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Sponsorship in Football Clubs: Italian Serie A case

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Over the past thirty years, sponsorship has evolved from a small-scale activity in a limited number of industrialized countries to a major global industry. Since '80, sponsorship has considered an important communication tool in marketing strategies. Nowadays, sponsorship is used to drive sales as well as to develop brand image, brand awareness and organizational internal and external relations (Masterman, 2007). Sport sponsorship and particularly football sponsorship have showed the biggest investments among cultural, artistic and environmental areas. The importance of activating or leveraging sponsorship relationship has been frequently highlighted and demonstrated both by corporate investments and by sponsorship literature (Farrelly and Quester, 2003). In this regard, this paper tries to investigate the main features of sponsorship in Italian Football Clubs.

Corporate investments on sponsorship have increased quickly over the last decades (Koo et al., 2006; Copeland et al., 1996): according to Stage Up and Ipsos (2009), in 2008, Italian companies invested in sponsorship 1.640 million euros, of which 63% in sport sector. Football sponsorship shows the biggest rate of growth: between 2002 and 2009, the investments increased by 8,72%.

Anyway, since the '90, sponsorship revenues of the Italian Serie A have increased less than in the other European Leagues; in Italy a wide percentage of revenues of Football Clubs has derived from television rights and the impact of sponsorship's revenues on the total ones is lower than in England, Spain and Germany.

From an academic viewpoint, the persistent growth in sponsorship investments has been accompanied by many studies which exam practical aspects (Gwinner and Bennet, 2008; Masterman, 2007; Nelli and Bensi, 2005; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Walliser, 2003) and theoretical ones (Papadimitriou et al., 2008; Aldas-Manzano et al., 2008; Grohs et al., 2004; Javalgi et al., 2004).

Given the huge interest for this issue in literature, the many calls for further researches (Koo et al., 2006; Walliser, 2003; Quester and Lardinoit, 2001; Cornwell and Maignan 1998) and the limited number of academic studies concerned budgetary analysis in Italian and European Football Clubs, the objective of this paper is two-fold: firstly, we shortly focus on sponsorship conceptualization and its goals; then we try to investigate the most important features of sponsorship in Italian Football Clubs, analyzing particularly: a) the companies sponsor's industries; b) the amount of their investments; c) the breakdown of sponsorship revenues; d) the differences between Italian Football League and other European ones; e) the possible effects on sponsorship contracts derived by current financial crisis.

The following research questions (RQ) are proposed on the basis of the foregoing discussion:

RQ1: What are the most important sponsor's industries of the Italian Football Clubs?

RQ2: Have they changed since 2004?

RQ3: What are the relationships between official sponsors and technical ones?

Very interestingly results come out from both the budgetary analysis of the annual accounts of the main European and Italian Football Clubs and the descriptive analysis which focuses on the sponsors' industries. The first analysis shows that in the last years, technical sponsors' investments increased more than official sponsors' ones. The second one compares the industries sponsor of the two most important and well-known Football League (Italian Serie A and English Premier League) in 2004 and 2008. We select two different years because sponsorship agreements have a long duration.

The sector-base analysis shows that a large number of Italian and European sponsors operate in travel, telecommunications and sport-betting industries. This is an interesting result, because in the past years the majority of sponsor operated in banking, insurance and food industry. This analysis confirm past studies which stated that sponsorship improve brand image and awareness and these innovative sectors seems to invest in sponsorship in order to improve their corporate image and reputation.

Finally, regarding main managerial implications, it must be noted that football sponsorship represent an important opportunity for corporate in every economic industries and future research could be expand the analysis at the Italian Serie B Clubs with less financial resources than Italian Serie A ones.