

Motivations & objectives of football sponsors: selecting sponsorship arrangements

Authors: Mary Charalambous-Papamiltiades PhD (1), Prof. Ian Henry (2), Prof. Guillaume Bodet (3)

Institutions:

1. European University Cyprus
2. Loughborough University
3. Université de Lyon

E-mails: m.charalambous@euc.ac.cy , I.P.Henry@lboro.ac.uk , guillaume.bodet@univ-lyon1.fr

Aim of the study

This paper aimed at investigating the main selection processes employed by companies when entering a sponsorship arrangement in a specific sponsorship context, including the motives impacting their decision and the objectives they attempt to realise. The goal was to identify the underlying mechanisms and structures of sponsorship in order to provide conceptual explanations based on critical realist paradigm.

Literature review

The literature on sport sponsorship objectives has shown that that sponsors are primarily concerned with the realisation of corporate related goals (Hartland, Skinner & Griffiths, 2005), with image and awareness objectives featuring among the most prevalent ones (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Walliser, 2003), and an emphasis recently on more sophisticated goals such as fostering a certain positioning concept (Goldman & Johns, 2009), and the accommodation of internal marketing goals (Cunningham et al., 2009). There is some evidence however, suggesting that for small companies, sponsorship can be an essential tool for building good relationships with the business community (Crowley, 1991). At the same time, it seems that the importance of sponsorship objectives may differ substantially, with the financial sector's sponsors setting more sophisticated and measurable goals (Thwaites, 1994) and the tobacco industry being particularly concerned with the creation of corporate goodwill (Lavack, 2003). Furthermore, more developed sponsorship contexts seem to place more emphasis on corporate objectives (Thwaites et al., 1998), whilst less developed contexts seem to direct their attention to the realisation of brand related objectives (Papadimitriou et al., 2008). Similarly to objective setting, sponsorship was also found to be fuelled, by a vast variety of motives, with less developed sponsorship contexts appearing to be characterised by a philanthropic orientation (Papadimitriou et al., 2008), as opposed to more developed contexts which seem to be driven by more commercial factors (Thwaites et al., 1998). In the same vein, small sponsors seem to be primarily driven by personal motives and interests (Polonsky et al., 1996), while public companies sponsoring sport seem to be motivated by more emotional and much less commercial factors as compared to private sponsors (Papadimitriou & Apostolopoulou, 2009).

Methodology

Considering the complexity of the sponsorship activity, an exploratory research design was deemed more appropriate for investigating the sponsorship phenomenon. A collective case study approach (Creswell, 2013) was adopted, and the data were collected through the use of an interview protocol which served as the platform for the conduction of detailed, semi-structured interviews with key decision makers representing companies investing in football club sponsorship. A total of 10 interviews were conducted with local and international companies investing in football sponsorship in Cyprus, representing both small and large

entities operating in different sectors. The findings of this qualitative research design were coded and analyzed through NVivo software. A within case analysis was performed through approaching and analysing each single case entirely, followed by a cross-case analysis which involved a thematic analysis across the cases (Creswell, 2013) in order to detect of common themes that transcend the cases.

Results/implications

The analysis of the findings indicated sponsors adopted a wide variety of sponsorship related practices, ranging from purely philanthropic and patronage activities to highly professional practices. Specifically, three broad approaches were identified. The first approach consider sponsorship as patronage and philanthropy, and the primary motivating factors for engaging in sponsorship were philanthropic, altruistic, social, and community related. Moreover, this approach was characterised by the absence of sponsorship related objectives, an absence of sponsorship selection criteria, as well as the lack of a contract regulating the sponsorship arrangement. The second approach identified in this study was semi-professional, demonstrating some aspects of a more systematic approach, such as the pursuit of some sponsorship objectives, the use of a contract consisting of some components minimising the risks involved in sport sponsorship, and the employment of some criteria for selection. The third approach identified relied on a purely systematic, methodical and well-organised basis. This approach was fuelled by purely commercial motives, it incorporated well defined and measurable objectives realising both corporate and internal marketing goals, and involved the employment of selection criteria which were linked to specific objectives pursued. The results of the multiple case study provided invaluable evidence for the variety of practices employed in a specific sponsorship context. This study investigated sponsorship practices and the underlying mechanisms impacting sponsorship related decisions, and attempted to provide conceptual explanations based on theoretical foundations. The explanations provided are regarded as being particularly helpful for both sport practitioners and sponsors operating in similarly developed sponsorship markets.

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