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Is oppositional loyalty moderated by the degree of rivalry?

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## Summary

Sports sponsorship literature has recently considered potential negative effects that reduces overall effectiveness. Current literature suggests that the negative attitudes towards a strong rival team may also be transferred to its sponsor(s). This research contributes to the topic by examining the possible moderating effect of the degree of rivalry. The study finds that strong rivalry is a stronger predictor of the rivalry effect than weak rivalry, but show mixed results in terms of attitude towards the sponsors.

## Introduction

There are several motivations as to why firms enter sponsorship deals with sport clubs, where the most cited are to build brand awareness, brand attitude and brand image (Coppetti, Wentzel, Tomczak & Henkel, 2009). Zdravkovic and Till (2012) argues that continuous support can enhance commitment and loyalty towards the sponsor.

However, in recent years there has been an increased attention to team rivalries and how it affects home fans' attitude towards a sponsor of a rival team. It has been proposed that such negative rivalry effects may impose threats to the desired sponsorship objective because the negative effect should be subtracted from the payoff (Olson, 2017). Findings show that oppositional loyalty effects do occur in team sports (Olson, 2017; Cikara, Botvinick & Fiske, 2011; Bergkvist, 2012), and the effect is especially prominent when fit between the sport and sponsor is strong (Olson, 2017). Thus, careful consideration for brand managers is therefore necessary before entering a sponsorship.

Previous research, however, has mainly focused on supporters of football teams where the rivalry is quite strong (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012). In line with Olson's (2017) suggestion for extended research, we aim to examine whether the same rivalry effects are present across different sports and if the negative effects are the same for competing teams that are perceived as weaker rivals.

Therefore, we aim to test for the effect between Norwegian ice hockey teams' sponsors, and to the best of our knowledge, studies have yet to examine if similar effects exists in the sport.

Furthermore, while previous studies have examined sports that are among the most popular in its respective country, for example football in England and Sweden (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012), and baseball in USA (Cikara et al., 2011), we examine a sport that is not a particularly popular in its country. More precise, we set out to determine whether a lower degree of rivalry also leads to reduced oppositional loyalty towards the rival's sponsor.

This will contribute to the existing sponsorship literature by extending the scope of research to include an examination of how widespread the rivalry effect is across other conditions.

While other studies have found that rivalry effect may be a source of concern for businesses considering entering a sponsorship, we believe that further research is needed to determine whether the effect can be generalized. Therefore, our study also examines if the degree of rivalry moderates the attitude towards rival teams' sponsor(s).

The findings in this research show that strong rivalry is a significantly stronger predictor of attitude towards an opposing team's sponsor, but the effect is not consistent with previous research (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012), as it shows both negative (IT brand) and positive (sports drink brand) attitudes.

## Literature review

Across sports and other activities with a (relatively) large audience, well known brands are using sponsorships to reach new and existing customers by placing their brand logo on items associated with sport clubs, athletes, at festivals, and so forth. Thus, brands are targeting the most passionate fans and users who generally have higher sponsor recall/recognition and positive attitude towards sponsors than those who are not (Biscaia et al. 2013; Johar & Pham, 2006; Olson 2010; Olson & Thjomoe 2011). Moreover, fan passion is often enhanced by seeing their favorite team (home team) or athlete playing well against a rival (Herrmann, Kacha & Derbaix, 2016; Zillman et al. 1989), and a growing body of literature has demonstrated that this passion can lead home team fans to develop negative feelings towards sponsors associated with the rival (Olson, 2017; Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Bergkvist, 2012; Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Hickman and Lawrence, 2010).

### ***Rivalry effect***

Rivalry is described as a “*subjective psychological construct that based on perceived competitive relationships*” (Bee & Dalakas, 2015. p410). It is further claimed that the nature of a rivalry is defined over time based on history of competition and geographical location (Bee & Dalakas, 2015). Thus, teams that has a long history of competing for the same trophies side by side are thought to have a stronger rivalry than teams that are not direct competitors in the same manner.

In simple terms, rivalry effect occurs because home team fans are cognitively linking the sponsoring brand of a rival team with the same negative associations towards the team (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Rivalry effects have been a relevant topic in sponsorship literature the past years, and Bergkvist (2012) showed that highly involved fans transfer positive characteristics and feelings from their team to its sponsor. This was found to be true for negative characteristics and feelings as well, and negative attitudes towards a rival team can therefore easily be transferred to negative attitude towards that team's sponsor (Bergkvist, 2012). The negative attitude towards a rival team's sponsor can be quite strong, and it is unlikely to change, even though strong counter arguments and positive information is presented (Bee & Dalakas, 2015).

Thompson and Shina (2008) found that a high level of participation in brand membership communities increases the likelihood of adopting new products from preferred brands, but also decreases the likelihood of adopting opposing brands. Such brand memberships communities could for example be fans of the same sports team.

### ***Social Identification Theory***

Social identity theory (SIT) has been used to classify to which extent spectators, or fans, of a sports team identify themselves with a given team (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Hickman and Lawrence (2010) suggest that SIT can predict that a fan often mirror a team's norms, values and goals, which creates an in-group mental favoritism toward other fans of the team, and negative mental preference toward the rival teams and their sponsors.

Social identity is said to occur at three stages: (1) the individual and others are defined as members of a social group, (2) the individuals of the social group learn the common attributes, behaviors and norms that define and differentiate the specific group from others, and (3), assigning the perceived norms from the group to the individual itself, which is a typical example of sport team fans (Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015).

Grohs, Reisinger, and Woisetschläger (2015) found evidence that football fans that have a strong social identity with their home team evaluate the team sponsor more positively than those who are not as involved.

It is found that higher involvement among fans will lead to businesses being more likely to achieve their sponsorship goals (Biscaia et. al. 2013; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Herrmann et al. 2016; Martensen, Grønholt, Bendtsen, & Juul, 2007; Olson 2010). Therefore, for brands to achieve their sponsorship objectives, the communication should be directed towards the most passionate fans, who usually are the ones watching the games either at the stadium or on television (Biscalia et. al. 2013; Olson 2010). Naturally, fans with high identification levels tend to show more positive reactions to sponsorships than fans that identify less (Amorim & Almeda, 2015; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997), and the degree of fan identification, or involvement, will therefore moderate the sponsorship effect.

Although current literature concerning weak rivalries is limited, Weisel and Böhm (2015) found less enmity between weaker rivals (no special rivals) among German football fans. However, there is still a lack of knowledge concerning the implications of how feelings towards opposing teams' sponsors are affected by the degree of rivalry. Cikara et al. (2011) found that in-group members are more likely to aggress towards a fan of a rival team than a fan of a competing, but not rival, team. We therefore find it likely that in-group members' attitude towards opposing teams' sponsor follows the same pattern, and our research question is as follows:

*RQ: Is oppositional loyalty towards an opposing team's sponsor moderated by the degree of rivalry?*

## Method

To test for generalizability across different sports and geographical locations, we use teams from the Norwegian ice hockey league (GET-ligaen) in the study. Ice hockey is claimed to be the ninth most popular sport in the world (Totalsportek, 2018), which corresponds well with the sport's standing in Norway.

One of the most decorated ice hockey teams in Norway the past decades with 7 cup trophies and 8 league trophies (SIL, 2018), Storhamar IL, is utilized as home team. Vålerenga IF is used as the strong rival team, as it is the most successful team in the Norway, and officially describe Storhamar as its main rival (VIF,

2018; Nettavisen, 2016). The weak rival in the study is Stjernen hockey, which has not won any major trophies since the 1980's, and therefore not been a direct threat to Storhamar in the league nor the cup. Just recently, in the 17/18 season, Storhamar finished on 1st place and Stjernen as number 9, whilst Vålerenga finished 5th in the league (Scoreboard, 2018).

The method follows the experimental procedure employed by Olson (2017) and use the same brands, Gatorade and SAP for the home team and Powerade and Oracle for the rival team, to illustrate high fit and low fit sponsors respectively. At the time of the study, none of the brands had any official associations with any of the clubs used in the study.

The respondents were recruited via a Facebook group dedicated to Storhamar IL supporters shortly after the season ended. The study was performed with an experiment consisting of four conditions (2 dedicated to weak rival and 2 for the strong rival). The survey had 379 respondents, of which 100 were removed ( $N=279$ ) because of poor completion rate and time spent on the survey. The number of respondents in each condition ( $N=66$ ,  $N=78$ ) for weak rival and for the strong rival ( $N=60$ ,  $N=75$ ) is large enough for representativeness, and the gender distribution of the sample is representative of male segment in sports, as 75,4% of the respondents were male and 24,3% women. This is consistent with the male segment that is most commonly targeted by sport sponsors (Loechner, 2009).

Prior to the questionnaire respondents were given a fictional press release of approximately 350 words containing information about the next season's team sponsor, which is in line with the manipulation necessary for the hypothesis testing (Olson, 2017). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four press releases, which stated that Gatorade and SAP will be the new sponsors of Storhamar, and Powerade and Oracle for the weak rival (Stjernen) and strong rival (Vålerenga), to test the difference in rivalry (Olson, 2017).

To disguise the purpose of the study, the press release included two other neutral teams, Manglerud Star and Frisk Asker, as filler teams (Olson 2017). With the objective of creating a realistic press release, we, as Olson (2017), included a statement by a business analyst emphasizing that the new sponsor of Storhamar is

a big competitor to the new sponsors of Stjernen (or Vålerenga). The press release also included a short comment from the respective sponsor, highlighting the excitement to become a partner with the aim of enabling the team(s) to achieve success. This procedure was used for both high and low fit sponsors.

To measure sponsor-sport fit and high/low rival team sponsoring brand attitude, respondents were asked to answer 3-item scales (Olson, 2010), followed by a 7-question sport spectator identification scale (Olson, 2017; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), and demographic questions.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, the respondents were informed that the press release is fictional.

Cronbach alpha for the sport Identification was .692 or higher for all groups. The Cronbach alpha for fit measure were of 0.72 or higher and 0.85 or higher for attitude measures, allowing to create variables as overall fit and attitude indices for analysis and results reporting. Group comparisons reveal no significant differences in the demographic variable gender and consistently high identification with Storhamar ( $M = 4,25/5$ ). However, the sponsor-sport fit mean for sports drink ( $M = 2.81$ ) versus the IT brand and ( $M = 2.89$ ) does not confirm the fit manipulation, and the fit measure is therefore excluded from the main analysis. The research question is addressed using hierarchical regression featuring a single two-level predictor variable, that will predict the impact of overall brand attitude (dependent variable) for IT brand and sports drink brand.

## **Measures**

### ***OVATT***

OVATT was used in the hierarchical regression, and is the overall brand attitude for both the weak and strong rival. The variable is based on three brand attitude questions that are formulated the same for both low fit and high fit brands. The three questions used are: "Oracle/Powerade has a good reputation", "Oracle/Powerade has a positive profile" and "I will recommend Oracle/Powerade to others". A five-point Likert scale are used to determine if respondents strongly disagree (1) or strongly agree (5).

***WESTP***

The rival sponsor dummy predictor variable, where 1 = strong rival and 0 = weak rival.

***FIT***

The fit measurement consisted of three fit questions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questions used were the same for weak- and strong rivals in both experimental groups: “Is there a logical connection between Oracle/Powerade and Stjernen/Vålerenga?”, “Oracle/Powerade and Stjernen/Vålerenga have similar values?”, “It makes sense that Oracle/Powerade becomes the sponsor of Stjernen/Vålerenga”. However, it was found to be inappropriate for the analysis because the difference between the brands showed minimal difference.

## **Results**

We tested if a weak rival is significantly less important than the strong rival in predicting overall attitude. The hypothesis testing was performed by following the procedure used by Olson (2017) with some modifications. OVATT is used as dependent variable, and is formed by the brand attitudes from the strong and weak rival. WESTP is the dummy predictor variable (1 = Vålerenga sponsor or 0 = Stjernen sponsor).

***IT-brand***

The first regression (table 1) addresses the IT brand condition, and show that strong rival (Vålerenga) is a significant negative predictor (-1.44) on overall brand attitude ( $p < .000$ ). The results in the regression is coherent with previous studies, and show that strong rival team is a significant negative predictor of brand attitude.

***Sports drink***

The regression analysis (table 1) for overall brand attitude (OVATT) with the Powerade stimuli, show a significant ( $p < .036$ ), but minimal positive effect on overall brand attitude (.23).

Somewhat surprisingly, the regression results differ from previous studies in terms of predicting attitude towards an opponent's sponsor. The positive coefficient (.23) in the regression analysis for the rival effect in sports drink brands show that the respondents in the strong rival condition have a slightly positive attitude towards the rival sponsor, which is contrary to previous findings in sponsorship literature (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012). Although quite similar, the strong rival condition (Vålerenga) show a higher mean (2.76), than the weak rival (Stjernen) (2.52), and illustrates the marginally significant results.

Research Question	Dep. Variable	Predictor Variable	Adjusted Explained Variance
		Coeff.	Coeff.(sig)
<b>RQ1</b> ORACLE	Overall Attitude (OVATT)	Constant	WESTP
1		4.27	- 1.44 (.000)
			0.056
<b>RQ1</b> POWERADE	Overall Attitude (OVATT)	Constant	WESTP
1		2.52	0.23 (.036)
			0.074

Table 1: Hierarchical regression results

Oracle/Powerade	Stjernen/Vålerenga	Attitude Mean	Mean Difference
<b>Oracle:</b>			
	Stjernen sponsor	4.27	
	VIF sponsor	2.71	1.56
<b>Powerade:</b>			
	Stjernen sponsor	2.52	
	Vålerenga sponsor	2.76	0.24

Table 2: Internal means for brand attitudes in the weak and strong rival conditions.

In summary, the results show that there are substantial differences in how home team fans perceive different types of sponsor brands (table 1; table 2). Rivalry effect is found to be stronger in the IT condition than the sports drink condition, and show a negative and positive relationship respectively (table 1).

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

The goal of the study was to understand what effect the degree of rivalry have on attitude towards an opponent's sponsor. In both conditions, the weak rival is significantly less important than the strong rival in predicting overall attitude towards a rival team's sponsor, which confirms the hypothesis. Thus, brand managers mainly must consider the response of strong rival teams' fans when evaluating whether to enter a sponsorship or not. However, it is necessary to gain a deeper understand of the nature of rivalry effects in Norway, due to the mixed results obtained in the study.

Where previous research have found that rivalry effects may pose threats to the overall effect of the sponsorship because of fans forming negative attitudes towards brands that are associated with the rival team (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012), our results indicate that it is still too early to generalize the impact of rivalry effects across sports and geographical locations. The results indicate that the effect may not be similar in all competition environments, and contrary to previous research (Olson, 2017; Bergkvist, 2012), home fans seem to be able to form positive attitudes towards a rival team's sponsor, even if the rivalry is considered high. Specifically, Storhamar fans reports both significantly negative (IT brand) and positive (sports drink brand) attitudes towards strong rival team's sponsors. Furthermore, rather surprisingly, the fit manipulation shows a reverse result compared to Olson (2017), as the IT brand has a slightly higher mean than the sports drink brand. The difference in means was found to be too small, and fit was not used as a predictor of rival sponsor attitude. Therefore, we cannot establish whether fit is a significant predictor of brand attitude towards a rival team's sponsor.

The timing of the study may have affected the results, as the study was conducted shortly after Storhamar's first playoff championship since 2008. We therefore hypothesize that the fans were in an ecstatic mindset, and not overly concerned about other teams' sponsors. Although Vålerenga describe Storhamar as its most fierce rival (VIF, 2018), the two teams have not been fighting directly with each other the past seasons. More precise, when Storhamar has been close to a league- or play off-championship, Vålerenga has not, and vice versa (Totalsportek, 2018). The last time the two teams were head to head in a playoff final was in 2007 (VIF, 2018), and as a result, we are theorizing that there is a difference between young and old supporters in how they perceive the strength of rivalry. For this reason, young fans may not have the same type of hatred towards Vålerenga as the older generation.

Also, Vålerenga IF has been the subject of a popular sports documentary series that follow the team close for four seasons on Norwegian TV2, and we speculate that even Storhamar fans following the series might establish some form of positive attitudes towards the team.

Norway is a small country with relatively few inhabitants and the sport culture is much based on inclusion, and in a recent report, the Norwegian strategy council for sports (Strategiutvalget for idrett, 2017) consider individualism to be a challenge for the "Norwegian sport model". The council further claims that the customer mentality is changing, which pose threats to the attitude towards teams and organizations.

We speculate if that mentality, in addition to the increased focus on individualism, can be transferred to sponsors as well. More specifically, we believe that pre-existing positive attitudes and preference towards certain brands (i.e. Powerade) may outweigh the negative attitude towards the rival team. Thus, the negative attitude towards the rival team may not be transferred to the sponsor because of an already established preference to the sponsoring brand.

The same report highlights football, cross country skiing, and cycling, as some of the most popular sports in Norway, which further strengthens the claim that ice hockey is not among the most popular in Norway. Whereas Olson (2017) used one of the biggest and well-known rivalries (Manchester United vs. Manchester

City) globally, we examined rivalry in a sport that can be considered a niche in the Norwegian sport environment. Therefore, because the ice hockey environment in Norway is relatively small, it is possible that rivalries occur only on the ice and that there is a general sense of belonging to the same community off the ice.

### **Limitations and future research**

It is important to recognize that there are limitations associated with this research. Although the study is constructed by following the same experimental procedure employed by Olson (2017), it did not run a pre-test to test for attitudinal differences between the brands included in the press releases. Nor did it include press releases where the sponsoring brands were reversed.

As stated previously, the fit manipulation did not show the expected results, and was therefore not included in the analysis. Future research should still aim to use a fit manipulation, as fit has been shown to be a predictive factor towards brand attitude.

Although the study was run based on prior research and findings, we recognize that the inclusion of a confirmed fit stimuli and the mentioned pre-test would have made the study more consistent with the study performed by Olson (2017). As this study is an extension of previous research by including both strong and weak rival teams, a second pre-test could also been run to statistically determine to what degree Storhamar fans perceive the opposing teams to be their rivals. By doing so, it can be determined if Storhamar fans perceive Stjernen to be a relatively strong rival, even though the sports performance and geographical distance suggests that it should not be (Bee and Dalakas, 2015). Similarly, as indicated in the previous chapter, the rivalry between Storhamar and Vålerenga might not be as strong as it used to be due to their performances the past few years, which emphasizes the importance of determining the degree of rivalry for both strong and weak rival assumptions. This contrasts with the team manipulation used by Olson (2017), as Manchester City (MC) has evolved into a serious contender for the premiership title the last ten years, while Manchester United (MU) has struggled in the league since 2013. The historically superior MU advantage over MC has shifted, and MC

has been the best performing team in Manchester the last five seasons, which ought to increase the hatred of MU fans towards MC (and its business partners).

Finally, the focus of this study is on a sport that is not among the most popular in its country, and found significant evidence for both negative and positive attitudes towards the main rival team's sponsor. To get a better understanding of the Norwegian mentality, we suggest that future research could test whether rivalry effects exists and are more consistent in more popular sports such as football.

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