors, they are more likely to purchase the sponsor's goods or services. It is important for sponsors and event promoters to recognize the importance of fit and recognition of sponsors when attempting to induce purchase intentions.

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