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Sponsorship Awareness, Attitudes, and Purchase Intentions of Road Race Series Participants

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Abstract

In light of the economic recession, the sport of running has remained strong in the United States, experiencing growth in participation, number of races, and apparel sales (Running USA, 2010). Because this sport grew during a period of otherwise economic decline, and because sponsors are often vital to the existence of road races, the researchers sought to examine sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, and purchase intentions of road race series participants and to examine differences in these variables based on demographics, level of identification with the series, and usage of the series website and/or Facebook page. No significant differences existed between respondents based on demographics, but several significant differences were found based on level of identification with the series, indicating that those more highly identified were able to correctly identify more sponsors, had a more positive attitude toward sponsors, and indicated a greater intent to purchase from sponsors.

Introduction

Research shows that over half of the US population participates in sport on a regular basis in any given year (Humphreys & Ruseski, 2009). Furthermore, the economic value of participant sport in the US was found to be two to four times larger than that of spectator sport (Humphreys & Ruseski, 2009; Kim, Smith, & James, 2010). A study by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (2008) found that over 24 million Americans participated in the sport of running/jogging on a regular basis, ranking it as one of the most popular participatory physical activities behind walking, stretching, and lifting weights. Additionally, the study showed that running/jogging experienced a 30.8% increase in participation between 2000 and 2007 (SGMA, 2008).

Despite the US recession that began in 2007, the sport of running has remained strong, witnessing increases in the number of participants, running apparel sales, and the number of running events held throughout the country (Running USA, 2010). The number of runners classified as core participants, or

those who train year-round, experienced a 9.2% increase from 2008 to 2009, with 25.5 million people in the US in this category (Running USA, 2010). Additionally, the number of US runners who completed a marathon increased 8.5% from 2009 to 2010, and the number of runners who completed a half marathon increased 24% in the same time frame, a phenomenon that Running USA (2011) referred to as half marathon “hyper-mania” (p. 4). Additionally, the number of runners who finished a road race grew 10% from 2009 to 2010, the largest percent increase that Running USA has reported since it began keeping track of road racing statistics in 1999 (Running USA, 2011). The total number of running events held in the US grew from 17,070 in 2009 to 22,825 in 2010, and running apparel sales were up 23% in 2010 (Running USA, 2010; Running USA, 2011).

Although much is known about the number of running participants in the US, little is known about running participants’ feelings towards road race sponsors, which are often vital to the existence of participatory sporting events such as road races. Numerous studies

have examined recall or recognition of sponsors from sport spectators' perspectives, but few have examined it under the lens of sport participation. Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) stated, "participants and supporters of these events may be different than the average sport consumer" (p. 148), and asserted that sport participants may be more likely to purchase products and services from participatory event sponsors. Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) urged researchers to continue examining sponsorship awareness among participants in grassroots and niche sports. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to further the participant sport sponsorship literature by completing a replication study based on previous sponsorship research (e.g., Bennett, Cunningham, & Dees, 2006; Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002; Maxwell & Lough, 2009; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006) examining Midwestern road race series participants' levels of sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, and intent to purchase; and to examine differences in these variables based on demographic variables, level of identification with the road race series, and usage of the series website and/or Facebook page. While this research replicates the methodology of the previously cited studies, it differs from past literature in its context, as it examines sponsorship from the point-of-view of race series participants and also includes an examination of social media, which was not examined in any previous studies.

Literature Review

Past sponsorship research has focused a great deal of attention on the effectiveness of sport sponsorships using measures such as sponsor recognition, intent to purchase from sponsors of sporting events, and the perceived benefits of sponsorship (e.g., Bennett et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2002; Maxwell & Lough, 2009; Nicholls, Roslow, & Dublisch, 1999; Pitts & Slattery, 2004). For example, Bennett et al. (2006) examined sponsorship awareness of attendants at a professional tennis tournament, and found that most spectators were able to identify the official sponsors. The percentages of correct identification for eight sponsors ranged between 65.4% to 100.0%. The majority of spectators also indicated that their attitudes towards a company and their purchase intentions were influenced by the company's sponsorship of the tennis tournament. In a similar study, Maxwell and Lough (2009) examined sponsorship recognition of women's college basketball game attendees in one arena containing signage and one arena containing no signage. The percentage of attendees correctly identifying official sponsors at the arena with signage was only 1.69% higher than those at the arena without signage, and the researchers con-

cluded that "Spectator identification levels significantly contributed to correct sponsor recognition" (p. 195).

In terms of the interpretation of recall and recognition levels, previous studies did not follow a specific recognition continuum, and instead the levels deemed high or low depended on the results of the individual study. For example, in Bennett et al.'s (2002) examination of action sports, a 57.8% recognition level of Tony Hawk as an action sports athlete was considered high, as he was the most recognized action sports athlete in the study. Conversely, in Bennett et al.'s (2006) study of professional tennis tournament sponsors, a recognition level of 65.4% for Pepsi was considered low since it was the least recognized sponsor in the study. Most sponsorship recognition studies seem to compare their results to those of previous research (e.g., Maxwell & Lough, 2009; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Pitts & Slattery, 2004; Portlock & Rose, 2009).

One commonality between many of the previous studies is their evaluation of sport sponsorship from the sport spectator's perspective. What makes the current study unique is the application of previous research examining sport sponsorship from a different perspective: that of the sport *participant*. Additionally, the current study examines website and social media usage and their relation to sponsorship awareness and recognition, which has not been studied in previous sponsorship research.

Research on sponsorship effectiveness from the sport participant's perspective is fairly limited in scope and has only begun to emerge in recent years. One such study is that of Miloch and Lambrecht (2006), in which sponsor recall, recognition, and purchase intentions of participants, spectators, and volunteers were examined at a grassroots sport event in the Midwest. The study found that recall and recognition rates were lower but comparable to other sponsorship awareness studies, and those with a greater interest in the sporting event indicated a greater likelihood of purchasing from sponsors. In terms of demographic characteristics, those respondents between the ages of 26-45 indicated a significantly higher likelihood of purchasing from sponsors than those in other age groups.

Along with Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) research on sport participants, a study by Filo, Funk, and O'Brien (2010) also examined sponsorship awareness of participants at a charity sporting event, finding that the degree of a participant's event attachment influenced his/her intentions of purchasing sponsor products as well as his/her intentions of participating in the event. The participant's image of sponsors did not, however, influence his/her intentions of participating in the event.

Finally, Kim, Smith, and James (2010) introduced the concept of gratitude in participatory sport sponsor-

ship with a survey of non-elite triathletes, which found those with a higher level of gratitude towards the sponsor had a higher intention of purchasing products from the sponsor. This finding, along with those of Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) and Filo et al. (2010), lends credence to the idea that those participants who feel a greater sense of identification, attachment, or gratitude toward an event or sponsor are more likely to purchase sponsor products or services. Kim et al. (2010) concluded that “incorporating feelings of gratitude may prove to be advantageous for potential sponsors within the participant sports industry” (p. 53).

This study also sought to examine participants’ level of identification with the race series. Previous studies involving identification have utilized a variety of measures. Miloch and Lambrecht (2006) asked participants a question about how interested they were in the event, and the identification level was measured based on the respondent’s answer on a five-point Likert scale. Similarly, Portlock and Rose (2009) measured three items relating to level of interest, enjoyment, and importance on a five-point Likert scale and used the mean score of the responses to categorize participants as having a high, medium, or low involvement with the 2006 FIFA World Cup. Other researchers, such as Maxwell and Lough (2009), utilized Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) Sport Spectator Identification Scale.

No other known studies have examined the relationship between sponsor awareness, attitudes, and purchase intentions based on the participant’s frequency of visiting the sporting event’s website or social media accounts (i.e., Facebook). Of the limited research that has addressed the Internet and social media’s role in sport, it has been identified as a valuable relationship marketing tool that has the ability to “build meaningful relationships through opportunities for communication, interaction, and value” (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 436). Furthermore, from a sport fan perspective, Broughton (2010) suggested that interaction on social media websites can also increase a fan’s level of identification with the sport organization.

Because the scope of research on sponsorship from the sport participants’ perspective is limited, and because past researchers focusing on this topic have traditionally studied participants of a one-time sporting event, this study sought to examine sponsorship recognition and intent to purchase from the perspective of participants in a road race series consisting of 35 races over the course of 10 months.

Background on the Magnificent 7 Series

A road race series is described by the Runner’s World website (2009) as events “sponsored by community running clubs, where runners earn points by compet-

ing in 5-Ks and 10-Ks over the course of a season” (para. 2). Road race series can range from a few to many races, and participants often earn points based on their participation, finishing time, or finishing place. Additionally, awards are typically given to the top finishers upon the completion of the season.

This study examined participants in the Magnificent 7 Series, which was first established “to promote participation in road races held in the 7 south-central Indiana counties of: Brown, Greene, Jackson, Lawrence, Monroe, Morgan, Owen” (Magnificent 7 Series website, n.d., para. 1). The 2011 season marked the 15th year for the series, and consisted of 35 road races from the months of March through December. The races ranged in distance from 5 to 10 kilometers. Each year, series participants receive championship points based on their overall or age group place in each race, and awards are given to the top three overall male and female runners, the top five male and female walkers, and the age group winners for each gender upon the completion of the season. Participants can compete in as many or as few races as they choose in order to earn points in the series.

The series experienced stagnant participation numbers from its inception in 1997 until 2010, when series organizers launched a more aggressive marketing campaign, utilizing traditional advertising methods such as billboards and newspaper print ads, as well as an online marketing campaign via social networking sites Facebook and Twitter. The average number of participants per race increased from 108 in 2009 to 140 in 2010. In 2011 the series included a title sponsor for the first time ever, continued its marketing efforts, and created greater activation platforms for many of its sponsors. For example, the series assisted in creating a team of runners supported by one of the series sponsors, encouraged sponsors to have representatives from their organization on-site at the races, and helped two sponsors develop and implement their own races, which were included in the series schedule. All of these efforts resulted in another participation increase with an average of 162 participants per race.

Method

Participants and Procedures

This study employed an online survey methodology in order to determine sponsor recognition and intent to purchase sponsors’ products and services among Mag 7 Series participants. The survey was conducted in August of 2011 after 21 of the series’ 35 races were completed. An email containing a link to an online web survey was sent to all who participated in at least one Mag 7 event up to that point in the 2011 season

and had provided an email address on an entry form. The survey link was also posted on the Mag 7 Facebook page, Twitter account, and website. The survey remained active for two weeks, upon which time a total of 166 usable surveys were collected. The survey software allowed just one response to be recorded from each IP address, preventing participants from taking the survey multiple times. At that point in the season, the average number of participants per event was 168. It is important to note that many of the participants in these events were repeat runners; that is, they participated in multiple events. Therefore, the average of 168 runners per event did not represent 168 unique runners per event. Because many of these participants were repeat runners, the sample size was deemed representative of the series participants.

Similar to the methodology employed by Kim et al. (2010), this study compared the demographic information of the survey respondents to that of known running participants, available from prior research (Running USA, 2010). These values can be viewed in Table 1, which shows that the demographic variables of gender and age are almost identical, while income and education were very close. The only demographic variable that was not fully available from Running USA's (2010) study was race. In the current survey, 95.2% of the respondents were White, 1.80% were Black, 1.20% were Latino, 0.60% were American Indian, 0.60% were Asian, and 0.60% categorized themselves as "Other."

Additionally, this study examined respondents' involvement with the Mag 7 Series. The average number of total races respondents reported running each year was 10.40, and the average number of Mag 7 races per year was 7.38 out of 35 possible races. Respondents were also asked how many years they had participated in the Mag 7 Series, including the current year of 2011, and the average number of years was 3.68.

Survey Instrument

The survey questions were designed based on the methods employed by previous sponsorship researchers (e.g., Bennett, Cunningham, & Dees, 2006;

Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2002; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2010; Maxwell & Lough, 2009; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Portlock & Rose, 2009). In addition to the demographic information reported in the previous section, the survey also asked respondents questions about their involvement with the series and their usage of the Mag 7 website and Facebook page.

In order to determine respondents' sponsor recognition, an item was modeled after studies by Pitts and Slattery (2004) and Maxwell and Lough (2009), in which both official sponsors and "dummy" sponsors were presented and the respondents had to select the correct sponsors. Dummy sponsors were defined by Maxwell and Lough (2009) as "businesses that are not official sponsors of the sport organization" (p. 192). Pitts and Slattery (2004) reported that dummy sponsors should be listed among the actual sponsors in sponsorship recognition questions in order to "add to the confidence of the measure" (p. 49). The current survey contained a list of 20 sponsor names, eight of which were correct sponsors and 12 of which were dummy sponsors. All of the businesses named were actual businesses in the community in which the series takes place. Respondents were not given the correct number of sponsors to select, and were asked, "Which of the following businesses/organizations sponsor the Mag 7 Series (select all that apply)?" The actual sponsors and dummy sponsors were listed in a random order and were not placed in lists according to product category.

In order to measure respondents' attitudes toward sponsors and their intentions to purchase from sponsor companies, the survey modeled three items from Bennett et al.'s (2006) study of professional tennis tournament attendees. All three items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 7 "strongly agree." The first item asked respondents to select their level of agreement with the statement, "I believe it is good for companies to sponsor the Magnificent 7 Series." The second said, "My attitudes towards a company are influenced by whether they sponsor the Mag 7 Series." The third said, "I am more likely to purchase a company's products or services if it is a sponsor of the Mag 7 Series." Finally,

Table 1
Participant Demographic Comparison with Known Values

Demographic	Respondent Results	Known Results
Gender	Female: 55%, Male: 45%	Female: 53%, Male: 47%
Average Age	Female: 38.2, Male: 45.6	Female: 38.6, Male: 44.8
Income	Average household income range is \$60K - \$79K	The majority have an average household income of over \$75K
Education	69.8% hold a Bachelor's degree or higher	78% are college educated

Table 2
Sponsorship Recognition

Product Category	Sponsor Name	% Answering "Yes"
Sports Medicine	Bloomington Sports & Wellness (actual sponsor)	69.9%
	Bloomington Bone & Joint Clinic (dummy)	31.3%
	Orthopedics of Southern Indiana (dummy)	19.9%
	Bloomington Chiropractic Center (dummy)	18.7%
Shoes/Apparel	Indiana Running Company (actual sponsor)	80.7%
	Smith's Shoe Center (actual sponsor)	80.7%
	Shoe Carnival (dummy)	1.8%
Beverage	Oliver Winery (actual sponsor)	66.9%
	Best Beers (actual sponsor)	18.1%
	Coca-Cola (dummy)	2.4%
	Pepsi (dummy)	1.2%
	Olinger Distributing (dummy)	1.2%
Website	MyINStride.com (actual sponsor)	44.6%
	VisitBloomington.com (actual sponsor)	11.4%
	RunnersWorld.com (dummy)	5.4%
	IUHoosiers.com (dummy)	3.6%
Running Organization	Bloomington Area Runners Association (actual sponsor)	33.7%
	Red Eye Relay (dummy)	7.8%
	Road Race Management (dummy)	5.4%
	Monumental Marathon (dummy)	1.8%

respondents were asked to respond to the item, "How often have you purchased products from Mag 7 sponsors over the past year?" on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 indicating "never" to seven indicating "very often." This item was modeled after Bennett et al.'s (2002) study on action sports sponsorships.

Based on the findings from past participant-based sponsorship research such as Miloch and Lambrecht (2006), Filo et al. (2010), and Kim et al. (2010), as well as spectator-based sponsorship researcher such as Maxwell and Lough (2009), the researchers decided to measure the respondents' level of identification with the race series in order to determine whether this had any impact on sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, or intent to purchase. This portion of the survey was adapted from the method employed by Portlock and Rose (2009). Three items measured the respondents' level of identification with the race series. These items included the following statements: "I make many sacrifices to participate in Mag 7 races," "I organize my calendar to ensure I can participate in Mag 7 races", and "I feel bad if I have to miss a Mag 7 race." Participants were asked to respond to three items on a seven-point Likert scale with 1 indicating "strongly dis-

agree" and 7 indicating "strongly agree." A mean score was calculated for each respondent on the three items, and respondents were then placed into groups of high ($n = 47$), medium ($n = 86$), or low ($n = 33$) level of identification with the series. A mean score of less than 2.33 was categorized as low, between 2.34 and 4.66 was medium, and above 4.67 was deemed high.

Finally, participants were asked to respond to items regarding their frequency of visiting the race series website and Facebook page in order to determine their website and social media usage as related to the series. These items stated: "How often do you visit the Mag7RaceSeries.com website?" and "How often do you visit the Mag 7 Facebook page?" The items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale with 1 indicating "never" and 7 indicating "every day."

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 19. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze demographic characteristics, correct sponsor recognition rates, level of identification with the series, attitudes toward sponsors, and intent to purchase. In addition to descriptive statistics, the researchers also

Table 3
2011 Mag 7 Series Sponsors

Sponsor	Recognition Level	Year Sponsorship Began	Activation Methods in 2011
Indiana Running Company	80.7%	2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide bib numbers for every Mag 7 race, featuring the sponsor's logo behind the race number • 10% coupon attached to every bib number • Provided gift certificates as awards at some races
Smith's Shoe Center	80.7%	1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsored a team of 12 runners who wore Smith's-branded apparel at every race and were identified during pre-race introductions • Donated gift certificates as prizes at most races • Hosted the Smith's Shoe Center Three-Mile Foot Race, which started and ended at the store and featured a running expo with giveaways
Bloomington Sports & Wellness	69.9%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Title sponsor of the series • Logo appeared alongside Mag 7 logo in all official communication pieces • Logo prominently placed on Mag 7 van • Doctor and signage present at most races to provide rock taping
Oliver Winery	66.9%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsored a trail race at its vineyard, featuring a band, silent auction, food and wine • Logo on Mag 7 website
MyINStride.com	44.6%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magazine and website featured a Mag 7 runner in a column titled "Foot Fuel: Advice from a Real Runner"; link on the Mag 7 website
Bloomington Area Runners Association	33.7%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logo on Mag 7 website
Best Beers	18.1%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logo on Mag 7 website
VisitBloomington.com	11.4%	2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logo on Mag 7 website

utilized chi square analysis to determine whether differences existed between demographic variables and sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, or intent to purchase. Bivariate correlation analysis was used to reveal significant correlations between usage of the race series website or Facebook page and the correct identification of sponsors, likelihood of purchasing sponsor products, and frequency of purchasing sponsor products. One-way ANOVA tests were performed to determine if significant differences existed between the respondents' level of identification with the series and their attitudes toward sponsors, likeli-

hood to purchase from sponsors, and frequency of visiting the series website and Facebook page.

Results

As reported above, the demographics of the participants in this study were very similar to the demographics of core participants in the sport of running nationwide. Using chi square analysis, the authors did not find any significant differences between respondents' demographic information such as age, race, gender, income, or education level in relation to sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, or purchase intention.

Sponsor Recognition

As shown in Table 2, sponsor recognition for each of the eight series sponsors varied greatly. While some sponsors, such as Smith's Shoe Center (80.7%) and Indiana Running Company (80.7%), received high recognition rates, other sponsors such as VisitBloomington.com (11.4%) and Best Beers (18.1%) had much lower levels of recognition. Despite some sponsors' lower recognition levels, none of the dummy sponsors had higher recognition rates than the actual sponsor(s) in their product category. Of the 166 survey respondents, only one person correctly identified all eight sponsors. The average number of correct selections was 4.06 out of 8 (50.75%).

Table 3 reveals deeper information about each sponsor, such as the number of years each has been involved with the series and the activation efforts of each during the 2011 season.

Along with recognition percentages, the researchers also conducted bivariate correlation tests to determine if any significant correlations existed between Mag 7 website or Mag 7 Facebook usage and correct identification of series sponsors. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between respondents' frequency of visiting the Mag 7 website and their correct identification of sponsors such as Smith's Shoe Center ($r = 0.34$, $p < .01$), MyINStride.com ($r = 0.30$, $p < .01$), Best Beers ($r = 0.25$, $p < .01$), Bloomington Sports & Wellness ($r = 0.23$, $p < .01$), and to a lesser extent, Indiana Running Company ($r = 0.19$, $p < .01$) and Oliver Winery ($r = 0.17$, $p < .02$). Significant positive correlations also existed between respondents' frequency of visiting the Mag 7 Facebook page and correct identification of the following sponsors: Best Beers ($r = 0.25$, $p < .01$), MyINStride.com ($r = 0.24$, $p < .01$), Smith's Shoe Center ($r = 0.23$, $p < .01$), and BARA ($r = 0.21$, $p < .01$).

In terms of participation frequency, significant positive correlations existed between the number of Mag 7 races each respondent participated in and their correct identification of the following sponsors: Best Beers ($r = 0.44$, $p < .01$), Bloomington Sports & Wellness ($r = 0.27$, $p < .01$), Smith's Shoe Center ($r = 0.24$, $p < .01$), MyINStride.com ($r = 0.24$, $p < .01$) and BARA ($r = 0.22$, $p < .01$). No significant correlations existed, however, between the number of Mag 7 races run and correct identification of the Indiana Running Company, Oliver Winery, or VisitBloomington.com.

Attitudes Toward Sponsors

As previously noted, attitudes toward sponsors were measured using two statements adopted from a study by Bennett et al. (2006). The first item stated, "I believe it is good for companies to sponsor the Magnificent 7

Series." Results showed that 47.2% strongly agreed with this statement, and in general respondents showed a very high level of agreement ($M = 6.28$, $SD = 0.98$). The second item stated, "My attitudes towards a company are influenced by whether they sponsor the Mag 7 Series." Although 9.5% strongly agreed with this statement, the results indicated more indifference than the previous question ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.62$).

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for differences between the three identification level groups' attitudes toward sponsors, and found that significant differences existed between the groups' belief that it is good for companies to sponsor the series, $F(2, 156) = 5.79$, $p = 0.004$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicated that the significant differences occurred between the high and low identification groups and the medium and low identification groups, but not between the high and medium groups, which both appeared to have stronger positive attitudes towards companies sponsoring the series. An ANOVA was also used to test differences between the groups' responses to the statement, "My attitudes towards a company are influenced by whether they sponsor the Mag 7 Series." Results revealed significant differences, $F(2, 155) = 5.04$, $p = 0.008$. Tukey post-hoc comparisons revealed a significant difference between the high and medium identification groups, indicating that the highly identified group's attitudes towards companies were affected more strongly by whether or not the company sponsored the series.

Intent to Purchase from Sponsors

In order to determine Mag 7 Series participants' intent to purchase from sponsors, survey participants were asked to respond to two items using a seven-point Likert scale. One item, adopted from Bennett et al.'s (2006) study, said, "I am more likely to purchase a company's product or service if it is a sponsor of the Mag 7 Series." The responses indicated that 21.0% strongly agreed with the statement, and as a whole, respondents generally agreed with the statement ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.61$). The next item was adopted from Bennett et al.'s (2002) study and asked, "How often have you purchased products from Mag 7 sponsors over the past year?" Results revealed that most respondents had purchased from sponsors at some point over the past year ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.81$), and 17.0% indicated that they had purchased from sponsors very often.

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for differences between the three identification groups in their likelihood to purchase from series sponsors, which indicated a significant difference, $F(2, 154) = 4.86$, $p = 0.009$. Post hoc tests revealed significant differences between the high and medium identification groups and the

high and low identification groups, but not between the medium and low groups, signifying that the highly identified participants were more likely to purchase from sponsors.

Additionally, bivariate correlation analysis revealed significant positive correlations between the frequency of visiting the Mag 7 website and the likelihood of purchasing sponsor products ($r = 0.24, p < .01$) and the frequency of purchasing sponsor products in the last year ($r = 0.35, p < .01$). An ANOVA test revealed differences between the level of identification with the series and frequency of visiting the website, $F(2, 155) = 8.99, p < 0.000$. Post hoc tests showed differences between the high and medium identification groups and the high and low groups, but not between the medium and low groups, indicating that highly identified participants visited the Mag 7 site more often than those in the medium or low identification groups.

Finally, bivariate correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between the frequency of purchasing from Mag 7 sponsors over the past year and the number of friends who participate in Mag 7 races ($r = 0.44, p < .01$). Additionally, a significant positive relationship existed between the frequency of purchasing from sponsors and the expectations of family members to participate in Mag 7 races ($r = 0.35, p < .01$).

Discussion

This study sought to examine a Midwestern road race series participants' levels of sponsor recognition, attitudes toward sponsors, and intent to purchase, as well as to examine differences in these variables based on demographic variables, level of identification with the road race series, and usage of the series website and/or Facebook page. One of the major findings of this study relates to the frequency of usage of the series website and Facebook page. As previously stated, usage of the Internet and online social media has not been examined in past sponsorship recognition studies. A unique finding of this study was that the frequency of usage of both the website and Facebook page was positively correlated with the correct identification of sponsors; that is, those who visited the website more frequently were able to better identify the correct sponsors than those who did not visit the website frequently. Additionally, those participants who visited the website more frequently were also more highly identified with the series and indicated a higher likelihood of purchasing from sponsors. These findings solidify the importance of driving traffic to the website in order to increase sponsor recognition and level of identification, and in turn, to encourage greater support of sponsors in the form of purchasing their products/services. Future research should attempt to replicate this portion of the study in

order to assess whether this finding is true for other participatory sporting events.

In terms of sponsor recognition, those sponsors who were involved with the series for a longer period of time, as well as those with an on-site presence at Mag 7 races as indicated in Table 3, had much greater levels of recognition than those sponsors whose activation methods did not include any on-site presence at races. Although the findings of this study are unique to the race series examined, it is possible that other participatory sports could benefit from the findings, as well as other road races and road race series since the demographic information for the participants in this study were found to be very similar to the demographic information of runners in the US (Running USA, 2011). Sponsors should develop activation plans that incorporate an on-site presence at events and/or serve as a title sponsor of a race or other event. For example, although Oliver Winery did not have an on-site presence at events, it hosted a five-mile trail run at its vineyard, and achieved a much greater level of recognition (66.9%) than those sponsors who never hosted an event and did not have an on-site presence, such as MyINStride.com (44.6%), whose only activation method was featuring Mag 7 runners in its publication throughout the year. It would be fairly simple for a sponsor such as this to incorporate an on-site presence at races by placing a magazine rack containing the latest issue of the magazine near the registration table, where all participants must go to pick up their bib number before the race. Similarly, other sponsors wishing to have a greater on-site presence could easily develop methods of distributing marketing materials and/or product samples to participants at a registration table.

Although all sponsors' logos appeared on the Mag 7 website, results revealed that those sponsors with a much more active method of sponsorship were more highly recognized. Consumers are exposed to as many as 5,000 marketing messages every day (Johnson, 2009), and therefore it seems that even at the grassroots/community level of sport, sponsorship activation requires greater efforts than simple signage or logo placement. It is important for marketers and participatory sport organizers to understand this and work with sponsors to create unique activation methods that will stand out in the clutter of other daily messages.

In terms of participants' purchase intentions, the results revealed the majority of participants indicated they were more likely to purchase from a company if it was a Mag 7 sponsor. Additionally, those respondents whose friends participated in the series or those whose families expected them to participate in the series indicated they purchased products/services from Mag 7 sponsors more frequently in the past year. Based on

this finding, participatory sport organizations should be advised to develop incentives for family or friends to participate. For example, the race series could begin offering discounts to those participants who register as a group or family, create team divisions in the races to encourage more participation, offer special raffles or giveaways for those who bring a first-time participant to an event, or incorporate more children's fun runs to take place just before or after the Mag 7 races to encourage participants to bring their children.

The results from this study indicated participants with a greater level of race series identification felt that it was better for companies to sponsor the series, their attitudes towards companies were influenced based on whether or not the company sponsored the series, and they indicated a higher likelihood of purchasing products/services from series sponsors. These findings are consistent with those of previous sponsorship awareness and purchase intentions studies such as Maxwell and Lough (2009) and Filo et al. (2010), and are important for sport marketers because they indicated that the more highly identified a sport participant is, the greater likelihood that s/he will support event sponsors and purchase from these sponsors. Therefore, the ultimate goal for marketers of participatory sports should be to increase the level of identification a participant has with an event.

While this study focused on sponsorship in the participatory sport context, the results aligned closely with those studies focused on sport spectators, such as Maxwell and Lough's (2009) examination of sponsor recognition by women's college basketball fans and Bennett et al.'s (2006) study of professional tennis tournament attendees. This suggests that sport participants and sport spectators might be more similar than was previously thought in terms of their sponsorship recognition and purchase intentions. An interesting difference between this study and past research, however, is revealed when examining Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) study on participants of a grassroots sporting event. Their study found that participants' sponsor recognition rates were slightly lower than those in spectator studies. It is possible that this finding is due to the fact that the event they studied was a one-time event, while the event studied in this paper was a series that took place over a longer period of time. One similarity between Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) study and the present study, though, was their finding that recognition rates were much higher for those sponsors that had greater activation efforts.

A final finding worthy of discussion is that in relation to sponsor recognition, attitude toward sponsors, and purchase intention, the aspect that seemed to indi-

cate the greatest differences between respondents was their level of identification with the series, while demographic variables did not account for any significant differences. This is an important finding, because it indicates that a main priority of the series should be increasing the level of identification participants feel with the series, along with focusing marketing efforts on targeting people with certain demographic characteristics. Donovan, Carlson, and Zimmerman (2005) found that some personality traits were positively related to a person's level of identification in terms of sport spectators, so future research on participatory sport could address this idea as well. If the personality traits of sport participants are found to be related to identification level, this knowledge would allow sport marketers to target participants with the specific personality traits related to high identification.

Conclusion

This study revealed similar results to past sponsorship recognition and purchase intention research, though it did so under a different lens than previous studies. First, it examined these aspects of sponsorship from a participatory sport perspective. While some researchers (i.e., Filo et al.; Kim et al. 2010; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006) also examined participant sport, there is a dearth of available literature on this topic. More research on sponsorship in participatory sport is needed in order to adequately understand if and how participants differ from spectators in their sponsor recognition, recall, attitudes toward sponsors, and intent to purchase. While this study did not find any major differences between sport participants and past research on sport spectators, it is possible that differences indeed exist. One suggestion for future research is to revisit Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) method of examining both participants and spectators of the same sporting event in order to assess similarities and differences and to develop enhanced marketing strategies to more effectively reach both groups.

The second way in which this study differed from previous research was that it examined a participatory sport *series* rather than a one-time event. Therefore, the respondents to the survey in this study, for the most part, had participated in multiple events where they were exposed to the same sponsors multiple times. In comparing the results to those of Miloch and Lambrecht's (2006) study, it was evident that there were differences between the participants in a one-time event versus those who participated in a series. Future research on long-term participatory sporting events or series should be conducted to see if further differences emerge.

Finally, this study was unique in that it examined the relationship between frequency of website and social

media usage and sponsor recognition and purchase intentions. As the first known sponsorship study (participant or spectator) to examine the impact of website and social media usage on sponsorship recognition and purchase intentions, it sets a precedent for future sponsorship studies to follow. Crawford (2011) reported approximately 70% of all US households have Internet access and Facebook (2012) reports having over 845 million monthly active users worldwide. These figures point to the importance of utilizing wide-reaching online platforms such as websites or social media sites to communicate information about sponsors to sport participants and consumers. In future research, it is important for scholars to expand the present study's findings on this topic.

Another area of research that should be conducted to assist in the understanding of sponsorship recognition and purchase intentions is the concept of participant loyalty. Few sport marketing studies have examined the concept of loyalty from a participant perspective. Again, the majority of this research in a sport context has been conducted on sport spectators or fans. Park and Kim (2000) examined behavioral and affective loyalty of recreational fitness center participants in South Korea and concluded that "meaningful and distinct target markets could be developed using attitudinal loyalty profiles" (p. 204). Further research is needed to determine how loyalty impacts sponsorship recognition and intent to purchase in participatory sports.

Finally, this study was not without limitations. First, because some respondents selected both correct *and* incorrect sponsors in the recognition test, it is possible these respondents could have also indicated that they had purchased from sponsors in the past year who, in fact, are not actually Mag 7 Series sponsors. If any survey participants indicated that they purchased from a sponsor in the past year, but they actually purchased from a non-sponsor, this does not invalidate the results of the study. The survey asked for the participant's perception of whether or not they purchased from a sponsor in the past year, and if the respondent indicated "yes," then they perceived that they had purchased from a sponsor. This finding highlights the importance of sponsorship recognition. While some sponsors might very well benefit from their sponsorship via increased purchases by event participants, other non-sponsoring companies or organizations that are perceived by participants to be sponsors might also benefit from participant purchases as a result of their incorrect sponsor recognition. It is a limitation, however, that researchers should attempt to control for in future research.

Second, the findings of this study are unique to the race series examined, and therefore the results are not

generalizable to other race series or participatory sporting events. While conclusions can be drawn from the results to help guide participatory sport marketers in the future, these marketers must realize that their participants are unique from those who responded to this study's survey.

Lastly, the survey was conducted online, which could allow respondents to view the Mag 7 website while completing the survey to attempt to answer questions about sponsor recognition correctly. Because only one of the respondents correctly identified all eight sponsors, the researchers feel this was not a problem that occurred during the research, but it is still important to mention it as a limitation.

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