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Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	2
2.1 FAN INVOLVEMENT	2
2.2 SPONSOR- TEAM FIT	2
2.3 RIVALRY EFFECT	3
2.3.1 <i>Social Identification</i>	3
2.3.2 <i>Balance Theory</i>	4
2.4 OPPOSITIONAL LOYALTY	4
3. METHOD	6
4. CONCLUSION	8
REFERENCES:	9

1. 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.

In recent years there has been an increased attention to rivalries and how it affects the “home” fans’ attitude towards a sponsor of a rival team. Previous findings show that oppositional loyalty effects does occur in team sports (Olson, 2017), which requires careful consideration before entering a sponsorship. The effect is especially prominent when fit between the sport and sponsor is strong, in addition to the rival teams having rival sponsors (Olson, 2017).

However, the body of literature has yet to address if such effects also occurs for teams where the rivalry is not that strong as it is for teams such as Man United vs. Man City, Arsenal vs. Tottenham, etc. Therefore, we want to investigate if there are different effects for teams that are not obvious rivals, for example: Arsenal vs. Leicester, Burnley vs. Crystal Palace. Thus, we aim to extend the work of Olson (2017), and investigate whether the degree of rivalry has an effect on the degree of negative rival effects. More precise, we set out establish whether a lower degree of rivalry also leads to reduced oppositional loyalty.

2. Literature review

2.1 Fan involvement

Fans that are highly involved, watch more games and therefore observe more sponsor and adds in the arena, TV and social media. Thus, they have a higher sponsor recall and recognition (Olson and Thjomoe 2011a). Also, those fans who are highly involved are more attractive to sponsors, because they often have, or develops a positive or increased attitude towards the sponsorship (Herrmann et al. 2015; Biscaia et. al. 2013; Olson 2010; Martensen, et al., 2007; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

2.2 Sponsor- team fit

One major topic in sponsorship theory is the importance of congruence, similarity, relatedness, or fit, between the sponsee and sponsor.

Main findings in previous research suggests that fit between sponsored and sponsor is important if the goal is positive brand image transfer (Olson, 2010; Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed and Thompson, 2000). Moreover, fit has been found to be an important predictor of how respondents perceived the sincerity and positive attitude towards the sponsorship, both in sports and non-sports contexts (Olson 2010; Simmons & Becker-Olsen 2006). Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) found fit to influence the clarity, elaboration on the sponsorship, which could end up in a negative relationship if the relationship between sponsor and sponsored is perceived to be of low fit. Rifon et al. (2004) found that congruent fit had more positive impact than incongruent fit, whereas Olson and Thjømøe (2009) discovered that a mild sense of incongruence between sponsor and sponsored could result in higher recognition, because an elaboration with a fit that is not natural can make it more interesting. They also concluded that fit had a negative relationship on sponsor recognition, but a positive relationship on attitudes.

Some of the main topics discussed in previous literature is attitude toward the sponsorship (Olson & Tjømøe, 2010) and attitude toward the sponsor (Olson & Thjømøe, 2009; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Research has shown that natural fit is advantageous in order to achieve the desired effect of the sponsorship (Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011b; Coppetti et al., 2009, Simmons & Becker-Olsen 2006). The results are seemingly similar, as most findings show that fit is a critical factor for sponsorship success (Olson 2010, Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Johar & Pham, 1999).

It is already established that in-group, or highly involved, fans have negative attitudes towards sponsors of a highly rivalising team, especially when the sponsor has a high fit with the sport Olson (2017). However, no evidence is found with a high fit brand towards a weak rival.

H1: Home fan attitudes towards (weak) rival team and sponsors will be moderated (reduced) by higher sponsor-sport fit.

2.3 Rivalry effect

The existence of rivalry effects are well known, and Bergkvist (2012), for example, found that Swedish football fans that associate the positive characteristics and feelings with their team, and link this to the teams sponsors. On the other side, the opposite negative feelings and characteristics towards the rival team, gets linked to the rival teams sponsors (Bergkvist 2012).

Rivalry effect can be explained based on both SIT and balance theory, which can be associated by the sponsorship that is cognitively linking the sponsoring brand with the factors that the home team fans dislike, that they further have learned to associate with the rival team (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999).

2.3.1 Social Identification

Social identity theory has been used to classify to which extent spectators, or fans, of a sports team identify themselves with a given team (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). It is found that higher involvement will mean that the sponsorship goals, such as attitudes towards the sponsorship, team, sponsor, that also probably more financial gains for team sponsors, increase (Biscaia et al. 2013; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Herrmann et al. 2015; Martensen, et al. 2007; Olson 2010). Thus, for brands to achieve their desired sponsorship results, they will have a

better chance when targeting fans that are highly involved with their favorite sport, team and athletes (Biscalia et. al. 2013; Olson 2010).

Social identity is said to occur in three stages: (1) the individual and others are perceived, defined as members of a social group; (2) the individuals of the social group learn the common attributes, behaviours and norms of the group that define and differentiate that 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, Woisetschläger (2015) found evidence that in-group football fans that have a strong social identity with their home team, and evaluate the team sponsor more positively than those of the out-group (not as involved fans). This was strengthened by testing four different brands from two distinct product categories. This study will also confirm the findings of Olson (2017)

Hickman and Lawrence (2010) suggest that SIT can predict that a fan often mirror a teams' norms, values and goals, this creates an in-group mental favouritism toward other fans of the team and negative mental preference toward the rival teams, this also includes the rival teams sponsors.

2.3.2 Balance Theory

Another theory that has been used to explain negative associations towards a rival sponsor is balance theory. The focus in elimination attitudinal imbalance towards items that has become associated with each other in memory, evidence of this is found in car racing and football fans, their liking or disliking for the particular team is transferred to the sponsors as a mean to reach a cognitive balance (Dalakas and Levin 2005; Reisinger, Grohs, and Woisetschläger 2008).

2.4 Oppositional Loyalty

It is evident that oppositional loyalty does occur for the dedicated and most committed fans. The negative attitude toward the rival team's sponsor can be quite strong, and it is unlikely to change even though strong counter arguments and the most positive information are presented (Bee and Dalakas 2013).

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

The literature to this date has revealed that negative feelings towards the rival teams may also lead to negative feelings towards rival sponsors, especially when they are business competitors with the home team sponsor (Olson, 2017; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). This negative attitude is further strengthened when the sponsor has high fit with the sport (Olson, 2017).

As mentioned previously, there are no evidence of the same result for a weak rival team, and we speculate that the oppositional loyalty will not be as significant between fans of teams that are not seen as main rivals.

H2a: Oppositional loyalty will be higher when a weak rival team sponsors are direct business competitors with home team sponsors.

H2b: Oppositional loyalty effects for a weak rival team sponsors that are direct business competitors to home team sponsors will be moderated (exacerbated) by high levels of sponsor-sport fit.

H3: Oppositional loyalty effects will be moderated (reduced) by lower degree of rivalry between the teams

The H3 Will test the difference in loyalty effects of our H2 hypothesis towards the similar research questions of Olson (2017), which focus on strong rivalry.

3. Method

The method is based on the experimental procedures employed by Olson (2017). The findings of the research found negative effects of sponsoring on passionate fans of rival teams, there were also found that fans of a home team are more negative towards rival team sponsors when they are business competitors and particularly when the sponsor has high fit with the sport (Olson, 2017).

We will use the same high fit and low fit sponsors, which is Powerade and Oracle for the home team and Gatorade and SAP for the rival team. We still want to use football as a sport in the experiment, since it is claimed to be the most popular sport in the world (Totalsportek, 2017), and the top league in England, Premier League, is the most popular football league in the world (Marketwatch, 2016). The home team chosen will be Crystal Palace (CP), The experimental procedure will be to change the strong rival to a weak one, which will be West Bromwich Albion (WBA). From the 14/15 to 16/17 seasons the two teams have been ranked from 10 to 15 place. Also, CP is based in London, and WBA is based 123 miles outside London (Google, 2017), this evidence and the low standings increases the statement that CP and WBA are not major rivals, since rivalry is often based on a close geographical positioning between teams as Man United vs. Man City, Arsenal vs. Tottenham, etc. Simultaneously, the filler brands will be reported coming from the Premier League teams Hull City and Watford.

Respondents will be given a fictional press release of approximately 350 words that contain information about the next season's team sponsor, which will correspond with the manipulation necessary for the hypothesis testing Olson (2017). The press release will state that Powerade and Oracle, will be the new sponsors of LFC and Gatorade and SAP for WBA (Olson, 2017).

Furthermore, the study will also use two other neutral teams Watford and Hull City with the aim to disguise the purpose, and the teams will be used as fillers and reported in each of the press releases Olson (2017).

For hypothesis H2a and H2b, the press releases will simulate reality, and therefore include a statement done by business analysts who will state that the new sponsors of LFC is a big competitor to the new sponsors of WBA. The press release will also state that these sponsors' excitement to become a part of the teams and that

they will provide funding that will help strengthen the squad that will hopefully lead to reach the team and fans' objectives.

This procedure will be done for both the high and low fit sponsors.

Further, the respondents will be asked to answer three scale questions measuring sponsor-sport fit and three rival team sponsoring brand attitude questions borrowed from the work of Olson (2010). Next, a 7-question Sport Spectator Identification scale from Wann and Brandscombe (1993), used by Olson (2017). At last, the respondents will be answering demographic questions. These questions will be used to establish the fans of LFC, which includes their recruiting process and random assignment that will create experimental groups, which could be used to compare the fan bases background and probably show a similar high identification with the in-group fans of the home team (Olson, 2017).

When ending the questionnaire, the respondents will be informed that the press release is fictional. Those of the respondents that will be assigned to control groups will not be exposed to the press release, but instead given the same attitude and fit measures regarding Powerade or Oracle for LFC and the additionally three filler brands. All manipulations involve comparisons of the same brand across the control group and weak rival team, for example Powerade will always be compared with Powerade, which also counts for Oracle.

4. Conclusion

This will contribute to marketing managers focusing on fans with a strong connection to their favorite team, should consider minimizing the possibility of negative consequences among rival fans. The H2 research questions could speculate that brands can create reduced feelings and attitudes toward the rival team fans when it is sponsored by a business competitor, and the negative effects could enhance with high fit sponsors. Those managers that has responsibility of a high sponsor-sport fit brand will need to pay extra attention, when sponsoring a team, when the team rival is sponsored by the brands main competitor (Olson, 2017). Olson (2017) found that negative attitudes can be reduced by league sponsoring. This might indicate that sponsoring something that is somewhat relevant to the rival is an effective way of reducing the hostile attitude. However, because league sponsoring is relatively expensive, we question whether sponsoring local teams may provide the same effect. Local teams, often at the grassroots level, is generally not an expensive sponsorship subject, and this could potentially be an interesting question for future research.

In conclusion, we expect the current research to find that managers, to some extent, have to be careful when the weak rival(s) have sponsors that are main competitors. Yet, we believe that the consequences are as severe as with the rivalries used in Olson's (2017) research.

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