

# Determinants of commitment in the football club/shirt sponsor relationship dyad<sup>25</sup>

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## Introduction

When football clubs and shirt sponsors agree a sponsorship deal, it is commonplace for one or both of them to profess their commitment to the other. Established notions of commitment are characterised by longevity (Ganesan, 1994), durability (Gundlach et. al., 1995) and a willingness to continue in a relationship (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). However, figures reported by Thwaites (1995) and Chadwick and Thwaites (2004) reveal that shirt sponsorship relations are likely to be of a short-term nature, with one or both parties routinely choosing not to renew their contracts. This suggests commitment in the football sponsorship dyad is rather different to that reported elsewhere in the literature. The main aims of this paper therefore are to examine the nature of commitment exhibited by football clubs and shirt sponsors towards each another, and to establish the determinants of commitment within this relationship dyad. Most sponsorship programmes continue to be analysed from within a transactional paradigm. This has resulted in sponsorship principally being viewed as a component of the marketing mix, undertaken on a discrete short-term basis and motivated by financial considerations. An alternative view emerging from the relational paradigm suggests sponsorship programmes have more durable, social characteristics than has thus far been acknowledged by the literature (Cousens et. al., 2001; Farrelly and Quester, 2003a; 2003b). It is from within this paradigm that this study has been undertaken and the paper therefore highlights interaction, mutuality and commitment as inherent features of all relationships. Commitment is particularly important for the success of relationships, especially in business-to-business dyads. But, despite some studies having addressed commitment in the sponsorship literature (Farrelly and Quester, 2003a; 2003b), this important phenomenon has to date received little attention from researchers.

## Methods

The methodology underpinning the study consisted of four stages. Firstly, a review of 174 sponsorship announcements was undertaken which served as the basis for a second stage during which 14 critical incident interviews were conducted (7 English professional football clubs and 7 football shirt sponsors). These were used to identify the nature of commitment and its determinants. Inter-coder agreement following an analysis of the interview data led to a conceptualisation of commitment and 10 determinants being identified. During the third stage of the research, the commitment concept was operationalised using Anderson and Weitz's (1992) definition of commitment. Along with the 10 determinants, this formed the basis for a questionnaire that was despatched to the 92 English professional football clubs and 90 shirt sponsors during the 2002/2003 season<sup>26</sup>. A response rate of 60.4% (60 football clubs and 50 shirt sponsors) was achieved which, following factor analysis, resulted in nine key determinants and a further conceptualisation of commitment being determined. Subsequent multiple regression analysis identified that three determinants (perceived benefits, opportunistic tendencies and shared values) explained a majority of the variance in commitment. In order to verify these results, a fourth stage involving interviews in six sponsorship dyads (six clubs and their respective six shirt sponsors) was completed.

## Results

The findings of this study show that commitment in the football shirt sponsorship dyad is generally a short-term phenomenon characterised by a willingness to continue in a relationship until such time that a more attractive alternative becomes available. This could be an alternative sponsorship partner, another form of marketing communication activity in the case of the sponsor, or other revenue sources in the case of a football club. The identified determinants also reveal that there are instrumental and affective aspects to commitment. In the case of the former, the decision to sign an agreement with a sponsorship partner indicates that a partner is the best alternative at the point when a sponsorship contract is agreed. This

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<sup>26</sup> Two shirt sponsors-Desun and Keijan-had no English offices at the time of the study.

convergence is nevertheless transitory, often lasting no longer than the contracted term of duration. This observation is reinforced by opportunistic tendencies and the desire for benefits that respondents display. Affective commitment is most obvious in the way that both club and sponsor appear to share commercial values. Data shows that parties are more likely to commit to one another where they have complementary business goals. This should nevertheless be interpreted in the broadest terms, as business goals are not always directly commercial and may involved shared views about, for example, club and sponsor roles in the local community.

### **Discussion**

It is clear that football shirt sponsorship programmes are not simply transactions involving the exchange of payments and financial rights. The process through which sponsor and sponsee engage, manage and terminate their association is a relational process. However, there is currently little evidence to suggest either clubs or sponsors capitalise upon the social aspects of their relationships as the basis for establishing strategically advantageous, long-term associations. A clear message nevertheless emerges from this study: simply by engaging in a dialogue with a view to establishing a relationship is a commitment. This is built upon a shared understanding of how each party envisages working with the other to maximise the benefits that both can realise through a sponsorship contract. As the dyadic relationship progresses, mutuality and interaction will continue to be important, and commitment will develop or cease depending upon the influence of the determinants noted above. Understanding what commitment is, and how it is determined, is therefore of paramount importance.

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