Environmental Sustainability Sponsorships: Examining the Organizational and Corporate Partner Financial Returns on Investment

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Inoue and Kent (2012) found that sport entities are effective platforms to promote pro-environmental behaviors. Subsequent researchers have explored this work and found that environmental fan engagement campaigns can influence pro-environmental behaviors of sport spectators during sporting events and in their everyday lives (Casper et al., 2014, 2017, 2020; McCullough & Trail, 2020; Trail & McCullough, 2018, 2020). These studies have further examined these efforts using theoretical frameworks (e.g., sustainable sport consumer evaluation model [SSCEM], Trail & McCullough, 2020) as a way to understand the antecedents and influences on these pro-environmental behaviors. Practitioners have advanced their efforts to improve environmental initiatives and engagement activities to include corporate partners (McCullough & Trail, 2020).

As these efforts progress among academics and practitioners, more research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these campaigns to report key performance indicators (e.g., financial ROI) to sport organizations' corporate partners. Such evaluations are important to justify and even raise the financial value of such sponsorship inventory. While McCullough and Trail (2020) examined a national sample without identifying a sport entity or particular environmental initiative, it is necessary to build upon this work by examining in a specific context. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to further test McCullough and Trail’s (2020) supplement to the SSCEM (Trail & McCullough, 2020) by examining the financial ROIs of an athletic department's sustainability campaign by examining the fit of a point of attachment (i.e., athletic department), sustainability-point of attachment fit, and responsiveness to messaging and their influence on financial ROIs (support of the athletic department and corporate sponsor).

Specifically, we proposed that perceived fit between the athletic department and environmental sustainability would predict responsiveness to environmental messaging from the athletic department directly (Hypothesis 1a) and indirectly through ascription of environmental responsibility to the athletic department (Hypothesis 1b). Ascription of responsibility would predict sustainability behavioral intentions directly (Hypothesis 2a) and indirectly through responsiveness to messaging from the athletic department (Hypothesis 2b). Furthermore, we proposed that attachment to the athletic department would increase responsiveness to messaging (H3) above that of the athletic department/sustainability fit. Lastly, we proposed that responsiveness to messaging from the athletic department would increase support for corporate partners both directly (H4a) and indirectly through support of the athletic department (H4b).

Data were collected from college football fans of an institution in the Midwest region of the United States using an internet-based survey after the 2019 football season (N=530). We found that a majority of our hypotheses were supported. Specifically, we found that responsiveness to messaging explained 39.0% of the variance of support of the athletic department, and in turn support of the athletic department explained 47.0% of the Support for Corporate Partners. Future research can explore the supplement to the SSCEM across other sport contexts including professional sport, participant events, and international sport organizations. Sport practitioners can further leverage this understanding to evaluate their environmentally focused sponsored initiatives. These implications, applications, and others will be discussed during the presentation.