

Factors driving Purchase Intention and Word of Mouth Communication for Sports Sponsors

A comparative analysis between “star” clubs and “underdogs”

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Abstract

The primary goal of this study is to scrutinize the growing importance of sport sponsorship, by identifying the key factors in the sport sponsorship relationship, and single out how these factors are anticipated by supporters of teams at the top and bottom of the league standing. According to literature, this study examines the impact of sponsor recognition, attitude toward sponsor and perceived sponsor's sincerity on two major behavioral outcomes, supporters' purchase intention and word of mouth communication (Olson, 2010; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). However, research regarding sponsorship evaluation is not well established, as the interactions between constructs proposed are complex and dynamic. A quantitative method was used for the purpose of this study and 1,311 questionnaires were completed by supporters from two distinct fan bases; one from a “star” football club and one from an “underdog” football club. The proposed hypotheses were empirically confirmed, either fully or partially. The attitude towards the team's sponsor had a significant effect to both purchase intention and word of mouth communication. Nevertheless, altruistic motivation seems to be the most powerful factor affecting word of mouth, both positive in favor of the team's sponsors and negative against the rivals' sponsors. The comparison between the two teams shows significant differentiation in the main variables; however, no mediation or moderation role can be attributed.

Introduction

Sponsorship is a well-known remarkable development first used in 590 BC, when athletes of the Olympic Games were financially rewarded by the Greek state (Lee and Ross, 2012). Sport sponsorship is a company's investment in cash or kind, for creating a business-to-business relationship with a sport team, in order to gain publicity and awareness within a particular target audience, via the encouragement of an activity not straightforwardly related to their business (Biscaia et al., 2013). Sport is an unforced domain for sponsorship, given that companies are more inclined to invest in sport associations and clubs, which have a strong bond with a mass audience, as the goodwill that supporters feel towards their favorite club, can possibly be demonstrated toward sponsors (Dees et al., 2006). Notwithstanding the indisputable relevance of sport sponsorship and the abundant amount of research conducted about its effectiveness, there is no widely established theory and there is a necessity for farther

research (Walraven et al., 2012). Academic research until now has mainly fixated on the assessment of abstract corporate sponsorship in lieu of actual sports club's sponsors (Biscaia et al., 2013). Moreover, there is a lack of research questioning how supporters of teams at different competitive levels perceive sponsorship and how this factor influences sponsorship effectiveness. The goal of the present research is to single out the key variables in the sport sponsorship relationship and to single out to what degree team's position in league standing affects these variables from the perspective of supporters.

Literature Review

According to sponsorship literature, it is crucial to investigate whether sport sponsorship provides any assets to sponsoring companies from the point of supporters' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses, such as perceived quality, price and intention to procure the sponsor's products (Walker and Kent, 2009). Previous studies have addressed a variety of attitudinal and behavioral factors influencing the effectiveness of sport sponsorship, such as attitude toward sponsor (Kim et al., 2011), sponsor recognition, sponsor sincerity, purchase intentions of fans (Biscaia et al. 2013) and word of mouth communication, as high level sponsorship outcomes (Alexandris et al., 2007). Nonetheless, hardly any of them have investigated how the relationship between fans and sport clubs affects sponsorship efficacy, and even less researches have developed an abstract basis for how team's competitive level, affects fans' attitudes toward sponsorship or/and sponsor firms. Regardless of its gravity and the abundance of research on sport sponsorship, the complexity of the association amidst sponsorship and fans buying objectives remains blurred, as the interactions betwixt the proposed variables are complicated and dynamic.

According to previous researches, there are many reasons why firms decide to undertake sponsorship with the most important being to creating positive consumer attitudes toward their brand and building, enhancing, or altering their brand image (Ko and Kim, 2014). Establishing a positive impression or attitude towards a brand has been recognized as a major factor of sponsorship effectiveness (Alexandris et al., 2007). Within the context of sponsorship as attitude is called the supporter's overall perception about a sponsor firm and a positive one is correlated with prepositions to support, positiveness towards, and eagerness to think about the sponsor's goods (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). An individual's notions about an entity constitute the base of his attitude toward that entity, with notions being viewed as the associations transferred from the entity to the individual's memory (Biscaia et al., 2013). Associations transferring between the sponsee and the sponsor are mainly a transfer of meaning and constitute one of the main results of sponsorship (Grohs, et al., 2004). Companies undertaking sponsorship activities assume that fan will have the same positive notions regarding them as they have toward their sports club (Shaw & McDonald, 2006). A sponsor is possible to be recognized as an ally of the club's fans due to the support which sponsor offers, to something they conceive as significant (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). When the sponsor and the sponsee bear upon individuals' mind, either intentionally or unintentionally, the attitude toward the sponsee is likely to be assigned to the sponsor, either as distinguishing brand concomitances or in a positive comprehensive assessment, thus a positive switch in prejudice about the sponsor (Walraven, 2012). A positive attitude toward the sponsor is related with supporters' assessments about the team's profits from the sponsorship agreement and in order to maximize these effects, firms should to seek to be anticipated as "good" sponsors, whose relation with the team produces the desired benefits (Alexandris et al., 2007). Furthermore, previous researches have proved that attitude toward the sponsor is a crucial forecaster of purchase intentions (Koo et al., 2006).

Sponsorship can enhance corporate image, and we can measure its effectiveness in terms of recall, recognition, and image changes (Bibby, 2011). Sponsor recognition is an extensively acknowledged factor for evaluating sponsorship effectiveness (Walsh et al., 2008). The concept of sponsor recognition ascribes to one's capability to identify the trademark of the sponsor, under disparate circumstances, and it comprises the brand recall and the recognition effectiveness (Biscaia et al., 2013). The individual's identification of the sponsor is essential for further information concocting about the sponsor. According to Crompton (2004), sponsor recognition constitutes the first step in the concatenation of sponsorship benefits, as a prerequisite for sponsorship effectiveness in mass audiences, is the awareness of its existence. In other words, if recognition is not initially accomplished, sponsoring firms are unable to fulfill their consequent ambitions (Farrelly et al. 2005). Recognition of sponsors is crucial to accomplishing their strategic goals, as team supporters may appreciate the firm as a consequence of the effect generated through the exposure indoors and outdoors the sport arena (O'Reilly et al., 2007). Moreover, the extent to which individuals are in a position to recognize a sponsorship, sponsor recognition is a decisive quantum of the sponsorship's efficacy (Rifon et al., 2004), while it also prompts to crucial consumer conducts such as positive stance about the sponsor (Speed and Thompson, 2000), and purpose to acquire its goods (Madrigal, 2001).

Another line of analysis has examined the role of the construct of sponsor's sincerity as a major factor enhancing sponsorship effectiveness (Olson, 2010; Alexandris et al., 2007). According to literature, an individual's reaction to sponsorship is affected by his notion about the sponsoring firm. This notion is mainly assigned to the attitude that sponsoring is a minor profit-making communication means in relation to advertisement, but this "feelgood" perspective is decreased when sponsors are considered as less sincere. Furthermore, it has been proven that there is a positive correlation betwixt an individual's anticipated sincerity of the sponsoring firm and his reaction to sponsorship (Koronios et al., 2016). In case that team's supporters anticipate sponsoring firm as a sincere associate of the team, rather than the impression that a sponsor is just trying to exploit their love for the team in order to sell his goods, these supporters will probably show concernment and sympathy unto the sponsoring firm, as well as an eagerness to think about its merchandise (Kim et al., 2011). Moreover, individuals have positive feelings and show a higher purchase intention when the motives of sponsoring firms are anticipated to be more charitable rather than merely commercial (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Although sincerity has been found to be a crucial forecaster of higher-level sponsorship effects, essentially no prior research has sought to comprehend the foundation for sincerity insight, with Rifon et al. (2004), to be the only ones who have used sincerity as a dependent variable. Purchase intentions is one of the most extensively examined sponsorship effects (Biscaia et al, 2013; Alexandris et al., 2007). Purchase intentions indicate the given intention of a fan to display a considerable endeavor to obtain a product/service (Spears and Singh, 2004). Conforming to this premise, purchase intentions depict an indicator of a consumer's inclination to have a certain purchase behavior (Dees et al., 2008), especially when a sponsor engages in sport activities addressed at supporters who have a common identity (Ko et al., 2008). From a sponsor's viewpoint, the purchase intention of fans constitutes the most important exponent of sponsorship effectiveness given its influence on sponsor's selling (Crompton, 2004). Furthermore, for the majority of sponsoring firms the improvement of the effectiveness of their bottom lines by way of increased selling is of utmost importance (Lings and Owen, 2007). From the teams' viewpoint, the purchase intention for sponsors' merchandise is a pivotal indicator for them to legitimate their correlation with existing sponsoring companies and to bargain potential sponsorship

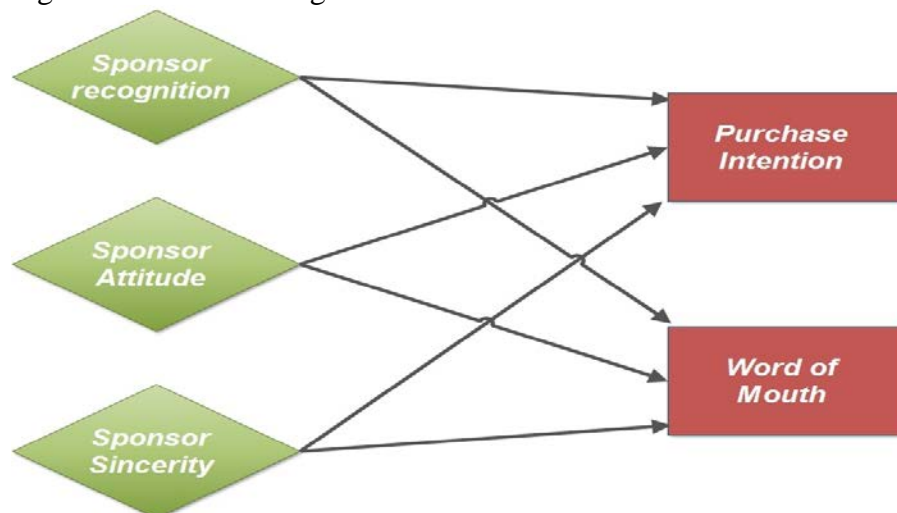
agreements (Hong, 2011). As far as supporters' viewpoint is concerned, recognizing a firm as upholding their club, they may acquire the sponsors' goods as a form of altruism or to compensate the firm for sponsoring the club (Parker and Fink, 2010). Based on such a variety of results, various researches have utilized purchase intentions as the decisive variable to assess sponsorship effectiveness (Alexandris et al, 2007; Madrigal, 2001). Nevertheless, the largest proportion of the research bear upon general sponsors, instead of concentrating on present sponsors affiliated with a club (Hong, 2011). Hence, the present research contemplates purchase intentions as the endpoint of sponsorship efficiency.

Although that the largest proportion of the research has identified purchase intentions as a main sponsorship outcome (e.g Biscaia et al, 2013; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001), word-of-mouth (w-o-m) communication has not been thoroughly investigated. Word of mouth communication can be described as a transmission of opinions and ideas between people, apropos of a product/service, which concerns the item of the communication (Laczniak et al., 2001). Word-of-mouth communication could be proposed as an extremely enticing sponsorship outcome, which will possibly have a more compelling impact on individual's attitude than the other promotion tools, as individuals perceive it as more approachable, trustworthy, and less biased (Swanson et al., 2003). Moreover, utilizing information received by word-of-mouth communication is an efficient approach for eliminating any anticipated risk derived from the consumption -for a first time- of any product or service (Alexandris et al., 2007). This is especially pertinent in the sport context, case of sport service organizations, in which supporters' anticipated risk is generally high, by cause of the complications in the evaluation of the quality of services, offered by sports clubs. The difficulties in the evaluation of services offered by sports clubs are caused by the high intangibility and inconsistency of the sport service product (Alexandris et al., 2007).

Developing the research model and Hypotheses

The intent of this study is to single out the key variables in the sponsorship relationship and to single out to what degree team's position in league standing affects these variables from the perspective of supporters. More specifically, the aim of the research is to examine the impact of attitude towards actual sponsors, sponsors' sincerity and recognition, on supporters of "star" and "underdogs" clubs purchase intention and word of mouth communication. In order to clarify the connection between each factor following model has been used (figure 1).

Figure 1. Factors driving Purchase Intention and Word of Mouth Communication Model



All the hypothesized variables are displayed in the suggested model as presupposed in figure 1, which critically investigates the following hypotheses:

- H1: Sponsor recognition is positively related to Purchase intentions of the supporters
- H2: Sponsor recognition is positively related to Word of mouth communication of the supporters
- H3: Attitude toward sponsors is positively related to Purchase intentions of the supporters
- H4: Attitude toward sponsors is positively related to Purchase Word of mouth communication of supporters
- H5: Supporters opinion about sponsors' sincerity has a direct positive effect on their purchase intention
- H6: Supporters opinion about sponsors' sincerity has a direct positive effect on their Word of mouth communication

Definition of Variables

Sponsor Recognition measures the number of the sponsors that respondents were able to identify correctly among various well-known companies. For the purpose of the analysis the authors constructed one single variable, which represents the percentage of correct answers that were given by each respondent (scale from 0 to 100%).

Sponsor Attitude refers to the opinion that the respondents hold for each sponsor. The authors have measured separately for each sponsor the respondents' opinion about both the general corporate image and the image of their products/services. The two variables that were included in the actual analyses were constructed as the mean value of the values given for the different sponsors (scale from 1 to 5).

Sponsor Altruism refers to the degree a company is perceived by the respondents as being altruistic in its motivation to become a sponsor. The authors performed an exploratory factor analysis to identify the motives that fans perceive as driving the sponsors' choices (KMO=0.806, Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p > 0.000$ and the total variance explained by the factors was 59.6%). It produced two distinct factors with no cross loadings over 0.2: a) purely business-oriented, selfish motives, like increased profits, sales and advertising (cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$) and b) altruistic motives like promotion of the sport or the team being sponsored (cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$). For the remaining of the paper, they will be referred as selfish and altruistic motives respectively.

Purchase Intention refers to the respondents' intention to purchase the products and/or services sold by their team's sponsors. It was measured with a direct question for each sponsor; one single variable was computed as the mean value of the original values given by the respondents (scale 1 to 5).

Word of Mouth Communication consists of two dimensions: the communication in praise of the team's sponsors (positive WoM) and the communication against the competitors of the team's sponsors (negative WoM). Both of the respective variables were directly measured on a 5-point scale.

Research Design and Data Collection

The present study introduces the effects of sport sponsorship as measured from two different football teams, which were chosen in consonance with particular criteria. More specifically both teams must have been playing for at least three seasons in the first Greek division. This assured that no relegation or promotion overwhelmed the attitude of the supporters, as this variable affects psychographic measures of supporter loyalty (Koenigstorfer & Uhrich, 2009). Furthermore, star club only licensed if it was amidst the top 5 Greek football clubs in revenue (Deloitte, 2008) and had participated in European championships in the last three years. This guaranteed that the star club was actually financially advantaged. The Club contemplated to be an underdog if it had not participated in European championships in the last three years and was not among the top Greek football clubs in revenue (Deloitte, 2008). Elements were obtained from both teams following the same procedure.

A quantitative questionnaire was selected as the predominant means of collecting the data. To elaborate, a team of five researchers was responsible for distributing the questionnaires to the fans during their entrance to the stadium. Each spectator was randomly selected by the research team and politely asked to take part to the survey. Particular circumstances on the field, such as the constant flow of people especially on coming to the field, and queues that sometimes are created in and out of the stadium, favors the selected operation by the researchers. In order to reach the desired sample, the whole operation took place at three different times. Researchers attended three home matches of both teams in a row, so as to increase the validity of their outcomes. The above mechanism is mentioned in the literature as systematic sampling and it is a very decisive technique for the reason that respondents, picked up at quite steady time intervals (Bennett, 1999). Questions were assessed on a five-point likert scale and the time needed for completing the survey was 10-12 minutes. A total of 1,515 questionnaires were completed and after the elimination of some ill completed, 1,311 were successfully used for the purpose of the study. According to Sheth et al. (1991), in order to export safe results for an individual brand in general, it is necessary to have at least 100 responses. The present study serves the above condition as each sponsor has been followed by approximately 135 responses. Finally, the items gathered from the questionnaires were analyzed by means of the SPSS.

Results-Discussion

The analysis was based on 1.311 responses coming from football fans. Almost half of them 47.1% came from the fans of a major Greek team based in the capital (star club) and 52.9% from the fans of a less successful team with a more local profile (underdog club). The great majority of the respondents were men (90.7%) who were either still in school (36.8%) or employed (47.3%). In terms of family status, 59.6% of them were not married while 33.7 were; a mere 6.7% were divorced. The high percentage of unmarried respondents probably accounts for the age distribution (63.4% were younger than 35 years old).

Before testing the main model, the authors performed a series of independent t-tests to examine whether there was a difference on the mean values of each of the model's variable between the two fan bases. Every single one of them resulted in a significant difference and every single one of them showed a higher mean value for the fans of the "underdog" team. The following Table presents the results in detail. All variables were measured on a 5-point likert scale, except for sponsor recognition, which represented the percentage of the respective team's sponsors identified by the respondents.

Table 1: T-tests for the main variables of the model between the fans of the two teams.

		p-value	Mean Difference (star-underdog)
Sponsor Attitude	Corporate image (CI)	0,00	0,32
	Product image (PrI)	0,00	0,31
	Sponsor recognition (SR)	0,00	0,55
Sponsor Sincerity	Selfish motives (SM)	0,00	0,24
	Altruistic motives (AM)	0,00	0,60
	Purchase intention (PI)	0,00	0,38
Word of Mouth Communication	Positive Word of mouth (PW)	0,00	0,69
	Negative Word of mouth (NW)	0,00	0,21

This is a very important finding mostly because of its consistency. The fact that all the model's variables have different results for the two different teams shows that it is a connection that should be further explored. The current data do not allow authors to explore the exact reasons accounting for the difference. Nevertheless, it is a valid hypothesis that this could very well be the result of the team's base. The highly performing team (star club) is based in Athens and has fans from the entire country, while the less successful team (underdog club) is based in a smaller city and the great majority of its fans live in this city, thus, forming a much more coherent group. This distinction does not apply to the sponsors of the two teams, eliminating, therefore such a connection from the results.

To test the proposed model, the authors used multiple linear regression analysis. More specifically, the authors tested whether there was an effect of the three independent variables, e.g. sponsor recognition, sponsor attitude and sponsor sincerity, on the two dependent variables, e.g. intention to purchase and word of mouth (positive and negative). The respective fit of the three models (three dependent variables) and equations were:

Purchase Intention: $R^2=0.748$, $p<0.000$

$PI= 0.524 + 0.497*PrI + 0.333*CI + 0.172*SR$

Positive Word of Mouth: $R^2=0.263$, $p<0.000$

$PW= 0.593 + 0.492*AM + 0.573*SR -0.162*SM + 0.202*CI$

Negative Word of Mouth: $R^2=0.063$, $p<0.000$

$NW= 0.821 + 0.223*AM + 0.276*PrI$

All three of the research hypotheses were confirmed, either fully or partially (all or some of the distinct dimensions of our independent variables have a significant effect to all or some of the distinct dimensions of the dependent variables). In consistence with the current literature (Koronios et al, 2015), altruistic motivation seems to be the main factor affecting word of mouth, both positive in favor of the team's sponsors and negative against the rivals' sponsors. As expected, perceiving a sponsor as having selfish motivation has a negative effect on positive word of mouth communication; it has no effect, however on purchase intention or negative word of mouth communication. The attitude towards the team's sponsor had a

significant effect on all three dependent variables, showing thus how important is the sponsor's image both in terms of product image and corporate image. This is consistent with the literature (Koronios et al., 2016).

Following the support of our proposed model, the authors included the team as a variable. Although the effect of the team was significant for the purchase intention and the positive word of mouth, it only increased the value of R^2 by 0.002 and 0.003 respectively (no significant effect was found for the negative word of mouth). Therefore, the authors cannot attribute a mediation or moderation role to it. Nevertheless, this is an indication that the specific characteristics of the various teams are to be taken into consideration when one decides on sponsoring a team. Further research could reveal different team profiles lead to different results for sponsors and/or are better suited for different sponsors. It would be of great interest to include in the research on the different attitudes and choices between local and national teams.

Managerial Implications

Sponsor recognition, sponsor attitude and sponsor sincerity have all been recognized as having a significant effect on intention to purchase and word of mouth communication, which indirectly may lead to increased sales for a specific team's sponsor and decreased sales for its rivals. Therefore, all three should be of concern to managers when making decisions about sponsoring a sports team. More specifically, they should ensure that their motivation is or at least appears to be altruistic. The fans' perception that the sponsors' motivation is altruistic increases the respective word of mouth communication both in their favor and against their competitors. Furthermore, they should eliminate any reference to business motivation since it has on its own a negative effect on word of mouth communication. The sponsor's image, both corporate and specific products' image, affects word of mouth communication as well as intention to purchase. This is evidence that sponsors would benefit from presenting a strong image of quality products and business practices along their altruistic motivation to sponsor a sports team. The line is indeed fine; any respective promotion should present a strong company of quality products that has no other reason to help the sports team, but pure love for the sport and a commitment to give back to the community. Such promotion is essential also in terms of quantity. The research shows that sponsor recognition also has an effect on intention to purchase and positive word of mouth. Therefore, sponsoring a team may not be enough to get the most of it; separate promotion events to increase awareness may also contribute.

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