

## **FEMALE CONSUMERS' EVALUATIONS OF SPONSORSHIP AND THEIR RESPONSE TO SPONSORSHIP**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of female consumer attitudes towards a sports event, its sponsor, and their perception of the sponsor-event fit on their sponsorship response that includes factors interest, favor and the use of the sponsor's product. A total of 413 female undergraduate students aged between 18 and 26, participated in the study. Data were collected using a Sponsorship Evaluation Questionnaire (Alay, 2004). Multiple regression, zero-order and partial correlations were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that "sponsor-event fit", the "sincerity of the sponsor" and "interaction of sponsor-event fit with the status of the event" were key factors in generating three levels of sponsorship response; interest, favor and use of the sponsor's product. In addition, factors such as "the image of the sponsor" and "liking the event" were the significant determinants of the sponsor's product use by female consumers. It is suggested that sponsorship decision makers should take into consideration these factors when deciding on any sponsorship agreement.*

**Key words:** Sport sponsorship; Marketing; Consumer response; Attitudes; Sponsorship evaluation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sponsorship has become the lifeblood of funding sport, art and social events (Roy & Cornwell, 2003). It is the provision of resources (money, people, equipment) by an organization (the sponsor) directly to an individual, authority or body (the sponsee), to enable the latter to pursue some activity in return for benefits contemplated in terms of the sponsor's promotion strategy which can be expressed in terms of corporate objectives, marketing objectives or media objectives (Pope, 1998). These objectives have to be measured by the sponsors whether or not they are achieved. However, the issue of the evaluation of sponsorship effects is controversial and much debated. The reason is that there is a lack of universally accepted techniques by which sponsorship can be evaluated and the value and return on investment can be determined (Shanklin & Kuzma, 1992; Thwaites, 1994). According to Meenaghan (1983) the simultaneous use of ingredients within the communication and marketing mix, the carry over effect of earlier activities, synergy derived from marketing communication variables, creative management issues, the pursuit of multiple objectives, and the discretionary nature of media coverage make it difficult to evaluate sponsorship.

The literature shows that the most widely used evaluation techniques for the effects of sponsorship are media exposure monitoring, sponsor name awareness, and sponsor-sponsored

event association (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Meenaghan, 1996; Easton & Mackie, 1998; Nicholls & Roslow, 1999). Despite their considerable corporate popularity, these techniques are the first line measurement of sponsorship impact and they do not serve to facilitate understanding of consumer engagement with the sponsorship (Meenaghan, 2001). Sponsorship arrangement has some objectives predefined by the corporations, and the main focus of sponsorship is people or society, so the effect of sponsorship should be measured with regard to consumers. However, research on consumer response to sponsorship is inadequate (Gardner & Shuman, 1987; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Meenaghan, 2001) and even less is known about the specifics of female consumer response to it.

Professional sports, in particular, are male-dominated, and females are given a disproportionately small amount of media coverage (Theberge, 1991; Hargreaves, 1994). Shaw and Amis (2001) state that the under-representation of females in sport is a factor in sponsorship decisions of the corporations. Similarly studies done by Meenaghan (1983) and Meenaghan (1991) and Copeland *et al.* (1996) cite that media exposure is also a determinant factor when managers decide whether or not a sponsorship investment is worthwhile. It is apparent that the under-representation of females in the media and the lack of media exposure make corporations capitalize on female sport less. Consequently, research examining sponsorship effects on female sponsorship response at women's sporting events is scarce.

Although Jeannet and Hennessey's (1988) study provides evidence of an increase in product sales related to sponsorship, how consumer perception of sponsorship and their response to the sponsorship play a role related to the increase in product sales has not been systematically studied before. Literature reviews on sponsorship emphasize the importance of the evaluation of consumer responses to sponsorship (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Walliser, 2003). These studies recommend that rigorously designed studies are needed to further understand consumer perceptions of, and reactions to sponsorship stimuli in order to continue sponsorship investment. Knowing the underlying factors that trigger people to buy a sponsor's product/services provides insight into how sponsorship affects consumers with regard to their response to sponsorship, and how to make decisions on sponsorship for the sponsors and sports managers.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

The theory behind the present study is based on the classical conditioning research in advertising (Mitchell & Olsen 1981; Shimp 1981; Stuart *et al.*, 1987; Shimp 1991; Mitchell *et al.*, 1995). Speed and Thompson (2000) developed a model based on the classical conditional research to predict consumer response to sponsorship, but was not designed to establish whether classical conditioning occurs in sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Classical conditioning research in advertising suggests that the size of the conditioned response will depend on (1) the respondent's attitude towards the unconditioned stimulus (the advertisement or the endorser) (Mitchell & Olsen 1981; Shimp 1981), (2) the respondent's prior attitude toward the conditioned stimulus (the brand) (Stuart *et al.*, 1987), and (3) the respondent's perception of the congruence between the unconditioned and conditioned stimulus (the advertisement/endorser and the brand) (Shimp 1991; Mitchell *et al.*, 1995). Speed and Thompson (2000) applied this theory to sponsorship; the response to a sports sponsorship is affected by (1) attitudes toward the event, (2) attitudes toward the sponsor, and (3) perception of congruence between sponsor and event. The response to a sponsorship means consumer

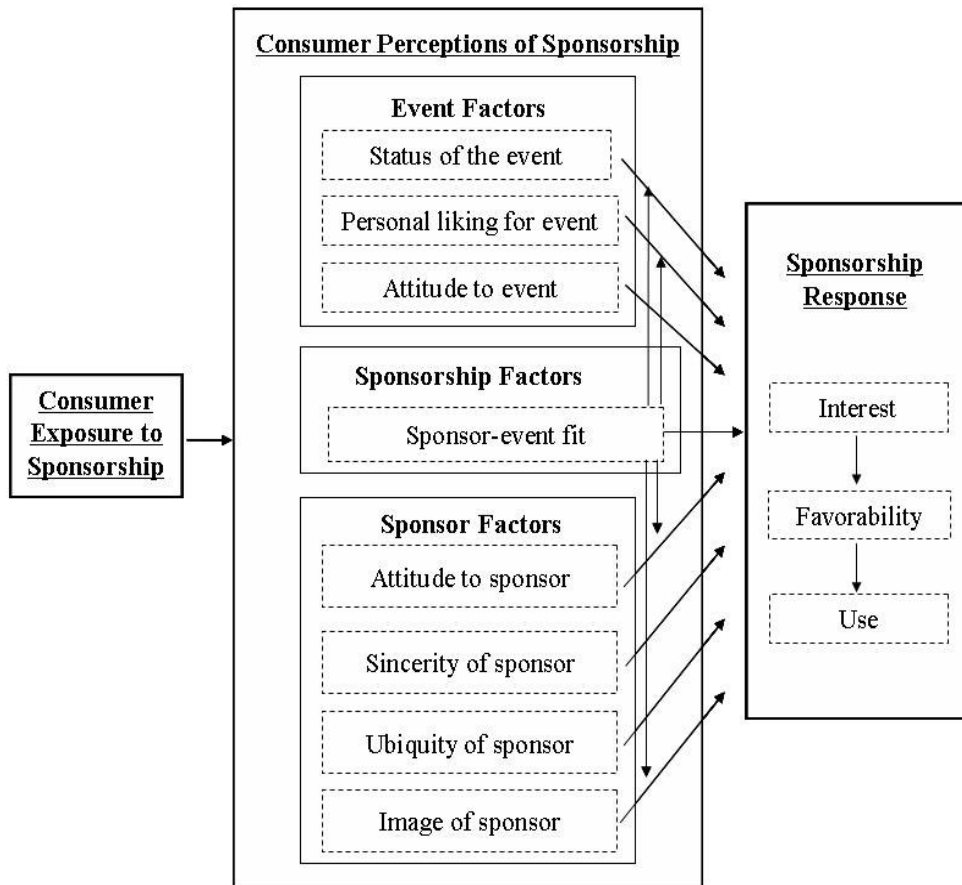
interest and favor towards the sponsor, and their use of the sponsor's product (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Attitudes towards the event include "perceived status" and "personal liking of the event" factors. In the literature, there are findings supporting the factors mentioned in Speed and Thompson's (2000) model. D'Astous and Bitz (1995) found that respondents who perceived the event to be attractive and interesting believed it would have a stronger impact on the sponsor's image. Crimmins and Horn (1996) also found that sponsors could benefit from the "gratitude" that arises among those fans with a strong liking for the event. Stipp and Schiavone (1996) suggest that a special, high status event, such as the Olympics, the Football World Cup and other World Cups create opportunities for sponsors because of the audience's high regard for these events.

Attitudes towards the sponsorship consist of "sponsor-event fit factor". Speed and Thompson (2000) described sponsor-event fit as the perception of the congruence between the sponsor and the event. Consumers who perceive a fit or relatedness between the sponsor and event generally have more positive responses to a sponsorship. This fit factor constitutes sponsor recognition (Johar & Pham, 1999; Pham & Johar, 2001), an image transfer from the event to the sponsor (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), and favorability toward the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Factors to be considered in relation to the sponsor include "the sincerity of the sponsor", "the ubiquity of the sponsor", and "attitudes toward the sponsor". Javalgi *et al.* (1994) as well as Stipp & Schiavone (1996) emphasize the importance of attitudes toward the sponsors in the provision of an effective sponsorship. According to them, sponsors with a favorable image receive a more positive response from consumers than those without it. Meenaghan (2001) also indicates that people involved in a sponsored activity are more aware of and have more favor toward the sponsor. Furthermore, sponsors perceived to be sincere in their sponsorship and motivated by philanthropy will achieve a superior response to their sponsorship compared with sponsors who are seen as purely motivated by commercial considerations (Armstrong, 1987; D'Astous & Bitz, 1995). The ubiquity of a sponsor, which is the frequency and the selectivity of a corporation for sponsorship, is also a determinant factor affecting sponsorship response. Speed and Thompson (2000) state that corporations who are unselective in their sponsorship get minimal response from consumers compared with those who sponsor only one or two selective events. Thus, sponsorship of selective events rather than too many different ones will benefit corporations in terms of consumer recall and consumer reaction to the sponsors/brands.

The theoretical model of Speed and Thompson (2000) grounded in Classical conditioning research in advertising was developed by Alay (2004) (see Figure 1). Two additional factors namely "image of the sponsor" and "attitude toward the event" were added to the model of Speed and Thompson (2000).



**FIGURE 1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE CURRENT STUDY**

The image of a sponsor is an additional factor in consumer response to sponsorship (Laroche & Brisoux, 1989; Laroche *et al.*, 1996; Pope & Voges, 2000; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Image transfer changes according to the type of sponsorship. For example, Meenaghan and Shipley (1999) found that the transferred values from an event to a sponsor through sport sponsorship are healthy, young, energetic, fast, and vibrant. These are admirable, concerned and caring for the sponsorship of social causes. Another study by Quester and Farrelly (1998) showed that when a strong congruence and belief is created between a sponsor and an event, the involvement of people at the event reflects on the sponsor's product as a brand or sponsor dependence. Similarly, Pope and Voges' (2000) study showed that there is a direct relationship between consumer purchase intentions and a company's image. Studies by Laroche and Brisoux (1989) and Laroche *et al.* (1996) support this finding. The more positive the image of a company is, the higher the purchase intention of consumers.

The theoretical framework illustrated in Figure 1 is utilized to examine the role of consumer attitudes toward a sponsorship in shaping their response to the sponsorship. The factors constituting the theoretical framework were investigated separately in previous studies, but they were examined within the context of the multidimensional measure of sponsorship response in this paper (see Figure 1). Knowing the role of consumer attitudes toward the sponsorship in shaping their response to a sponsorship can provide marketing departments with valuable information to assist them in the planning and execution of their marketing activities in a flexible manner in an uncertain and competitive business world. Evans (1991) states, in relation to this, that a flexibility in their response to environmental change provides corporations with a variety of options to choose from, and thus enables them to take the most appropriate and effective course of action. Thus, from this approach this publication may provide marketers with opportunities to consider their roles in relation to their attitudes and response toward a sponsorship, and see it as a flexible communication tool.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of female consumer attitudes towards a sports event, its sponsor, and their perception of the sponsor-event fit on their sponsorship response that includes factors interest, favor and the use of the sponsor's product. Based on the Sponsorship Model illustrated in Figure 1, the research questions of this study were outlined as follows:

1. How well do the event factors, the sponsor factors, and the sponsorship factor predict the three levels of sponsorship response (the respondents' interest and favor towards the product of the sponsor, and their use of the sponsor's product)?

Speed and Thompson (2000) found that the higher the level of fit between the sponsor and the sponsored event, the stronger the association between the sponsorship response and "personal liking of the event", "perceived status of the event", and "attitudes toward the sponsor". The interaction of each of these factors with the fit creates sponsorship response on consumers. Thus, the second research question is:

2. How well do the interaction of fit with "personal liking the event", "perceived status of the event", "attitudes toward the sponsor", and "image of the sponsor" predict the three levels of sponsorship response?

### Participants

The sample consisted of 413 female undergraduate students from one of the largest universities in Turkey, the Middle East Technical University, located in Ankara. Their ages ranged from 18 to 26 years with an average age of 22. The participants of this study were randomly selected. Those participants who were aware of the event and the sponsor of the event participated in the study. They were from a wide range of departments from humanities to engineering; all were enrolled in elective courses that were open to all faculties and departments.

The sponsored sports event was the European Volleyball Championship Turkish Women's Team matches and the sponsor of the event was a sanitary towel product, Orkid, a Procter &

Gamble product. Since the sponsor sponsoring this event focused on the young female market during the sponsorship period, female students were specifically chosen as the subjects for this study.

### **Measures**

Data was collected by using The Sponsorship Evaluation Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Alay (2004) to examine the effects of consumer attitudes regarding a sports event, the sponsor and their perceptions of the sponsor-event fit on their sponsorship response such as interest, favor and use of the sponsor's product/brand.

The introductory part of the questionnaire consists of the demographics of the respondents, and their participation level at the sports event. The participation level of the respondents is measured by putting a check mark on only one of the statements that best describes their involvement in the sponsored event.

The main part of the questionnaire has two sections and measures "consumer perception of sponsorship", and "consumer sponsorship response". The consumer perception of sponsorship section includes "event factors", "sponsorship factor", and "sponsor factors". The sponsorship response section includes three levels of sponsorship response namely consumers' interest and favor towards the product of the sponsor, and their use of sponsor's product. Cronbach alpha was .93 for "consumer perception of sponsorship", and .97 for "sponsorship response". Each section of the questionnaire consists of 55 items. The SEQ measures respondent agreement with each of the items on a scale ranging from 1 (indicating strongly disagree) to 7 (indicating strongly agree).

### **Procedure**

The SEQ was administered to the respondents after the three months of the sponsored event. In the literature, there is no study of when the sponsorship effects on consumers should be measured. Usually it is possible to see the pre-event and post-event measurement of the sponsorship effects on consumers in the literature (McDonald, 1991), but it is not clear that when the post-event measurements should be done after the sponsored event. Parker (1991) pointed out that the connection of consumers to a corporate image or a brand with an event takes time. Therefore, in this study as the actual consumption attitudes of the respondents were measured, it was presumed that the respondents exposed to the sponsorship messages needed time to connect the product of the sponsor and buy the sponsor's product which is directly related to females.

As the main purpose of the SEQ is to determine the respondent agreement on their perceptions of the sponsorship and their sponsorship response, only subjects who were aware of the sponsor and sponsored event were accepted in data collection. The researcher collected the data from the respondents during their regular class hours. Four hundred and seventy one (471) respondents participated in the data collection. Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondent participation levels in the sponsored event.

**TABLE 1. PARTICIPATION LEVELS OF THE RESPONDENTS TO THE SPONSORED EVENT**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
I have attended this event more than once as a spectator	20	4.2
I have attended this event once before as a spectator	15	3.2
I watched this event on TV consistently the last time it was held	133	28.2
I watched this event on TV occasionally the last time it was held	140	29.7
I watched this event on TV, but I did not follow all of the matches	105	22.3
I didn't pay this event any attention	25	5.3
I know nothing about this event	33	7.0
<b>Total</b>	471	100.0

Those respondents who did not pay the event any attention, and knew nothing about the event were eliminated from the study. A total of 413 valid questionnaires were included in this study. To analyze the data, multiple regression, zero-order and partial correlations were performed.

## RESULTS

The participation levels of the respondents to the sponsored event are presented in Table 2. 8.5% of those respondents had participated in the sponsored event as spectators and 91.5% of them "attended" it as television viewers.

**TABLE 2. PARTICIPATION LEVELS OF THE RESPONDENTS TO THE SPONSORED EVENT**

	<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
I have attended this event more than once as a spectator	20	4.8
I have attended this event once before as a spectator	15	3.6
I watched this event on TV consistently the last time it was held	133	32.2
I watched this event on TV occasionally the last time it was held	140	33.9
I watched this event on TV, but I did not follow all of the matches	105	25.4
<b>Total</b>	413	100.0

Their participation level shows that they consumed the sponsored event as spectators and television viewers, and thereby respondent sponsorship exposure was determined as the sponsorship exposure is important in evaluating the sponsorship effect (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Table 3 reveals multiple regression, zero-order and partial correlation of results across all independent variables in terms of the three levels of sponsorship response (respondents' interest and favor towards the sponsor's product, and their use of the sponsor's product).

Independent factors under the consumer perceptions of sponsorship section (eight independent variables; status of the event (SE), liking the event (LE), attitude toward the event (ATE), the sponsor-event fit (SEF), attitude toward the sponsor (ATS), the sincerity of the sponsor (SS), the ubiquity of the sponsor (US), the image of the sponsor (IS)), and the dependent factors under the sponsorship response section (3 dependent variables; interest, favor and use of the sponsor product) were measured. In addition, with the use of Lance's (1988) residual centering method, the interaction effects of SEF\*SE, SEF\*LE, SEF\*ATS and SEF\*IS across all dependent variables were measured.

Generally, the results of this study provided a valuable support for the research questions of the study. There is a significant moderate relationship across all twelve independent variables and the respondents' interest in the product of the sponsor,  $R=.554$ ,  $R^2=.307$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that 31 % of the variance in respondents' interest towards the product of the sponsor could be predicted by these independent variables. Similarly, there is also a significant moderate relationship between all independent variables and both the respondents' favor towards the product of the sponsor and use of the sponsor's product, respectively  $R=.687$ ,  $R^2=.472$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $R=.679$ ,  $R^2=.461$ ,  $p < .01$ , indicating that 47 % of the variance in respondents' favor towards the product of the sponsor and their use of the sponsor's product could be predicted by the independent variables.

The factors SEF ( $p=.003$ ), SS ( $p=.000$ ), and SEF\*SE ( $p=.000$ ) were the significant predictors of the respondents' three levels of sponsorship response namely the interest, favor, and use of sponsor's product. The factors SEF\*LE ( $p_{\text{favor}}=.000$ ,  $p_{\text{use}}=.000$ ), SEF\*ATS ( $p_{\text{favor}}=.000$ ,  $p_{\text{use}}=.006$ ), and SEF\*IS ( $p_{\text{favor}}=.000$ ,  $p_{\text{use}}=.000$ ) were the significant predictors of two of the three levels of respondents' sponsorship response that were favor and use. Another significant factor for the prediction of two of the three level of respondents' sponsorship response was the IS ( $p_{\text{interest}}=.000$ ,  $p_{\text{use}}=.002$ ). However, liking the event created only one level of sponsorship response in the respondents. It was the significant predictor of the respondents' use of the sponsor's product ( $p_{\text{use}}=.000$ ). On the other hand, the factors concerning the ubiquity of the sponsor, status of the event, and attitudes to the event were not significant predictors of the respondents' three levels of sponsorship response. Also, although the factor attitude to the sponsor was not a significant predictor of any sponsorship response, the interaction effect of sponsor-event fit with attitude to the sponsor ( $p_{\text{favor}}=.001$ ,  $p_{\text{use}}=.006$ ) was the significant predictor of the respondents' two of the three levels of sponsorship response, namely favor and use. Therefore, the factors of the status of the event, the ubiquity of the sponsor, and attitude to the sponsor were not predictors of any of the three levels of the respondents' sponsorship response. As stated in the research questions, the factors, except for status of the event, the ubiquity of the sponsor, and attitude to the sponsor, were significant predictors of the respondents' sponsorship response.



**TABLE 3. MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS FOR THE RESPONDENTS' INTEREST, FAVOR AND USE OF THE PRODUCT OF THE EVENT SPONSOR**

Variables	Interest					Favor					Use				
	$\beta$	T	p	Zero-order r	Partial r	$\beta$	T	p	Zero-order r	Partial r	$\beta$	T	p	Zero-order r	Partial r
	R=.554 R <sup>2</sup> =.307 p=.000					R=.687 R <sup>2</sup> =.472 p=.000					R=.679 R <sup>2</sup> =.461 p=.000				
<b>Attitude to event</b>	.027	.502	.616	.245	.025	.109	2.356	.019	.337	.116	.058	1.246	.213	.263	.062
<b>Attitude to sponsor</b>	-.099	-2.185	.029	.027	-.108	-.003	-.073	.942	.106	-.004	-.062	-1.568	.118	.054	-.078
<b>Image of sponsor</b>	.209	3.840	.000*	.407	.188	.032	.678	.498	.410	.034	.148	3.094	.002*	.438	.152
<b>Liking event</b>	-.090	-1.696	.091	.154	-.084	-.100	-2.162	.031	.179	-.107	-.183	-3.922	.000*	.087	-.192
<b>SEF*ATS</b>	.573	1.406	.160	.396	.069	1.254	3.419	.001*	.550	.167	1.026	2.736	.006*	.509	.134
<b>SEF*IS</b>	-.156	-.344	.731	.490	-.017	1.692	4.132	.000*	.609	.200	2.661	6.671	.000*	.614	.313
<b>SEF*LE</b>	.144	.499	.618	.399	.025	1.247	4.880	.000*	.531	.235	1.021	3.904	.000*	.463	.190
<b>SEF*SE</b>	1.433	3.811	.000*	.460	.185	1.977	5.877	.000*	.561	.279	2.331	6.926	.000*	.529	.324
<b>Sincerity of sponsor</b>	.222	3.840	.000*	.447	.188	.347	6.871	.000*	.600	.323	.344	6.748	.000*	.585	.318
<b>Sponsor event fit</b>	.168	3.008	.003*	.447	.148	.289	5.944	.000*	.579	.284	.280	5.703	.000*	.560	.314
<b>Status of event</b>	.134	2.548	.011	.242	.126	.062	1.362	.174	.228	.068	.056	1.212	.226	.174	.060
<b>Ubiquity of sponsor</b>	.077	1.554	.121	.331	.077	.117	2.711	.011	.437	.134	.080	1.823	.069	.408	.090

**Note:** SEF\*SE= interaction between sponsor-event fit and status of the event, SEF\*LE= interaction between sponsor-event fit and liking the event, SEF\*ATS= interaction between sponsor-event fit and attitude to sponsor, and SEF\*IS= interaction between sponsor-event fit and image of the sponsor

The zero and partial correlation results for the European Volleyball Championship Turkish Women's Team matches and the main sponsor of the team in terms of interest, favor and use of sponsor product for undergraduate females is shown in Table 3. SEF ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.447, .579, .560$ ), SS ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.447, .600, .585$ ), SEF\*SE ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.460, .561, .529$ ) and SEF\*IS ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.490, .609, .614$ ) were all positively correlated with interest, favor and use. However, when the other independent variables were controlled, SS ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.188, .323, .318$ ), SEF\*SE ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.185, .279, .324$ ) and SEF ( $r_{\text{interest, favor, use}}=.148, .284, .314$ ) were the most important variables correlating with interest, favor and use of sponsor's product by the respondents. Furthermore, IS ( $r=.188$ ) positively relates with interest, SEF\*LE ( $r=.235$ ) with favor and SEF\*IS ( $r=.313$ ) with use.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of the consumers' attitudes regarding a sport event, a sponsor and their perceptions of the sponsor-event fit on their sponsorship response such as interest, favor and use of the sponsor's product. The sponsored sport event was the European Volleyball Championship, the Turkish Women's Team matches, and the sponsor of the event was a sanitary towel product-Orkid produced by Procter & Gamble.

The findings of the study indicate that the sponsor-event fit (expressed as the fit), sincerity of the sponsor, and the interaction of the fit with the status of the sponsored event affect females' sponsorship responses toward sport sponsorship in terms of their interest and favor toward the sponsor's product and use of the sponsor's product. Besides the interaction of the fit with the personal liking for the event, the interaction of the fit with attitude toward the sponsor, and the interaction of the fit with image of the sponsor also affect females' responses to sport sponsorship, concerning their interest in and favor towards the product of the sponsor. In addition, the image of the sponsor is important for both respondent interest and use of the sponsor's product, and a personal liking for the sport event plays an important role in usage of the sponsor's product.

Three levels of sponsorship response means that the respondents' interest and favor towards the product of the sponsor, and their use of the sponsor's product, is stronger when women consumers perceive a fit between the sponsor and the sponsored event which is consistent with the sponsorship research of Speed and Thompson (2000) as well as Crimmins and Horn (1996). It could be stated that when the sponsor-event fit is perceived well, that the response of the consumers is high. This finding correlates with prior research on sponsorship which reported that if the consumers perceive sponsor-event fit high, their sponsorship response are high (Mitchell *et al.*, 1995; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Pham & Johar, 2001, Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006).

The sincerity of the sponsor was another significant predictor in terms of the three levels of sponsorship response. It can be stated that when consumers perceive a true sincerity in the sponsor, this is reflected in their interest, favor and use of the sponsor's product. Stipp and Schiavone (1996) as well as Speed and Thompson's (2000) findings support this finding.

Meenaghan (2001) also advocate that people that are involved in the sponsored activity is aware of the sponsorship, and therefore more aware of the sponsorship and have a more favor towards the sponsor. Besides, sponsors perceived to be sincere in their sponsorship and

motivated by philanthropy will achieve a superior response to their sponsorship compared to sponsors that are seen as purely motivated by commercial considerations (Armstrong, 1987; D'Astous & Bitz, 1995; Cornwell & Coote, 2005).

The status of the event was not perceived as a significant predictor of the three levels of sponsorship response by the respondents. Stipp and Schiavone (1996) suggest that a high status event, such as the Olympics, the Football World Cup and other World Cups, create opportunities for sponsors because of the audience's high regard for these events. In this study, the status of the event did not significantly contribute to the prediction of the respondents' interest and favor toward the sponsor's product and their product usage. However, the interaction of the fit with the status of the event was perceived as a significant predictor for three levels of sponsorship response. It can be said that if the interaction of the fit and status of the event was perceived to be high, female consumer response will be high on the three levels of sponsorship response. This finding is also consistent with Speed and Thompson's (2000) study.

Although the attitude to the sponsor, liking the event, and the image of the sponsor did not create any effect on the respondents in terms of the three levels of sponsorship response, the interaction of the sponsor-event fit with each of these created two levels of sponsorship response, namely favor and use. This means that the sponsor-event fit plays a significant role in these factors. The interaction of the sponsor-event fit with attitudes towards the sponsor, liking the event and the image of the sponsor created favor towards and use of the sponsor's product. For example, findings show that liking the event was the negative significant predictor of product use. This finding contradicted the previous findings of Speed and Thompson's (2000) study. Findings of this study revealed that even when consumers didn't like the event, a stronger link was created between the event and the sponsor. The interaction of this link and liking of the event affect consumers positively in their favor towards and use of the sponsor's product.

The image of the sponsor was also a determinant factor for two of the three levels of sponsorship response, namely interest in and use of sponsor's product. Although the real consumption attitudes of consumers were tested in this study, the findings of Pope and Voges (2000) partially support this finding. It shows that there is a direct relation between purchase intention and the sponsor's image. Other studies also support this finding (Laroche & Brisoux, 1989; Laroche *et al.*, 1996) namely the higher the positive image of a corporate sponsor the higher the purchase intentions of consumers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although in general all the event, sponsorship and sponsor factors affect the respondents' sponsorship response in terms of interest, favor and the use of the event sponsor's product, the sincerity of sponsor, the sponsor-event fit, the interaction of sponsor-event fit with the status of the event should be taken into consideration by potential sponsors when planning for sponsorship allocation, and by sports managers when preparing sponsorship proposals for potential sponsors. Although sponsorship increases product sales, knowing which underlying factors triggers people to buy the sponsors' products or services provides corporations and sport managers with insights into the functioning of sponsorships. Well known sponsorship evaluation techniques such as media exposure monitoring and sponsor name awareness, are

first line measurements, but do not serve to facilitate the understanding of consumer engagement with sponsorships (Meenaghan, 2001). In that sense, the present study is related to consumer engagement in sponsorship evaluation in a perceptual and attitudinal manner. It can be concluded from the findings of the present study that the sponsor and the event to be sponsored should be suitably selected, the sponsor should exhibit a sincere approach to this sponsorship, and lastly, high status events should be selected for sponsorship purposes.

Due to the fact that sponsorship is an important tool in marketing, and has the ability to contribute to a wide range of objectives at both a corporate and brand level (Thwaites, 1995), the findings of this study should be utilized strategically in marketing activities. As marketing thought has moved from a product orientation to a market orientation (Stotlar, 2001), sponsorship offers flexibility as a communication vehicle (Quester & Thompson, 2001). Flexibility is the capability to pro-act or respond instantly to changing competitive conditions and thereby develop and/or maintain a competitive advantage (Hitt *et al.*, 1998). As customization and personalization of products and services are of fundamental importance for competitiveness (Özer, 2002), sponsorship can be an effective medium or tool for strategic marketing purposes. During sponsorship, sports spectators are exposed to promotional messages under favorable conditions such as the enthusiasm, excitement and enjoyment under which customers tend to be relaxed and receptive to the corporate messages (Nicholls & Roslow, 1999). Therefore, it can be also concluded that sport sponsorship is an effective way of transmitting messages with different marketing aims and different market segments with the help of the special and unique characteristics of each sports event.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The present study had a number of limitations that should be noted. Firstly, all variables were measured by self-report, and the response biases may have influenced participants' scores. For example, some students may have wanted to describe themselves as being interested in or as using the sponsor's product. However, students were assured that their responses would be confidential, and details regarding their confidentiality were stressed, so there is little reason to suspect that students were motivated to provide socially desirable responses. In addition, subject responses could not be compared with the sponsor company's product sales increase in numbers because of the sponsor firm's secrecy. A second limitation, although the sponsor of the event focused on young females during this sponsorship, the sample of this study was comprised of only young female undergraduates. Lastly, the findings can not be generalized to cover the whole population, but this is the one of the leading studies of the sponsorship-consumer and female sponsorship response triangle in terms of perceptual and attitudinal perspectives.

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