



'Game, Set, Match': An exploration of congruence in Australian disability sport sponsorship



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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of sponsorship communications, and thereby the success of corporate sponsorship management, is considerably influenced by the multi-faceted, theoretical concept of congruence. In this paper, sponsors' management approaches to disability sport relationships are presented, as well as an examination of the role congruence plays in the sponsorship process. The aim of the study was to investigate whether, and where, congruence was a consideration when examining the end-to-end sponsorship management of disability sport properties in Australia. Semi-structured interviews were used to assess congruence within each stage of the sport sponsorship management framework – strategy, objectives, selection, implementation and measurement. The various forms of congruence were found to align with past work of sponsorship in regards to congruence prominence within the management framework. A key distinguishing factor of disability sport sponsorship relationships was the emphasis placed by sponsors on *mission* and *value* congruence.

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1. Introduction

The importance of sport for people with a disability (PWD) cannot be underestimated. Sport has been used as a rehabilitation tool (Howe, 2008), a vehicle to teach self-efficacy and build confidence, and as a platform for integration and societal attitudinal norm adjustment (Blauwet & Willick, 2012). There is also growing evidence that suggests sport for PWD promotes social connections, psychological health, quality of life, and life satisfaction (Wilhite & Shank, 2009; Yazicioglu, Yavuz, Goktepe, & Tan, 2012). This is of critical importance given that PWD have lower participation rates in sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2011), generally have poorer health and a heightened risk of preventable secondary health issues, have lower levels of education and employment, as well as face higher rates of poverty (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2010; Iezzoni, 2009; Iezzoni & O'Day, 2006; Wilhite & Shank, 2009; WHO, 2012). As a result of the numerous barriers and issues faced by PWD, the benefits obtained through sport for PWD need to be supported, realised and capitalised upon. This is even more important for sports servicing PWD as they move into an era of new business models and need to develop non-government financial and other support, to ensure that access to sport for PWD does not become even more challenging.

While there are non-profit disability sporting organisations that provide opportunities for sport participation in the PWD community, the sustainability of disability sporting organisations, associated sports, and athletes themselves, is contingent

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on their ability to face and manage greater pressures of commercialisation (Australian Paralympic Committee (APC), 2010; Gómez, Martí, & Opazo, 2008). This growing concern is highlighted by the *Sports Funding: Federal Balancing Act* report (Jolly, 2013) where it was identified that in the current funding year, Disability National Sporting Organisations received from the Australian Government only 20% of what they did six years ago and a little over 1% of what National Sporting Organisations received. Therefore, reliance on income generated from various stakeholders such as sponsors has become much more important.

Sponsorship plays a large role in the general sport industry, with 60–70% of sponsorship directed towards sport properties (IEG, 2012). It is an attractive addition to the marketing mix, where value is derived through the achievement of multiple marketing objectives simultaneously (Thwaites, 1995), such as increasing sales (Easton & Mackie, 1998) and enhancing corporate image (Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, & Lampman, 1994). The consideration of disability sport as an attractive sport property may be around the corner as, in 2012 it was found that “70% of Australians followed the 2012 Paralympics, and 74% were more likely to support a brand if it was a Paralympic sponsor” (News Analysis, 2012, p. 9). With these statistics, Paralympic sport (and, possibly, disability sport) may pique the commercial interest of brands that see it as a worthy opportunity (News Analysis, 2012).

Most sponsorship research has been dedicated to understanding consumer attitudes towards sponsorship (e.g., Dees, Bennett, & Ferreira, 2010), and has indicated that there is an array of factors that generate a favourable response to sponsorship, such as perceived sincerity and ubiquity (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Congruence has also been broached as one of the relevant factors in management of sponsorship relationships, which dictates the effectiveness of sponsorship (Fleck & Quester, 2007; Groza, Cobbs, & Schaefer, 2012; Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011). Specifically, congruence is the construct used to reflect the symbolic matching of properties between the sponsor and sponsee (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), and can be understood and examined using a number of different dimensions (Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011). The construct relates to the processing of sponsorship stimuli (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Johar & Pham, 1999; Speed & Thompson, 2000), and suggests that sponsors will be more willing to sponsor an organisation when congruent characteristics are present for both the sponsor and sponsee (Meenaghan, 1991) as its presence can help achieve sponsorship objectives (e.g., reinforce an organisation’s positioning; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008) as well as influence both sponsorship motives (Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, Weeks, & Tellegen, 2006) and consumer preference for the sponsor (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008).

While there is still a growing need to understand the general nature of sponsorship management (Apostolopoulou & Papadimitriou, 2004; Farrelly, Quester, & Burton, 2006), there is an even greater need to explore sponsorship in other contexts such as disability sport. Little is known about how sponsorship relationships occur, are managed and evaluated (Burton, 2010; Park, Yoh, Choi, & Olson, 2011) and how congruence influences those relationships; as experts note, finding the common denominator (e.g., congruence, shared values, objectives, etc.) will determine the value in the relationship, and disability sport should not be treated differently in the assessment of the relationship’s viability (News Analysis, 2012).

Thus, the general aim of this study is to provide a descriptive understanding of how sponsorship management occurs in the context of disability sport and to better understand the role of congruence in that process, using the lens and perspective provided by the sponsorship literature. The authors examined sponsorships of disability sport properties, with a focus on congruence and its role across the stages of the sponsorship management framework.

2. Literature review

2.1. Disability sport sponsorship as a commercial platform

British Paralympic Association communications director, Jane Jones notes that commercialisation of disability sport properties present both challenges and opportunities (Handley, 2011). This is true within the Oceanic region, where the challenges for commercial opportunity stem from factors related to public miseducation, cultural misperception, and are heightened by general lack of development and participatory support (e.g., Maharaj, 2011). Commercial opportunities are further hampered by deep-seated inequalities and complex social problems surrounding disability (Smith & Thomas, 2012), including an existing lack of legitimisation of Paralympic sport found in first-world societies and athletes lacking status parity compared to athletes without a disability (Fitzgerald, 2012). While disability sport faces these challenges, disability sport in markets like Australia presents a number of commercialisation opportunities. The current Australian sporting infrastructure involves sporting pathways managed by the APC and national sporting organisations, both of whom receive financial support (albeit diminishing) from the Australian Sports Commission (Australian Paralympic Committee, 2012). Further, the Australian Paralympic teams have had an ongoing history of success, demonstrating their best performance at the 2012 London Olympics where they won medals in nine of the thirteen sports and were ranked 5th in overall medal tally (Paralympians return to Australia, 2012). Having a well-established pathway, functioning governing bodies, and ongoing international success of their national teams provides stability that contributes to the opportunity to position disability sport in Australia alongside other high performance sports properties, in the way of offering attributes (e.g., success) that like-minded brands see as an opportunity for partnership (Handley, 2011).

Additional factors related to the positioning of disability sport relate to the ability of PWD to influence society by challenging people’s perceptions of normality, ability, and capabilities (Bailey, 2008). Researchers are currently debating whether disability relates to extra ability or to disability, and how sport is used as a vehicle to empower PWD through promoting disabled athletes as life role models (Purdue & Howe, 2012). This is further exemplified by research conducted in

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