An Exploratory Investigation of the Experiences of Gay Games IX Sponsors

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Abstract

In recent decades, sport sponsorship has emerged as a significant component of the financial plan for many sport properties. While the importance of sponsorship is widely acknowledge by practitioners and researchers, there has been minimal work devoted to understanding sponsorship of amateur sports and even less related to the sponsorship of sports properties which cater primarily to members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community. This exploratory case study was part of a larger group of studies which sought to investigate sponsorship of Gay Games IX. Specifically, this component of the study sought to investigate the organizational experiences of those that entered into sponsorship agreements with the 2014 Gay Games, an LGBT focused, international sporting mega-event which secured $4.16 million in sponsorships. Data were gathered via document analysis, site observations, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Two major themes related to the sponsorship experience emerged as a result of data analysis: 1) minimal concerns and experiences of backlash related to sponsorship and 2) a difficulty measuring the effectiveness of the sponsorship. Practical applications and research implications for these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Gay Games, sport sponsorship, LGBT sport, case study

1. Introduction

On August 9, 2014, the ninth installment of the Gay Games executed their opening ceremonies at Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio. The ceremony signified the official start of the quadrennial, international; LGBT focused sporting and cultural mega-event. The event boasted a budget of $6.8 million dollars, of which $4.16 million was obtained via cash and in-kind sponsorships (Cleveland Foundation, 2014). Researchers have investigated the complexities of sponsorship and sponsorship agreements through a variety of methods and lenses. However, the vast majority of that effort has been dedicated to examining sponsorships at the Olympic, professional, or major college sport levels. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to investigate the organizational experiences of those which entered into sponsorship agreements with the 2014 Gay Games. The study was guided by the following research question: What were the experiences of companies which engaged in sponsorship of Gay Games IX? Because of the substantial growth and evolution of sport sponsorship and a void in the literature regarding sponsorship of LGBT sport properties, this work constitutes an important contribution to the literature based while providing practical and applicable information for those involved in the sponsorship management process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sport sponsorship

Quester and Thompson (2001) write that sponsorship is "an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, person or event, in return for access to exploitable commercial potential associated with the activity, person or event by the investor" (p. 34). Therefore, sport sponsorship can be defined as an investment in return for access to commercial activity related to a sport property.

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The International Events Group (2017) reports that sponsorship expenditures have grown at nearly a 4% rate year-over-year for the last five years and projects that $17.05 billion will be spent on sport sponsorships in North America in 2018. Sport sponsorship is an attractive communication vehicle to businesses and organizations due to its ability to allow the sponsor to engage and interact with potential customers and clients in a setting that allows for customization not often attainable through more traditional methods of marketing (Zullo, 2013).

In its earliest forms, sponsorship was viewed as a type of corporate philanthropy, not normally tied to specific business objectives (Lough & Irwin, 2001; Meenaghan, 1984). More recently, sponsorship has evolved into an important marketing and communications tool (Fortunato, 2013; Mujkic, Butiene, Valantine&Rado, 2017). A great deal of research has focused on the objectives of sport sponsorship (Amis, Slack, &Berrett, 1999; Dolphin, 2003; Lee, Hur& Sung, 2015; Meenaghan, 1984; Zullo, 2013), the sport sponsorship decision making process (Delaney, Guilding, & McManus, 2014; Lee & Ross, 2012; Thjomoe, Olson, & Bronn, 2002), and the effects of sport sponsorship on consumers (Cornwell & Relyea, 2000; Meenaghan, 2001).Quester, Farrely, and Burton (2006) write that further work is needed to understand the experiences of sponsors.

While the literature base regarding the Gay Games is growing, not a single empirical study focused on the financial aspects of the Games was produced between 1999 and 2014. In fact, one must go back to the Pitts (1998) study of Gay Games sponsorship recall to find any work centered onsponsorship of the event. Considering the financial and cultural significance of the Gay Games, the failure to thoroughly investigate the financial aspects and business components of the event constitutes a serious oversight by researchers.

2.2 Sexual stigma and sport

In 1972, psychologist George Weinberg presented the conceptualization of what he termed "homophobia" representing it as "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals-and in the case of homosexuals themselves, self-loathing" (Weinberg, 1972, p.4). More recent research has presented the overarching concept of "sexual stigma" as "the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords to non-heterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, or communities" (Herek, 2009, p.66). A number of researchers from a variety of diverse academic fields have examined the concept of sexual stigma within sport and leisure settings (Anderson and Mowatt, 2013; Campbell, Cothren, Rogers, Kistler, Osowski, &Greenauer, 2011; Cunningham and Melton, 2012). Sexual prejudices and heterosexism are pervasive in many sport and leisure settings and are experienced by many different groups including homosexual athletes, transgendered individuals, sexual minorities of color, female athletes and others (Cunningham, 2012).

Participation in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered sport has grown significantly over the past three decades. Stonewall CYMRU (2012) offers statistics which indicate 94% of LGBT respondents participated in a sport or recreational activity during a 12-month period; 42% of lesbian respondents participated in organized sport settings compared to 25% of gay men; 59% of gay men were members of a gym or recreation center compared to 40% of lesbian respondents. Their statistics clearly support current and historical literature which indicates that members of the LGBT population have a strong desire to engage in sport and leisure opportunities (Pitts, 1989;Place and Beggs, 2011;Pronger, 1990; Symons, 2012).

The development of organized leagues and tournaments has played an important role in the growth of LGBT sport participation numbers over the last thirty years (Pitts, 1998; Pronger, 2000). LGBT sporting organizations, leagues, and tournaments have been organized for the purpose of providing social opportunities while building sport skills in an open and accepting atmosphere (Place & Beggs, 2011). Pronger (2000) writes, in terms of LGBT sporting organizations, "Where sport was formerly a hostile environment for gays and lesbians, it has in some respects become a haven" (p. 223).

2.3 The Gay Games

The Gay Games were first conceived in 1980 by Tom Waddell, a member of the 1968 United States Olympic Team, as a result of the relegation and oppression of sexual minorities in mainstream sport (Litchfield, 2013). Waddell and supporters worked to create an event which welcomed sexual minorities and their allies to compete in their selected sporting events in a supportive, inclusive environment free from the stigmatization many experienced in other sporting arenas (Krane, Barber, & McClung, 2002; Symons, 2012). Thus, began an international quadrennial event which would experience monumental growth and evolution over the next thirty years.

Gay Games I took place in San Francisco, California in 1982 and welcomed 1,350 athletes from all over the world. The second installment of the Games boasted significant growth as more than 3,500 athletes participated. In 1990, the Games moved to its first international location as Vancouver, British Columbia hosted the event, welcoming 4,250 athletes from 30 countries. Gay Games IV brought 15,000 participants to New York City and featured over 6,000 volunteers. Gay Games V, held in Amsterdam in 1998, featured 16,026 athletes, 558,350 total visits to events, a $14 million budget, and a $1.92 million budget shortfall. Gay Games VI in Sydney welcomed 12,099 participants from 77 countries. The 2006 Games, in Chicago, welcomed 11,788 athletes and featured a balanced budget, the first Games to do so, in large part due to a significant increase in sponsorship. The Cologne Gay Games welcomed 25,000 participants and guests to Germany in 2010 (Symons, 2012).

In 2009, the Federation of Gay Games, announced Cleveland, Ohio as the surprise winning bid to host Gay Games IX. Cleveland was selected over Boston, Miami, and Washington D.C., a selection which stirred a bit of controversy within the LGBT community (Maag, 2009). The City of Cleveland formed the Cleveland Special Events Corporation to act as the organizers and hosts for GGIX.Gay Games IX, held in August of 2014, welcomed 30,000 participants and guests, featured a $6.8 million operating budget, raised $4.16 in sponsorships, and resulted in the most profitable Games ever executed (Cleveland Foundation, 2014). Rohlin and Greenlaugh-Stanley (2014) write that the event was responsible for a $52.1 million economic impact in northeast Ohio.

3. Method

This study sought to examine the experiences of corporate and organizational sponsors of Gay Games IX. Because of the existing gap in the literature with regard to LGBT sport sponsorship, an exploratory case study method was selected. Case studies allow for the investigation of complex, contemporary phenomenon (Zainal, 2007). Yin (1984) advocates for case studies "as an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (p. 23). Case studies are strengthened through the employment of multiple data sources which allows for data triangulation (Creswell, 2014). For this study, site observation, document analysis, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed in order to provide an opportunity for the collection of a rich and robust data set (Yin, 2009).

3.1 Procedures and Participants

In August, 2014, the investigator traveled to Cleveland, Ohio to observe Gay Games IX. During the visit, the researcher recorded detailed notes on the context of the event and collected documents which were deemed pertinent for analysis.Stratified random sampling (Mirakhmedov, Jammalamadaka, &Ekstrom, 2015; Robinson, 2014) was employed in orderto obtain a representative sample of the potential participants. Sponsors of Gay Games IX were assigned into strata according to the United States Small Business Administration guidelines. Microsoft Excel was then used in order to organize the various strata and generate a random list of potential participants. The researcher then began recruiting participants via telephone, internet contact forms, Facebook, Twitter, and email. Recruitment and interviewing participants from each stratum continued until saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) had been reached. Following the interviews, additional documents were procured via internet sources. In all, 14 individuals representing 13 organizations participated in interviews. Seven were classified as small businesses and six were classified as large businesses. Six non-profit organizations were represented, while seven of the companies were for-profit businesses. A variety of industries were represented including food and beverage, hospitality, education, health care, social services, business, and technology. The participant sample included one multi-national company, three national companies, five regional companies, and four local companies. Four of the participants sponsored the Games at the level of $100,000 or more, two sponsored at the $50,000 level, two sponsored at the $25,000 level, one at the $14,000 level, and four sponsored in the $2500 to $5000 range.

3.2 Data analysis

An inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006; Yin, 2009) was conducted which allowed for the construction of themes based on observed patterns within the data. Observation notes, collected documents, and transcribed interviews were analyzed and coded through the use of *NVivo 11* (QSR International, 2017) in three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During the selective coding process "categories are organised around a central explanatory concept" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.24) which allows for the emergence of themes and theories.

4. Findings

The exploratory case study method allowed for the assemblage of a robust data set. The examination of that data led to the emergence of two major themes related to organizational experiences with regard to Gay Games IX sponsorship. Findings indicated that organizations had minimal concerns and experiences of backlash in response to their Gay Games IX sponsorship. Additionally, sponsors experienced a difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of their sponsorships. The identified themes are presented below and evidenced through the words of the participants and quotes from gathered documents.

4.1 Minimal concerns and experiences of backlash in response to sponsorship

The first theme which emerged from the semi-structured interviews was the small or non-existent amount of concern sponsors of Gay Games IX had with regard to backlash. When Cleveland's winning bid was announced, a number of community groups, activist groups, and individuals had publicly voiced their displeasure with the existence of the Gay Games, the LGBT lifestyle, and the LGBT agenda. Not only did participants report little initial concern over backlash, but also reported minimal experiences of backlash to their sponsorships. However, data gleaned from document analysis, particularly social media websites Facebook and Twitter, do indicate that there was indeed some backlash.

When asked whether his organization had any concerns or discussions of negative fallout based on the association, Braxton replied, "There was none at all." Grace agreed that there was no concern negative reactions, "I think that there would have maybe been reactions if we hadn't participated in the Games! Like, what are you doing? How are you not participating in this?" Ellen and Joey each indicated that the only difficult conversations surrounding their organization's sponsorships centered on what level each organization wished to sponsor the Games. Ben responded with a simple "no" when questioned on any concerns raised regarding negative feedback on the association while Cory responded, "None whatsoever." Jim's company discussed possible negativity briefly, "I think we discussed it as an issue…you know should we be concerned? But the consensus answer was, no." Nicki confirmed there was no concern within her company regarding an adverse reaction to the association, "No, none at all." Shelley concurred that there was little concern over negative reactions to her organization's Gay Games IX sponsorship:

There really wasn't. There was a time years ago when of course we would have perhaps been aware of potential pushback or backlash for sponsoring an event such as this, but I think we as a society have largely moved past that. Additionally, I think that people have come to expect our brand to be associated with diversity and social justice and therefore it is sort of a foregone conclusion that we will stand with organizations and events such as this.

Enzo also indicated no concerns on the part of his organization, but also shared his knowledge and experience on the subject:

Well, I mean I know for other folks, but not for ours. There was absolutely no hesitation on the part of my organization. But I know, because I have friends that work at other companies, that there was a lot of hesitation. You know, so many companies had this initial fear. You know I worked with the HRC, I was on the national Board of Governors, and then locally I was corporate sponsorship co-chair for five years. So my job was to go out to corporations and get sponsorships for the gala. And sometimes when you're having those conversations, they would ask, "What type of pushback should we expect." And 99% of the time, because with the Gala you would have to be looking for that event to know who sponsored it, I never heard really any corporate sponsorship of an HRC event in Cleveland get backlash. But because the Gay Games was such a big event in Cleveland, I mean you couldn't turn on the television without seeing the news, I mean it was all over Cleveland. So I think, you know, I understood some of the corporations having a hesitation, because it was new ground for them, but our company did not.

Eric spoke of a miniscule amount of initial concern for negative reactions, but also shared that it was quickly disregarded:

It was very generic and I think everyone sort of thought, oh we might have some hostile responses. I personally gave it very little, I don't really give anyone any steam, like to me that's somebody else's problem. Like if you want to be against it that's fine but I'm not going to sit and worry that you are going to say something bad about me because I support LGBT causes.

Wyatt's company also had some discussions and inventoried the social landscape, but also decided the concerns were not prohibitive:

No there weren't any and knowing that, it was interesting, we thought with such a high profile event, and the world forgets that we're different than it was back in 2014 as far as acceptance and sensitivities. Back then there weren't companies that were gearing their marketing towards the community, in fact they were instead avoiding it concerned with the controversy it may embroil. We knew there was a certain risk to do that, but we also thought it was the right thing to do. Within the organization we had very few naysayers.

Nicki also shared that in addition to a lack of concern regarding negative responses prior to the event, individuals within her company experienced zero negative feedback regarding their association:

We hung our rainbow flags on the patio and I encouraged my staff that if anyone had anything negative to say, come get the management, and we would talk with them. You know we're a member of Plexus (Cleveland's Gay Chamber of Commerce), which I'm sure you're familiar with, and we were a sponsor of the Gay Games. We really didn't have any backlash but we told our staff if they encounter someone that had a problem with it, that we really wouldn't tolerate it.

Similarly, Eric reported only observing the smallest amount of negativity surrounding Gay Games IX:

I think from day one of the Games being here, it was a beautiful day it was an amazing opening ceremony, it was covered by the media with such great respect that it just dissipated almost immediately. There might have been like 25 protesters but they just disappeared. No one heard anything negative after the first day.

Interview participants indicated that the fear of consumer backlash played little or no part in their discussions regarding Gay Games IX sponsorship. Similarly, participants reported that they did not experience or encounter anything resembling significant backlash. However, analysis of textual data gathered via Facebook, Twitter, and comment sections of various news outlets reveal that sponsorship of the Games was cause for major concern and anger among some.

Followers of the United Church of Christ's Facebook page shared their thoughts on the church's official announcement of sponsorship, responses which were largely positive. Phyllis Murphy (2014) shared:

If the purpose of Open and Affirming is to bring others into the main crux of our church and Society by creating a new norm, this seems to create an exception. Athletes are athletes whether straight or LGBTQ! Inclusion would be creating a place for everyone in the Greater Games, Unless Cleveland doesn't already have this competition! I do suppose we have to begin somewhere!

Dottie Wine (2014) posted, "Love UCC! Because of exclusion or a hostile environment in many instances, things like "gay games" make it possible for individuals to participate and excel who would otherwise not be able to do so." Other responses included, wow, wow!!!, so proud, and this is great!" Frank Jackson (2014) stated "All I can say to all the haters out there is. (andim straight) If you don't like it DONT ATTEND. But don't try and remove a splinter from some ones eye. WHEN you have a 2x4 in yours. Now you can bring on your hate full comments."

Still, many were not receptive to the association. Stacie Hansen (2014) shared, "God made Adam an eve, not Adam an Steve sorry I am a Christian an I know my Bible it is wrong". Vikki Tepsic Duval (2014) wrote, "Wow, I am disappointed the church would sponsor such an event. I am a Christian and believe it is wrong! I have no hate towards anyone. I just feel it is wrong for a church to participate." Twitter user @luchadora41 (2014) tweeted, "Celebrating Sin – United Church of Christ to Sponsor Gay Games? I don't think Jesus is happy w/this."

In addition to disagreement with the church's decision to sponsor the event, many commentators typed messages of personal disgust with the LGBT lifestyle and population. Tom Schmitt (2014) shared:

Bein gay is a sin and disgusting and gay games is ridiculous isn't that discrimination anyways what if str8 people wanted to enter who even thought of something so stupid lol gay games wtf is wrong with people and it is in the bible morons god said men are not to lay with man as they do a woman it's in Lev. Google the chapter and verse I forget. Sharon Fargues (2014) added, "Oh my god.....the world's gone madd. I heard they were going to have a handbag toss and a pole sitting event for the "men"."

Sharon Caroniti (2014) posted, "wanna know why you have to be 18 to attend some of the events? is it because of the deviant behavior? other Olympics are for all ages....wake up people". Stacie Hansen (2014) shared, "I dont hate gays I have a daughter who is gay an a nephew an a brother but they are going to he'll thank you if they dont change an get saved thank you."

Reverend J. Bennett Guess penned a guest column for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in July of 2014 to explain the UCC's decision to engage in sponsorship. He wrote: So when Cleveland, our hometown, was selected to host this summer's international Gay Games, leaders within the United Church of Christ knew instantly that we had a responsibility, not only as a good corporate citizen, but also as a prominent national religious organization, to do all we could in support, because the lives of LGBT people and their families are at stake. That's the Christian message of faith, equality and justice that we want to emanate from our visible and vocal endorsement.

That's why we are especially proud that, this August, Cleveland's own United Church of Christ, headquartered on Prospect Avenue, will become the first religious denomination to be a major corporate sponsor of the Gay Games. The UCC's Amistad Chapel, built as a shrine to faith-inspired justice advocacy, will host events and extravagantly welcome visitors from across the country and around the globe. An "extravagant welcome," we call it, because we believe radical inclusion was at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry and that's the kind of Christianity we want visitors to Cleveland to experience here (Guess, 2014). Public comments on article indicate that the sponsorship was identified as highly controversial. Only in Cuyahoga (2014) wrote:

Like I stated earlier on this subject. This organization has lost a lot of credibility in honoring this event. because no form of religion, which truly holds gods aspirations as sacred, would honor this immoral type of behavior for anything other than what it is, which is simply disgusting warped behavior. No religion that I'm familiar with, would go as far as honoring this event, and if one such as these people do, then I find them to be of a false reality, of the word of god, and in no way should be taken seriously.
Commenter Attis (2014) added:

When it comes to homosexuality and same-sex marriage, there is nothing liberal or tolerant about the UCC. You are either for it, or you're out. The UCC routinely purges pastors from its ranks who openly oppose same-sex marriage, and welcome with open arms homosexual pastors from other denominations; it rewards congregations who support homosexuality and same-sex marriage with a gold star (ONA designation) and makes others sit in corner with a dunce hat on. What Guess depicts as a pioneering progressive stance by the UCC in actuality chronicles the steady 40-year decline of a once liberal and liberating Christian denomination into a homosexual cult. The enthusiastic endorsement of the Homosexual Games is part of that ongoing decline and descent into social sin.

On August 12, 2014, Akron General Hospital, a division of Cleveland Clinic, posted an official Gay Games marketing piece along with the message "We're a proud sponsor of the Gay Games, one of the most inclusive sports and cultural festivals in the world (Akron General, 2014). The posting received 34 likes and a number of positive, affirming responses. On August 9, 2014, Cleveland Clinic posted on their Facebook page, "Welcome to all those participating in Gay Games Cleveland 2014" (Cleveland Clinic, 2014). The posting received 400 likes, 80 shares, and six comments. Michael Wright (2014) wrote simply, "Yuck". Gem Mimz (2014) added, "Bet the basketballs go 'swishy, swishy', lol…;p". Jeff Clagg (2014) wondered, "Is there a straight games in Cleveland too?", a comment which received four likes.

Participants in the semi-structured interviews reported little or no fears of backlash regarding their association with Gay Games IX. Additionally, they indicated very little experience of any backlash based on their sponsorships. However, the analysis of a variety of textual sources indicates that sponsors did face some negative reactions to their sponsorship of the Games. There were a large number of negative comments aimed at the United Church of Christ Based on their decision to sponsor the Games. Those comments invoked religion as well as personal disgust. Other sponsors also encountered both positive and negative reactions from social media users based on their decision to sponsor the event.

4.2 Difficulty measuring the effectiveness of sponsorship

A second theme that emerged through data analysis was the difficulty experienced by sponsors of Gay Games IX in measuring the effectiveness of their sponsorships.

Literature on goal-setting and objectives is rife with instructions on setting measurable goals and objectives as well as the importance of measurement in evaluation of success. However, a majority of the participants described a litany of difficulties and challenges when attempting to calculate or evaluate the return on their investment in sponsorship of GG9.

Michael shared that his organization completed no formal evaluation of their sponsorship with regard to measuring objectives. When asked if his organization gauged the effectiveness of their sponsorship he responded:
Not really in a formal way, but I know that we tried to be at every event that was hosted here in Summit County, so the feedback that they received was very positive for our level of support as well as the athlete experiences.

Grace shared that her group does not evaluate or measure sponsorship effectiveness on any formal level but that they did monitor social media activity when promoting the sponsorship. She explained, "If there is an uptick in visits to our website, maybe an uptick in people joining our mailing lists we can see that, but nothing that we really quantify." Similarly, Ben shared that his organization did not evaluate the Gay Games IX sponsorship, "Not on any formal basis."

Shelley explained the difficulty of her job with regarding to evaluating or measuring the effectiveness of the sponsorship:This is one of the most difficult parts of my job because often many of the sponsorship we are engaging in, particularly at the regional level, are events or entities that we are going to struggle to go into a meeting and say, "Ok we got X percentage bump in sales or web traffic" from this deal." To a certain extent at the local and regional level we evaluate the effectiveness based on perceived results as opposed to hard data. Now, with the evolution of the social media outlets, we can definitely say, "ok this was what we pushed out via Facebook for instance, and this is what that post generated….X number of shares, X number of likes, X amount of positive comments, X amount of negative comments." But even then, how do we definitively assign a worth to that? We just can't at times.

Jim also spoke of the difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of his organization's sponsorship. When questioned on the manner in which the sponsorship was evaluated, he shared: Hard to tell, hard to tell. There's not a dollar for dollar formula. In some cases we can see whether a group that maybe hadn't supported us in the past becomes a supporter. Other times, we will put the money out there when sometimes they already do business with us. Sometimes, people aren't customers and they don't become customers. It's hard to measure.

Wyatt explained his view on evaluating the efficacy of his firm's Gay Games sponsorship, "It's difficult for us to evaluate the success because there is no quantitative measure. A lot of what we have done with these sponsorships is more anecdotal." Bryan agreed, "It's really just a gut feeling and evaluation. It's kind of hard to judge…we don't know, we can never truly tell." Cory used similar terminology, explaining that, "much of our evaluation is done based on our collective gut feeling on whether our sponsorships are helping us to accomplish what we want to accomplish." He continued, "It's hard to put into statistics or some sort of measurable format what the sponsorships actually do in accomplishing our objectives."

A difficulty in evaluating and measuring sponsorship success emerged as a key theme of this study. The existing literature base repeatedly identifies the effectiveness of sponsorships as a key consideration decision makers with regard sponsorship selection. However, research participants, through their own words, highlighted their uncertainty and difficulties encountered when broaching this topic. Several participants pointed to a lack of knowledge regarding methods by which effectiveness could be measured choosing instead to evaluate based on their own personal thoughts and opinions regarding outcomes.

5. Discussion

5.1 Minimal concerns and experiences of backlash in response to sponsorship

Findings from this study indicated that organizational decision makers had minimal concerns and experiences of backlash in response to their sponsorship of Gay Games IX. Additionally, participants indicated little or no experiences of backlash as a result of their sponsorship. However, data gathered via public domain documents and social media outlets do indicate that there were in fact negative responses to corporate sponsorship of the Games.

The purchasing power of the LGBT community is estimated to be more than $917 billion annually (Witteck, 2016). While in the past, corporations shied away from marketing and promotions aimed at the LGBT community, the 2000s ushered in a new philosophy (Ragusa, 2005).

Findings from this study support Ragusa's (2005) findings, indicating that corporations were not concerned or intimidated by concerns of boycotts and backlash. Due to the power of the community and its "pink dollar", businesses have targeted the LGBT community with various marketing and advertising tools (Oakenfull, 2013). Prior to Gay Games IX, a number of religious and activist based organizations called on the boycott of sponsors and supporters of the Games. A number of participants indicated that there were no concerns whatsoever with regard to backlash. Still, others indicated that there may have been brief, passing conversations to ascertain the level of concern the organization should have regarding negative public responses to the sponsorship. Ultimately, the organizations decided the concerns were minor at best.

While the participants indicated only minor concerns or experiences of backlash, data gleaned from public documents do show that there were both positive and negative responses to corporate decisions to sponsor the Gay Games. Many individuals took to social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter to proffer their opinions on the Games themselves as well as the decision by organizations which they followed to engage in sponsorship. Responses in support of the sponsorship relationships included phrases like "Wow!!! So Proud" and "This is great!" However, others responded with terms such as "sick", "disgusting", and "wrong".

Cunningham (2012) writes that sport and leisure pursuits can expose sexual minorities to an overwhelming amount of sexual prejudices. Those prejudices can include hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2000), homophobia (Weinberg, 1972), and heterosexism (Anderson &Mowatt, 2013); prejudices such as those stigmatize members of sexual minorities. Data from documentary evidence confirms the previous literature regarding the stigma that members of the LGBT community face. Data garnered from social media and public comments sections support the literature base which shows the world of sport to be a difficult and stigmatizing locale for members of the LGBT community. Social media users and online discussion forum commentators made comments such as "What's the record for the purse toss?", "Do they have pole sitting instead of pole vaulting?", and "Bet the basketballs go 'swishy, swishy', lol…;p". Comments such as the ones represented here indicate thoughts and attitudes of derision which reinforce the previous findings of a multitude of academics who find sport and leisure settings to be stigmatizing and difficult places for members of sexual minorities.

It is comments such as these that reinforce the necessity of LGBT sporting opportunities and gay sporting mega-events. Events such as the Gay Games provide the opportunity for individuals to compete in an open and inclusive setting where individuals can feel insulated from the threats of many heteronormative and sexually stigmatizing sporting spaces. Additionally, the presence of such an event forces individuals such as those uncomfortable with the idea to confront their thoughts and feelings and presents the opportunity for a dialogue.

5.2 Difficulty evaluating effectiveness of sponsorship

Findings from this study indicate that sponsors experienced a difficulty evaluating the effectiveness of their Gay Games IX sponsorship. Meenaghan (1983) writes that sponsorship is a marketing tool which must be managed by objectives in order to maximize success. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence in the area of sponsorship effectiveness which stems from the complex nature of sponsorship (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). While sponsors of GG9 did establish objectives, most reported a variety of obstacles to measuring the success or accomplishment of those objectives.

Crompton (2004) writes that good sport sponsorship objectives should be SMART, which stands for specific, measurable, achievable, results oriented, and time bounded. He posits that strongly conceptualized objectives provide an inherent guide-map for evaluation. In this study, numerous participants responded that they had no established objectives prior to engaging in sponsorship, however asking them to describe their desired outcomes in other ways revealed that they did indeed have established objectives. For instance, Eric explained, "I don't really have a set of objectives", however more probing questions revealed that in concert with philanthropic motivations, increasing sales was one of his desired outcomes for sponsorship. Later when asked to explain his methods for evaluation he responded, "I don't sit and do it on paper, I don't create a graph, but I can look and say that led to a relationship building situation." This example illustrates Crompton's (2004) position that without a clear understanding of the process of objective setting, measurement becomes very difficult. Fahy, Farrelly, and Quester (2004) write that the measurement of sponsorship effectiveness has proven to be problematic due to a variety of issues. Meeneghan (1983) writes that the difficulty in measuring sponsorship effectiveness and accomplishment of objectives is that there are often simultaneous variables in a company's communication mix, there are uncontrollable environmental factors, and there are often multiple objectives for each sponsorship.

Certainly, participants in this study echoed those sentiments. Multiple participants referred to their own evaluation processes as simply a "gut-feeling" on whether or not the sponsorship was effective in accomplishing their desired objectives. There seems to be a great deal of agreement in the literature with regard to the importance of the measurement and evaluation of objectives of sport sponsorship (Apostolopoulou& Papadimitriou, Crompton, 2004; Meenaghan, 1983, Meenaghan, 1991). However, the literature also find a number of barriers and difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of sport sponsorships. Findings from the present study support previous work in this area as participants indicated that they experienced a great deal of difficulty in evaluating the effectiveness of their sponsorships of the 2014 Gay Games.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study provide insight into the experiences of organizations which engaged in sponsorship of the 2014 Gay Games. The first emergent theme, minimal concerns and experiences of backlash, provides insight into the organizational decision making process today's society. While previous literature shows that organizations once shied away from association or support of the LGBT community, sponsors here were happy to publicly affiliate with the Gay Games. In fact, some organizations actively sought out the opportunity to sponsor the games. Still, while organizations indicated that they were not fearful of backlash, an examination of internet comments and social media postings show that backlash did in fact exist. These findings support a litany of previous literature which posits that members of the LGBT community as well as their allies are often the victims of sexual stigmatization, particularly in the arena of sport. While some have questioned the necessity of events such as the Gay Games at a time when protections for the LGBT community are being established and enacted, the public and social media responses to sponsorship do provide further evidence of the necessity of an event which allows for individuals to be true to themselves while engaging with the sports they love.

The second emergent theme shined light on the difficulty sponsors experienced in evaluating the effectiveness of their sponsorships. In order for the value of these mutually beneficial agreements to be maximized, both the sponsor and the organization should engage in significant discussions in the early stages of sponsorship planning. Those discussions should center on desired outcomes and realistic and appropriate methods which might be employed in order to measure the effectiveness of the sponsorship. The ability to truly appreciate the effectiveness of Gay Games sponsorships is beneficial not only to the organizations engaging in sponsorship of the Gay Games, but also to the professionals charged with managing the event's sponsorship program. A carefully planned, administered, and measured sponsorship program can serve as an example for future sponsorship sales and agreements.

As both sponsorship and LGBT sport continue to grow, further studies should be conducted so that academics and practitioners can garner further understanding of these complex, multi-faceted agreements. While this study provides an exploratory look at this emerging phenomenon, future studies should incorporate quantitative methods in order to gain a breadth and depth of information regarding LGBT sport sponsorship. The execution of studies using quantitative and/or mixed-methods can act as important tools in order to being to fill the existing gap in the literature regarding LGBT sport sponsorship experience.

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