



The Influence of Sponsorship on the Stages of the Consumer's Decision-making Process: A South African Perspective

Catherine Mpolokeng Sephapo*

Department of Marketing and Retail Management, Lecturer in Marketing Management, University of South Africa. Pretoria, South Africa. *Email: sephacm@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Understanding the consumer's behavior is not an easy task; consumers are different and react differently to stimuli. Other factors may influence the consumers' final decision to purchase a product offering however, literature does not reveal extensive studies that investigated the influence of individual Integrated Marketing Communications tools on each stage of the consumer decision-making process. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for the study as it allowed the researcher to understand the thoughts and beliefs of consumers regarding how sponsorship influences their decision-making. A qualitative research approach further allows the researcher to document the experiences of consumers in buying situations and also interpret how consumers make purchasing decisions. A phenomenological research design was applied in this study in order to describe the phenomena; sponsorship; and how it influences the stages of the consumer decision-making process rather than explaining why sponsorship influences these stages. Data for this study was collected by means of naïve sketches and focus groups. The naïve sketches as well as the transcriptions of the focus groups were analyzed by means of content analysis. The findings of revealed that sponsorship did not influence consumers' purchase decisions (the fourth step in the consumer decision-making process) but indicated that sponsorship may play a role in the need recognition, search for alternative and evaluating alternative stages in the consumer decision-making process.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Decision-making Process, Sponsorship

JEL Classifications: M3, M31

1. INTRODUCTION

Companies today are challenged with reaching, communicating and influencing consumer behavior using effective tools. An excessive use of advertising has created clutter in the communication realm. It is because of this clutter that companies need to seek out coordinated strategies that place much focus on the consumer rather than on the organization itself. The use of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) strategy starts with the consumer's wants and needs, and then works in reverse to the product, brand or organization (Kurtz, 2010. p. 491). A coordinated IMC strategy creates a competitive advantage for an organization as each component in the communication mix strengthens and supports the others for a much greater effect (Arens et al., 2011. p. 272), much like the concept of synergy where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. IMC is defined as marketing communication planning that identifies the importance of an

all-inclusive plan and assesses the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communications impact (Egan, 2007. p. 338). IMC is a marketing tool which a company uses to carefully integrate and coordinate its communication channels to deliver a clear, concise and convincing message about the organization and its product (Kelly and Whiteman, 2010. p. 28). The components of IMC include advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations, sponsorship, direct marketing as well as the internet. For the purpose of this study, the discussion will focus on sponsorship and its role in the study of consumer behavior.

Sponsorship can take various forms which include cultural, education, social, environmental, sponsorship sporting entities or endorsements (Bühler and Nufer, 2010. p. 90). Ngan et al. (2011. p. 551) defined sponsorship as the investment of money or in

kind, in an event in return for the right to be linked and associated with that event. Sponsorship deals are different in value and the benefits associated with each deal vary relative to the investment. For example in sports, when an organization is considered to be the primary sponsors of a sports team, the sponsor would have rights to display their logo on the playing jersey of the sporting team. Other companies may opt to sponsor equipment or goods in return to be associated with the sporting entity. For example; Gilbert, a manufacturer of balls, could be the official ball supplier and sponsor or various sporting organizations such as the South African national rugby team.

Allen et al. (2011. p. 328) mentioned that between the IMC tools, sponsorship may be considered to be one of the most powerful tools now used to communicate and structure associations with key stakeholders and target audiences. Companies have shifted their focus and emphasis now on “connecting with” rather than “talking at” audiences, sponsorship is a model way for organizations to establish brand interaction with their target audience (Allen et al., 2011. p. 328). However, very little research focuses on how this marketing communication tool influences the consumer decision-making process. The study highlights the types of consumer decisions are discussed; the consumer decision-making process is explained as well as the relationship between marketing communications and the consumer decision-making process. The methodology follows the literature review followed by the findings of the study. The study concludes with the recommendations and conclusions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer behavior is regarded as the study of how consumers make purchase decisions and how they use and dispose of the purchased products (Lamb et al., 2011. p. 73). The process of understanding how consumers think, how they buy and how they use products is very complex as there are various factors that may influence the consumer. It is important to note that consumer needs, wants and preferences are constantly changing therefore organizations need to understand the factors that bring about these changes and cause consumers to act in a particular manner.

2.1. Different Types of Consumer Decisions

When trying to understand the consumer decision-making process, it is important to first understand the effort required from the consumer each time they make a decision. Decisions that consumers believe are important will generally receive more of their time, effort and thought, whereas decisions made purely out of habit will require less involvement from the consumer (Shank, 2009. p. 113). The level of consumer involvement can be explained as the amount of time and effort the consumer invests in the search, evaluation of alternatives and decision processes (Lamb et al., 2009. p. 173). Solomon (2011. p. 334-335) mentions the following types of consumer decisions that organizations need to consider:

- Habitual decisions: These refer to decisions that require little or no conscious effort from the consumer. Some products such as milk may be purchased daily within a household therefore the buyer may purchase the same brand daily out of habit rather than loyalty to the brand.

- Extended problem solving decisions: This consumer decision relates to buying situations whereby the outcome may be perceived to be risky in some way, the consumer may need to acquire as much information as possible, carefully evaluate alternatives and consider the most appropriate alternative in terms of product features and benefits.
- Limited problem solving decisions: These consumer decisions are usually simple and straightforward. Unlike with extended problem solving decisions, the consumer does not need to search for information in order to make their decision. The consumer would rely of simple decision rules such as convenience to make their decision.

The next discussion will provide the steps in the consumer decision-making process.

2.2. Consumer Decision-making Process

As discussed in the previous section, there are various types of consumer decisions; some may require a great deal of involvement from the consumer while others might not require much involvement from the consumer. In low involvement purchases, the consumer would not embark on the full steps of the decision-making process. In this section, the consumer decision-making process for high-involvement purchases will now be discussed (Figure 1).

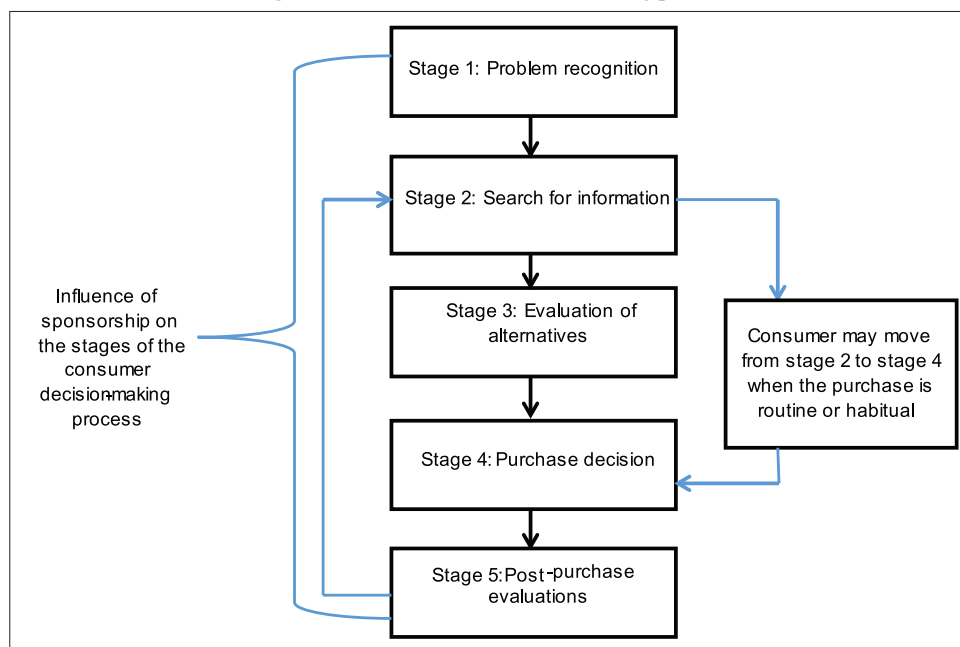
2.3. Stage 1: Problem Recognition

The first stage in the consumer decision making process is that of problem recognition. During this stage, the consumer begins to identify that there is a need which has not yet been met (Shank, 2009. p. 108). This would be when a consumer sees that there is a gap in terms of their actual state and their ideal state (where the consumer is compare to where they would like to be). There could be a number of scenarios that could have taken place which resulted in the in the consumer's state. For instance the consumer could have run out of product, or the consumer could had previously purchased a product that did not meet their expectations therefore not satisfying the consumer's needs or the consumer could have identified a new need or desire their life (Solomon, 2013. p. 327). It is important to note that it is not always the case where the consumer will act because there is a gap between their actual state and their desired state; essentially, the gap needs to be relatively high in order to motivate the consumer to act (Kardes et al., 2011. p. 72).

2.4. Stage 2: Search for Information

Once the consumer has identified the need or problem, provided that the identified gap is substantial, the consumer would now move along the decision-making process and search for information regarding any alternatives available to satisfy their need (Lamb et al., 2012. p. 191). According to Parumasur and Roberts-Lombard (2012. p. 254), the search for information can be delineated as the mental and physical engagement of consumers in order to ascertain relevant information. The process of information search may be internal or external for the consumer (Parumasur and Roberts-Lombard, 2012. p. 254).

Hoyer et al. (2013. p. 189-193) identified four types of recall that consumers experience during the internal search of information:

Figure 1: The consumer decision-making process

Source: Mullins and Walker (2013. p. 100)

- **Recall of brands:** In such situations, it is unlikely that the consumer will remember all the brands relevant in their buying situation; however, they are likely to remember a few brands. These brands are therefore referred to as a consideration set; which are those brands that the consumer thinks of at the top of their head.
- **Recall of brand attributes:** Consumers are unlikely to remember every single detail that has been communicated to them relating to a product or service. With time, specific details stored in the consumer's memory tend to decrease. Recalling attributes helps the consumer review and streamline the original information in order to make a decision. For example, when looking to purchase a new car, the consumer would realistically remember that the car they are considering is safer rather than remembering how many airbags the car has and specific safety features of the car.
- **Recall of evaluations:** As previously mentioned, specific details stored in the consumer's memory regarding products and services tend to diminish over time therefore consumers may rely on the evaluations previously made. For example, whether the consumer likes or dislikes the product or what attitude the consumer has towards the product or service.
- **Recall of experiences:** Experiences are considered to be more intense and prominent therefore most likely to be remembered. Whether the experience has been positive or negative, the consumer will recall this and use this information in making future decisions. For example, if the consumer has had a negative experience with a brand, they will most likely disregard that brand whereas suppose the experience was positive, the consumer will retrieve this information and proceed with considering the brand for their purchase.

An external information search on the other hand describes looking for sources outside the consumer's own experiences to find the

relevant information they need to make an informed decision (Cant, 2013. p. 143). According to Hoyer et al. (2013. p. 195-196), consumers can acquire information from the following sources:

- **Retailers:** This refers to when the consumer physically visits the retailer in order to inspect the product as well as its packaging.
- **Online sources:** This refers to advertising information online, corporate websites, discussion forums as well as social media platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter).
- **Interpersonal sources:** This refers to information obtained from trusted friends and family as well as people in the consumer's sphere of life.
- **Independent sources:** These sources include books, magazines and newspapers.
- **Experiential sources:** This refers to consumer samples or product/service trials.

2.5. Stage 3: Evaluation of Alternatives

Once the consumer has acquired all the necessary information, the task now involves evaluating all the alternatives. According to Reisinger (2009. p. 309), in order for consumers to reach a final decision, the following sets of options need to be formed:

- **Consideration or evoked sets:** These sets denote the accessible products or brands that the consumer considers when making their selection.
- **Inept sets:** Certain products may be omitted from the list of alternatives because they are unknown (not very well marketed), or they are unacceptable (they have poor features), or overlooked (products which have not been well positioned in the market) or simply because the product does not meet the consumer's needs.
- **Inert sets:** These refer to those products that consumers perceive to not have any special features or outstanding benefits to offer.

Once the various sets have been established by the consumers, each alternative would need to be evaluated based on the characteristics and features unique to the product (Shank, 2009. p. 111). These features and characteristics are collectively known as evaluative criteria and are used to justify the consumer's final decision (Shank, 2009. p. 111). The evaluation of alternatives is also significantly influenced by the beliefs and attitudes consumers hold regarding products (Shilbury et al., 2009. p. 57). At this point, the consumer has now collected adequate information that will enable them to make an informed decision.

2.6. Stage 4: Purchase Decision

The next step in the decision-making process is making the decision to make the purchase. This step in the decision-making process is also not as straightforward; the consumer needs to decide on which brand to purchase, which store to purchase the brand from as well as how they would pay for the purchase (Blythe, 2012. p. 53). Shilbury et al. (2009. p. 57) describes the decision to purchase a product as the intention to purchase plus the unanticipated circumstances that may prohibit the consumer from their purchasing decision. For instance, having made the decision to make a purchase, the consumer may proceed with that intent in mind but be faced with an unanticipated circumstance of the store not having the consumer's desired product in the desired colour. In this case the consumer will need to consider perhaps seeking the specific desired brand at another location.

2.7. Stage 5: Post-purchase Evaluations

In the last step of the decision-making process, the consumer evaluates whether there is a significant difference in their current state, which the intention of the process was to modify. Here the consumer decides whether they are satisfied or dissatisfied with their purchase. In determining this, the consumer goes through post-purchase assessment, which involves evaluating the performance of the product (Brijball and Roberts-Lombard, 2012. p. 260). As a result, consumers may experience cognitive dissonance. This dissonance occurs because consumers experience doubt and anxiety about the wisdom of their decision and question their total decision (Shank, 2009. p. 112). Marketer need to ensure that the consumer's post-purchase evaluations are positive. Positive evaluations mean that the consumer is satisfied with their purchase and only satisfied consumers become loyal consumers (Mittal et al., 2008. p. 329).

2.8. The Relationship between Marketing Communication and the Consumer Decision-making Process

Figure 1 summarizes the consumer decision making processed used in the framework of this study. Research has found that sponsorship as an IMC tool can influence consumer attitudes, consumer purchase intentions as well as consumer perceptions. However, research rarely focuses on which stages of the consumer-decision making process are most affected by sponsorship and how. IMC plays a vital role in the consumer decision-making process. Mpinganjira et al. (2013. p. 315-316) focuses specifically on how advertising influences each stage of the consumer decision-making process:

- Stage 1: Problem recognition: During this stage of the consumer decision-making process, advertising can kindle or

stir the need for a particular product. For instance, a consumer may see an advert on television and this advert could convince the consumer that there is actually a gap in their current state. This consumer would then be motivated to search for information on how to alter their current state.

- Stage 2: Search for information: During this phase of the decision-making process, the consumer will consult internal and external sources of information. Advertising in this stage would provide valuable information to consumers in order to facilitate their decision-making.
- Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives: Advertising in the evaluation of alternatives can be used to communicate product features, characteristics and benefits to consumers. Advertising can also be used to differentiate one brand from another.
- Stage 4: Purchase decision: Advertising can be used in the fourth stage of the decision-making process to facilitate the purchase. Organizations can use advertising to communicate price discounts and allowances to consumers.
- Stage 5: Post-purchase evaluations: Advertising can be used in the last stage of the decision-making process to comfort the consumer and assure them that they have made the correct decision. Advertising can therefore play a vital role in reducing cognitive dissonance.

One can explain the significance of the impact of each component of IMC on the consumer decision-making process. However, the study at hand will focus on sponsorship specifically and its impact on the consumer decision-making process.

Organizations globally have rapidly adopted sponsorship as a medium of reaching consumer markets. This is done not only through sponsorship of sporting organizations, but also through sponsorship of art programmes, causes and sponsorship of individuals. Literature surrounding sponsorship highlights that sponsorship can alter the brand image in the eyes of the consumer, influence consumer purchase intentions and can spark interest into sponsor brands (Ngan et al., 2011; Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009; Speed and Thompson, 2000. p. 229). The consumer behavior model identifies internal and external variables (such as attitudes, perceptions and motivations) that affect the consumer's behavior. Attitudes for example consist of three components: The cognitive, affective and behavioral components. Sponsorship seems to affect the affective component of an attitude by creating a positive association between the sponsored organization and the sponsor. However, sponsorship can also affect the attitudinal cognitive component by altering brand perceptions (Mason, 2005. p. 32). Studies have reported a relationship between these two variables. It was suggested that a positive attitude towards a sponsor is positively associated with the intention to consider a sponsor's product (Speed and Thompson, 2000. p. 229). Although attitudes influence the consumer's decision-making, marketers cannot simply assume that purchase intentions are influenced by attitudes alone. Within a sporting context for example, fans that identify with the team may be favorably biased towards the sponsors. This biased behavior could result from their belief that the sponsor shares comparable convictions about the team and they thus transfer perceived team image to the sponsor. For sponsors to

be considered by consumers as a viable alternative to satisfy the identified need, the consumers need to be aware of the sponsor and their product offering. Awareness is also considered as a way to measure the effectiveness of sponsorship. Brand awareness refers to the strength of a brand's presence in the consumer's mind and to the extent and ease with which consumers recall the brand and can recognize the products and services with which the brand is associated (Boshoff and Gerber, 2008. p. 1). It measures the percentage of the market that is aware of the existence of a brand. Walliser (2003) suggests three broad approaches to measuring sponsorship awareness in literature, namely measuring to what extent consumers take notice of sponsors, identifying factors influencing sponsor recall and analyzing the internal processes related to recall taking place in the consumer's mind. The study conducted by Rowley and Williams (2008. p. 781) suggests that sponsorship has an impact on brand recall, awareness and attitude. However, that study provided little evidence of impact on brand use.

Similarly, social identity theory formulated by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 has been evidenced to be an explanatory construct in several areas and disciplines. Under the construct, identification is defined as the perceived oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Jones and Volpe, 2010). When an individual identifies with an organization, they become emotionally involved in its success and failures. Kim and Kim (2009) found that team identification is linked to various aspects of sponsorships including sponsor identification, a positive sponsor image and a high level of awareness of the sponsor. The literature referred to above links sponsorship to awareness; however, the question remains whether this awareness leads to the decision to purchase the sponsors' product. The literature does not reveal studies that investigated the influence of IMC tools; specifically sponsorship; on each stage of the consumer decision-making process.

3. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Sponsorship has been evaluated in three main ways: Measures of media, research on spectators' awareness and attitudes, and sales or behavioral data (Donovan and Henley, 2010. p. 370). Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009. p. 358) found that highly devoted sports fans could possibly develop a more favorable image of their team sponsor and also display stronger intentions to purchase the sponsor's product. Ngan et al. (2011. p. 551) found that the performance of a team significantly influences the consumers' intention to purchase the sponsor's product. Understanding the consumer's behavior is not an easy task; consumers are different and react differently to stimuli. Mihart (2012. p. 123) identifies a cognitive view of the facets that may impact the behavior of the consumer. This cognitive view illustrates the consumer as an open and dynamic person who participates in the decision-making process by seeking information, attempting to make informed decisions. The feelings of consumers can also impact their decision-making in the sense that in some cases, consumers may be impulsive in their purchase decision. It is therefore because of the various factors (individual and group factors) that consumers will behave in a particular matter. Howard and Sheth (1969); Schiffman and Kanuk (2010); Solomon (2011); Mihart,

2012. p. 123 generalize the role of consumer involvement in the decision-making process. Consumers may make decisions under conditions of low involvement where the resolution is prompted by the environmental stimuli (Mihart, 2012. p. 124). Other factors may influence the consumers' final decision to purchase a product offering however literature does not reveal extensive studies that have investigated the influence of individual IMC tools on each stage of the consumer decision-making process. The purpose of this study was to therefore explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for the study as it allowed the researcher to understand the thoughts and beliefs of consumers regarding how sponsorship influences their decision-making. A qualitative research approach further allows the researcher to document the experiences of consumers in buying situations and also interpret how consumers make purchasing decisions. As indicated in the literature review, there are various psychological processes that consumers go through when deciding on which products to buy; internal and external factors also play a role what consumers purchase. Qualitative research techniques allow for the extraction of detailed first-hand information from consumers on what their thought process is in buying situations. A phenomenological research design was applied in this study in order to describe the phenomena; that is sponsorship; and how it influences the stages of the consumer decision-making process rather than explaining why sponsorship influences these stages (Lester, n.d. p. 1). The research design was appropriate as it assisted in obtaining information from the consumer's perspective (Lester, n.d. p. 1).

The population of the study consisted on male and female consumers who ranged between the ages of 18-25 years and 26-35 years and were from various racial groups including African, Caucasian, Indian, Coloured and Asian. The inclusion criterion was needed in order to clarify the scope of the population and included consumers who were (Nayar and Stanley, 2015. p. 178):

- Male and female and were 18 years or older;
- Had been exposed to sponsorship messages;
- Resided in the Tshwane area within Gauteng;
- Were able to understand, read, write and speak English; and
- Were available to participate in the study.

Data for this study was collected by means of naïve sketches and focus groups. Naïve sketches give the consumers an opportunity to describe their experiences and opinions in their own words (Chokwe and Wright, 2012. p. 3). This data collection technique was deemed suitable as it allowed consumers to provide a narrative of their experiences in buying situations and describe their thought processes as well as the extent to which sponsorship influenced the stages of their decision-making process. Rich information, from the consumers own perspective could be attained as narratives are a safe platform for consumers to express their true feelings. The participants were given 15 min to complete the narratives (the

naïve sketches) before the researcher commenced with the focus groups. Once the completed naïve sketches were collected by the researcher, the questions asked in the naïve sketches were then discussed in the focus groups. Two focus groups were conducted in a private room at the University of South Africa; consisting of six participants in each group. Initially, four focus groups were scheduled however, data saturation was reached after only two focus groups and no new information was observed. The focus groups were recorded; the audio recordings were transcribed and these transcriptions were used in the data analyses process. The naïve sketches as well as the transcriptions of the focus groups were analyzed by means of content analysis; a process of transforming raw data into meaningful information (Das and Bhaskaran, 2008. p. 9).

The following criterion was applied in the study in order to ensure the credibility of the study findings (Klenke, 2008. p. 38; Golafshani, 2003. p. 601):

- **Credibility:** Refers to the degree to which the outcomes of the study are probable or true from the position of the participants. Credibility was obtained in the study through the use of audio recordings which allowed the researcher to revisit in order to check that the findings reflect the true position of the participants.
- **Neutrality or confirmability:** Refers to the degree to which the results uncovered can be authenticated or confirmed by others. In this study, confirmability was obtained with the input of the independent coder in the data analysis process (Jooste et al., 2013. p. 4).
- **Consistency or dependability:** Refers to the degree to which the same findings can be achieved by independent researchers. Dependability was obtained through a clear description of the decision-tail. The researcher was clear about the data collection methods, analysis techniques as well as the sample included in the study in order to ensure that independent researchers can arrive at similar or comparable findings.
- **Applicability or transferability:** Refers to the extent to which the results of the study can be transferred to other circumstances. Transferability was attained providing an adequate description of the target population (the inclusion criterion).

The results of the study will now be discussed.

5. RESEARCH RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. In presenting the findings, it is essential that rich verbatim descriptions of participants' explanations be included in order to validate the findings (Noble and Smith, 2015. p. 35). Table 1 provides a summary of these themes and categories identified from the findings.

5.1. Theme 1: Influence of Sponsorship on the Stages of the Consumer Decision-making Process

Consumer behavior theory identified steps that consumers go through in the decision-making process. As can be seen from

Table 1, the first theme derived from the findings is that of the influence of sponsorship on the consumer decision-making process and addressed the primary objective of this study. Categories relating to the individual stages of the consumer decision-making process were identified as reveal the thoughts and opinions of the participants.

5.1.1. Category 1: Need recognition

The first stage of the consumer decision-making process is that of need recognition. At the start of the decision-making process, the consumer would typically desire to alter their current state and transform it into their desired state. The findings did not reveal that sponsorship evoked a need for the sponsor's product but rather the views of the participants that there has to have been an established need for the sponsor's products. The findings reveal that consumers felt that the sponsor's products must fill a gap that they have identified in their current state which would move them to their ideal state. The findings reveal that sponsorship did not significantly influence this stage of the decision-making process however if the need was apparent, they would consider sponsor brands. Verbatim descriptions to validate these findings include the following: "... Yes, but we wouldn't really buy it if we don't need it," "... in as much as you are sponsoring the team, but how are you going to meet my needs..."

5.1.2. Category 2: Searching for alternatives

The second category identified in the findings was that of searching for alternatives. Hoyer et al. (2013. p. 189-193) identified four types of recall that consumers experience during the internal search of information while searching for alternatives. The type of recall that was dominant in the findings was that of brand recall. The participants indicated that sponsorship helped them recall brands when searching for alternatives in their decision-making process. "*The brands are definitely top of mind in the category ...*" In addition, the participants mentioned that "*the sponsorship makes the product much more known. These products would be considered in my decision-making process...*" Additionally, participants mentioned that "*I will consider them as an alternative but not base my decision on this fact (sponsorship) alone.*"

5.1.3. Category 3: Evaluating the alternatives

As can be seen from Table 1, the third category identified within the first theme is that of evaluating alternatives. The findings reveal that consumers are inclined to consider sponsor brands as alternatives during the decision-making process; however whether the brand is involved in sponsorship initiatives is not the deciding factor in the minds of consumers. Verbatim descriptions that validate the findings include; "... I will consider them as an alternative but not base my decision on this fact alone." Literature as well as the findings reveals that when consumers are evaluating alternatives in the decision-making process, they need to consider the benefits each brand offers and the value that consumers will receive. The participants of the study mentioned that they "... would purchase the products offered by sponsors regardless of who they sponsor. I look at the brand itself and the value they possess."

When evaluating alternatives, the participants indicated that other factors such as money played a vital role in their decision-making.

Table 1: Summary of themes and categories identified in the study

| Themes | Categories | Objectives |
|---|---|--|
| Theme 1: Influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process | Need recognition Searching for alternatives Evaluating the alternatives | Primary objective: To explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process |
| Theme 2: Impact of sponsorship on the consumer | Creates awareness Creates patriotism | |

Source: Derived from the results

Consumers made statements such as: *“Well it doesn't influence me that much particularly because I have a budget and I am very kind of strict about it so my spending is not necessarily because of what I see on TV or on billboards but if there is a product that they have or whatever I need at that time, say a sponsor...has it, I will go and get it....”* The following quote from the focus group transcripts further supports the findings: *“It is about what they can actually give to me, their sponsorship is not.”*

Focus groups offered the researcher the opportunity to attain in-depth information regarding the underlying issues surrounding the study. The findings thus far have revealed the stages of the decision-making process that consumers believed sponsorship may play a role. Group interactions stimulate thoughts and opinions that would not have otherwise risen in a one-on-one setting. From the raw data, the researcher identified the second theme of the study that was consistent in both focus groups. Theme 2 describes the participant's viewpoint of how sponsorship impacts them.

5.2. Theme 2: Impact of Sponsorship on the Consumer

As can be seen from Table 1, the results revealed that sponsorship created awareness of the sponsor brands in the minds of the consumers. The findings also revealed that sponsorship induced patriotism in the minds of the consumers.

5.2.1. Category 1: Creates awareness

From the findings, it is revealed that sponsorship creates awareness of sponsor brands among consumers. This means that consumers felt that sponsorship made them conscious of the sponsors and products they may offer. Although the sponsorship did not influence the purchase stage of the participant's decision-making process, participants explained that the sponsorship made the sponsor brand familiar and easy to remember in their mind. Verbatim quotes to support the findings include the following:

- *“... I might be more aware of the brand and have more of a positive attitude towards them but I wouldn't necessarily buy the product.”*
- *“... The sponsorship makes the produce much more known. These products would be considered in my decision-making process. I assume that they are of a high quality and they would stand a better chance of me purchasing them.”*
- *“... [Sponsorship] creates awareness but I will still not buy the product.”*

5.2.2. Category 2: Creates patriotism

From the findings, the data revealed the second category of theme 2. This category represents the second impact of sponsorship mentioned by the participants. The findings reveal that the participants were aware of the sponsor brands but wouldn't

necessarily purchase that brand only because they are related to the sponsored organization, their purchase was based on the needs identified by the consumer. The participants mentioned that they will however consider the sponsor brands but there are a number factors that come into play like the consumers budget or disposable income, whether there is a need for the product and then there is a small measure of patriotism that might come in but not to that large extent.

According to Adeyinka (2011. p. 155), patriotism is explained as fervent love, support and defence of one's county or national loyalty. Within the context of sports, patriotism can also denote the love, support and loyalty towards a sporting entity such as the national team. The following quotes from the naïve sketches and focus group transcripts are provided to validate the findings:

- *“... Does not influence my buying decisions because I work on a limited budget. I always make decisions based on what I need and not where the company spends on sponsorships. But there are instances where I support some sponsors in the spirit of being patriotic.”*
- *“It is based on my need but sometimes one is a bit patriotic like I said earlier on and just support for the sake of supporting.”*
- *“There are other factors that influence my buying not really sponsorships and I think if I go out and buy a Springboks (the South African national Rugby team) shirt, I buy it for the Springbok brand not necessarily for the Gilbert brand or the Puma brand.”*

6. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. In this study, the stages of the consumer decision-making process identified by Mullins and Walker (2013. p. 100) were used. These stages are:

- Stage 1: Problem recognition
- Stage 2: Search for information
- Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives
- Stage 4: Purchase decisions
- Stage 5: Post-purchase evaluations.

The findings of revealed that sponsorship did not influence their purchase decisions (the fourth step in the consumer decision-making process). Theme 1 addresses the influence of sponsorship on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. The categories in identified within theme one represents the stages of the consumer decision-making process that consumers felt sponsorship may have played a role. The first category within theme 1 describes the first stage in the decision-making process;

which was need recognition. The participants of the study indicated within the first category of this theme that there has to be a need for the sponsor's product. This means that there needs to be a gap between their current state and desired state in order for them to continue in the decision-making process. In the context of the study, the findings did not reveal that sponsorship evoked a need for the sponsor's product but if a need was established, sponsorship would play a role (to a lesser extent) in the other steps of the decision-making process. Category 2 of theme 1 highlighted the role of sponsorship within the second step of the consumer decision-making process; searching for alternatives. The findings revealed that sponsorship played a role in brand recall during the decision-making process. This means that consumers easily remembered brands that are sponsors when searching for alternatives to satisfy the identified need. Participants mentioned that the sponsorship made them more aware of the brands and could therefore recall them within consideration sets. The influence of sponsorship on awareness has been largely researched within the sphere of sports marketing. Donlan (2014, p. 15) found a strong link between sponsorship and brand visibility. Thurston, (2011, p. 1) also found that sponsorship has a positive influence on sponsor awareness within the South African context. The findings presented within category 2 of theme 1 are supported by Herrmann et al. (2014, p. 796) who found suggest an implicit relationship between awareness sponsorship and a greater probability that the sponsor brand will appear in their memory-based consideration sets. Herrmann et al. (2010, p. 550) found that sponsorship improves the probabilities of a brand being part of the stimulus-based consideration set of consumers; irrespective of whether they were aware of the sponsorship.

The third category identified within theme 1 relates to the evaluation of alternatives in the consumer decision-making process. The findings suggest that participants may consider sponsor brands when evaluating alternatives during the decision-making process. When evaluating which alternative to opt for, consumers are likely to consider various aspects. The results show that participants consider what the sponsor brand has to offer and the benefits that the brands offer. Participants also considered their monetary constraints when evaluating alternatives. This means that in order to choose the sponsor brand, they needed to offer benefits that participants sought after within budget.

As can be shown in Table 1, Theme 2 in the findings illustrates the participants' viewpoint of how sponsorship impacts them. The findings suggest that sponsorship creates awareness of sponsor brands (category 1) and creates patriotism to a lesser extent (category 2). The study at hand found that sponsorship may play a role in the second step in the consumer decision-making process; searching for alternatives. Awareness is suggested to be a significant element in this stage of the consumer decision-making process. The findings of this study reveal sponsorship does create awareness of brands in the minds of consumers. Hibic and Poturak (2016, p. 423) came to a similar conclusion in their study and suggested that among the key characteristics of a brand; which include awareness, design and loyalty; only awareness was the only characteristic that has an impact on the consumer decision-making process. Within the context of sports sponsorship, sponsors

are able to expose consumers to their brand names and logos during sponsored events and this increases the consumers' awareness of the sponsor's products which may consequently lead to product consumption (Turco, 2015, p. 12).

7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The recommendations for this study include the following:

- The findings of this study reveal that sponsorship did not influence the purchase decision stage of the consumer decision-making process. Essentially, the participants indicated that their final decision to purchase products did not solely rely on the sponsorship initiatives in place. The study by Lysonski and Durvasula (2013, p. 77) highlights eight mental characteristics of consumer decision-making. These characteristics include the following; perfectionism or high-quality consciousness, brand consciousness, novel-fashion consciousness, recreational, hedonistic consciousness, price shopping consciousness, impulsiveness, confusion over choice of brands, store information and habitual, brand loyalty orientation towards consumption. These mental characteristics support the notion that consumers are different and think differently when purchasing products. Sponsorship integrated into the marketing plan of an organization can be relatively expensive; taking into consideration the sponsorship cost as well as leveraging costs. With these costs in mind, sponsorship should ideally have a degree of impact on the consumer's purchase decisions in order to contribute to the profit making objective of an organization. It is therefore recommended that sponsors in South Africa consider how they are implementing their sponsorship initiatives and how these initiatives influence the consumers purchase decisions and ultimately profits. Sponsorship initiatives should be planned with the mental characteristics that consumers use to make final purchase decisions in mind in order to effectively influence the consumer's decision-making. Sponsorship should be used more effectively in order to influence consumer's purchase decisions. For example, one of the mental characteristics is referred to by Lysonski and Durvasula (2013, p. 77) as price consciousness. If the sponsor offers consumers value for money in their product offering, this benefit must be communicated through the sponsorship. Those organizations sponsoring sporting organizations can for example communicate the "value for money" benefit at the sporting event and link this communication to communication developed for television and radio.
- The participants of the study indicated within the first category of theme 1 that there has to be a need for the sponsor's product. This means that there needs to be a gap between the consumer's current state and desired state in order for them to continue in the decision-making process. Marketing initiatives are put into place to either show consumers that there is a need for the product in their lives. It is therefore recommended that sponsorship be implemented in such a way that it further highlights the need for the product in the minds of consumers. Sponsorship should be leveraged with other IMC tools in order

to communication valuable information about specific product lines in order to influence the consumer decision-making process. The sponsor does not need to highlight all product offerings but rather plan and identify the relevant product that can be highlighted.

- This study did find that sponsorship increases awareness of the sponsor brands; these findings were supported by Walraven et al. (2014, p. 142) who also found that sponsorship awareness levels rise over time; increase in awareness occurred particularly in second year of sponsorship. Literature states that sponsorship can increase the awareness levels of sponsors however do not demonstrate the extent to which sponsorship influences the awareness of the sponsor's products. For instance, if a consumer attends a sporting event sponsored by an organization, the consumer should not leave the sporting arena without having been exposed to communication that stirs up thought and ideas about the sponsor and what the sponsor offers. Some consumers may go away having seen the brand but may not be aware of any products and services offered by the sponsors. The study did find that sponsorship increases awareness of the sponsor brands but it is recommended that sponsors ensure that this awareness be extended to consumers being aware of specific products and services offered by the sponsors in order to drive sales for specific product lines.
- Lastly, this study offers great insight regarding the impact of sponsorship on the consumer decision-making process. It is therefore recommended that further research be conducted using a quantitative approach in order to quantify the direct influence of sponsorship particularly on the first (need recognition stage), second and third stages of the consumer decision-making process.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Mihart (2012, p. 126) studied the impact of IMC on the various stages of the consumer decision-making process. Such studies are important and valuable as this information helps organizations better understand consumer's judgments and actions (Mihart, 2012, p. 126). This study however does not isolate sponsorship and its impact on the stages of the consumer decision-making process. The study at hand contributes to the body of knowledge as it clearly specifies which stages of the consumer decision-making process sponsors can better reach consumers. This knowledge also provides room for further research on how sponsors can leverage their sponsorship to be effective in the purchase and post-purchase stages of the consumer decision-making process.

This study further contributes to literature in sponsorship and consumer behavior. Thurston (2011, p. 1) found that sponsorship has a positive influence on sponsor awareness within the South African context however, limited research identifying whether this awareness of sponsors further extends to the recall of sponsor brands during the decision-making process.

The study at hand supports the findings by Thurston (2011, p. 1) that sponsorship creates awareness of sponsor brands in the minds of consumers. The findings contribute to consumer behavior literature and suggest that this awareness improves the consumer's ability

to recall brands as consideration sets during the second stage of the consumer decision-making process (stage 2: Searching for alternatives). Herrmann et al. (2014, p. 799) highlight the significance the findings of this study and state the implications of these findings for sponsors. Sponsors need to understand that brand recall and recognition are not the only conditions that describe an effective sponsorship (Herrmann et al., 2014, p. 799). Whether consumers include brands in consideration sets as a result of brand recall and awareness may be more valuable as it correlates with sales.

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