

Sport sponsorship: a systematic review (1980 – 2009)

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Abstract keywords

Sport sponsorship, systematic literature review

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

To provide an extensive and systematic review of the sport sponsorship literature from the early 1980s to 2009 in an effort to identify research trends, areas that received research attention, methodological issues, and topics that deserve consideration. Moreover, the review aims at identifying differences in the sponsorship management practices adopted in different contexts by different sponsors investing in different sports. The findings of the review are expected to guide future sponsorship research.

With regard to management application, the findings of the review are expected to provide invaluable insight into the sponsorship management process, something that is expected to enable both sponsors and practitioners to develop informed and academically adequate explanations of sport sponsorship, frameworks for attracting and selecting sport sponsorships, as well as appropriate models allowing and enabling the evaluation of sport sponsorship. An advanced understanding of the sponsorship management practices can also enable sport properties in the process of soliciting and maintaining corporate support. Moreover, understanding those critical sponsorship management factors will help sport properties to work together with their sponsors to achieve goals, to build strong and beneficial relationships, and to facilitate a match with the benefits of the sponsor

Theoretical background

A systematic review, which is regarded as a scientific investigation in itself (Mulrow, 1994), allows the researcher to avoid the negative aspects of a narrative review that has been highly criticized by several researchers for being simply descriptive and highly biased (Craik, 2006). The systematic review process differs substantially from a traditional narrative review in that the former attempts to limit bias through a replicable scientific procedure that relies on comprehensive searches, explicit search strategies, and rigorous critical appraisals and synthesis of all relevant studies (Cook, Mulrow & Haynes, 1997). A quantitative systematic review often uses a statistical analysis to combine and summarize the results of different studies, called meta-analysis (Garg, Hackam & Tonelli, 2008), and it is a process used extensively in medical science. Meta-analysis is widely regarded as providing 'high-quality' evidence, but the application of this method is feasible when studies are comparable. As Mulrow, Cook and Davidoff (1997) argued, meta-analysis is simply one of the tools that it is used in preparing systematic reviews. When the heterogeneity of study data prevents the use of meta-analysis, such as when

data are obtained from qualitative or non-randomized studies, synthesis is achieved through summarizing the findings of a group of studies (Tranfield et al., 2003). When the results are summarized but not statistically combined, the review may be called a qualitative systematic review (Cook et al., 1997), and this method is proposed for management research. This more flexible approach is regarded to fit the exploratory and developmental nature of management review, as well as the heterogeneity of the management studies. Thus, the protocol that is suggested for management systematic reviews aims at ensuring that reviews are less open to researcher bias than narrative reviews, whilst not compromising the ability of the researcher to be creative in the literature review process (Tranfield et al., 2003). Based on the above, meta-analysis was not regarded as an appropriate tool for synthesizing the findings of the specific study. Instead, the approach adopted was more of a descriptive and thematic nature, and it will be described in detail in the subsequent section.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Prior to the beginning the review process, a scoping study was conducted in order to delimit the subject area. Then, a review panel was formed encompassing four experts on the research topic and methodology – the researcher (PhD student), head supervisor, co-supervisor, and a library and information scientist. In addition, a formal protocol was designed, detailing the background, objectives, inclusion criteria, search methods, and the way in which the data would be compiled in research synthesis. The systematic review methodology involved an exhaustive literature search of all potentially relevant published sources through the use of predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (time range, length of the studies, peer-reviewed status, published in English etc.). 971 studies were originally retrieved, and 211 were eventually included based on a critical evaluation.

Relevant sources yielded from the aforementioned search method were transferred into the bibliographic software Endnote and were retrieved for a more thorough reading. Moreover, the Endnote program allowed the researcher to identify duplicated studies, while the remaining citations were filtered according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. From these, the final selection was made for the systematic review. The reasons for inclusion and exclusion at this point were documented and stored in the data extraction forms. Data were abstracted using data extraction forms developed for the purpose of this study, in an effort to reduce human errors and bias, since they served as a historical record of the decisions made during the process (Clarke & Oxman, 2001). The forms contain general information (e.g. author, title and publication details), study features, specific information (e.g. details and methods), the reasons for inclusion and exclusion of studies, and notes on emerging themes. When designing the data extraction form, the researcher took into consideration the information that would be essential for the completion of the specific study. For the purposes of the specific study, a large part of the data extraction process was double since it has been undertaken independently by two reviewers and, in some cases by a third assessor – the researcher, head supervisor

and co-supervisor. The independent reviewers assessed and analyzed the studies against the inclusion criteria and the findings were compared and reconciled if required, while discrepancies and disagreements were resolved by discussion.

As already mentioned, a social science systematic review can use different approaches to synthesizing the data than meta-analysis, since studies in this field rarely address identical problems or measure phenomenon in the same way. Therefore, and based on the suggestions made by a number of authors who proposed several inductive and interpretive approaches to research synthesis as an alternative option to the statistical, deductive meta-analysis, the current study used a three-stage analysis in synthesizing the results. The first stage involved a "descriptive analysis", which was achieved using a very simple set of categories (such as the authors, contributions from different geographic locations, orientation of studies, age-profile of the articles, etc.). The researcher attempted to provide a descriptive account of the field of study and an audit trail justifying the conclusions drawn.

The second stage of the process used is "thematic analysis". The researcher used an interpretive approach to data analysis and synthesis which relied on the identification and documentation of emerging or salient themes. In line with the recommendations made by Tranfield et al. (2003), the researcher provided a detailed audit trail back to the core contributions to justify and support the conclusions drawn from the thematic analysis. Moreover, an attempt was made to link the themes across the various core contributions wherever possible, and to highlight such links throughout the reporting process. The third stage undertaken for the purposes of the present research is "construct analysis". An attempt was made to go beyond the contents of the primary studies and to identify issues that are not explicitly reported in the original studies. Third order themes, or conceptual issues raising ontological and epistemological concerns. All those steps were frequently made independently by more than one reviewer, and the interpretation and research synthesis were performed in a transparent way, by providing an audit trail of the reviewers' decisions, procedures and conclusions (Cook et al., 1997).

Implications/conclusions

The descriptive analysis of the findings resulted in the creation of several simple set of categories, some of those being the geographical contribution of studies – with North America contribution most of the research, and much less research effort directed at less developed countries from the perspective of the sport sponsorship. Another category involved the sport that gathered most of the research attention, with football being the number one, followed by the Olympics. Moreover, most of the studies employed a positivistic approach to research, with clearly less research using and inductive, qualitative research orientation, and this research seems to focus primarily on the sponsor and not the sponsored property.

The thematic analysis indicated that there is a different conceptualization of sport sponsorship in differently

developed contexts (e.g. China and the USA) whilst there is also a difference in the sponsorship perception, as well the sponsorship management practices, through time. The original charitable and philanthropic conceptualization of sponsorship (Gratton & Taylor, 1985; Mescon & Tilson, 1987) lends its place to a more professional sponsorship activity (Cornwell, 2008). Nowadays, sponsorship is used as a means for developing corporate strategy (Cunningham et al., 2009), it is used as a resource towards the development of competitive advantage (Amis, 2003) and it is effective in fostering the creation of partnerships and relationship building strategies (Olkkonen et al., 2000). The issue of managing strategically the sponsorship deal is another well-supported theme that emerged from the thematic analysis, and it is also depicted in the importance that sponsors place today on the concept of congruency, as well as from the studies that focused on the factors that determine congruency, such as sport identification, creative communicating practices, etc. Moreover, the review indicated that sponsors and researchers place much importance on sponsorship management practices, since objective setting was one of the main issues that were explored in many studies., together with many other sponsorship management aspects such as audiences reached, leveraging, motivation of the sponsors etc. Despite the growing realization of the importance of a strategic sponsorship management approach, it is indeed, surprising that the majority of the sponsors – even in more developed sponsorship contexts such as the UK – do not set clear and measurable objectives, and they seem to employ limited, and sometimes unsophisticated leveraging practices. Interestingly, a more professional sponsorship management approach seems to be associated with larger sponsors whilst in contrast, smaller companies seem to be less systematic and professional in managing their sponsorship arrangements. Moreover, there was some indication of a more professional sponsorship approach adopted by private sponsors compared to sponsors coming from the public sector. Additionally, the review revealed that there are significant differences in the management of sport sponsorships between more developed and less developed sponsorship contexts (e.g. North America and Australia). It appeared that experienced sponsors operating in more developed contexts use more fully integrated sponsorship activities. Moreover, another interesting finding with regard to the selection process is that the importance placed upon several selection criteria varies significantly, and depends on the industry in which the sponsor operates.

Additionally to the above, the findings indicated a shift from media objectives set by sponsor to corporate related goals, while recently there seems to be a shift from image and awareness objectives to more sophisticated goals such as fostering a certain positioning concept within a certain target market (Goldman & Johns, 2009), or the accommodation of internal marketing goals such as generating employee commitment (Cunningham et al., 2009). At the same time, it is significant to mention that there seem to be differences with regard to the objectives set by sponsors coming from different industries, as well as by sponsors operating in contexts with different state of

sponsorship development. For more developed contexts, for example, such as the UK or Canada, corporate objectives receive much more importance compared to less developed contexts such as the Australian or Greek which place more emphasis on brand related objectives. In addition, less developed sponsorship contexts such as Greece and Romania seem to place much more emphasis on sales related and profit oriented objectives. The size of the sponsor also appeared as an important determining factor, since larger sponsors seem to be more inclined towards image related objectives, and smaller sponsors towards sales and community related objectives. The same differences seem to exist with regard to the motives of the sponsors, with small sponsors, and public companies entering a sponsorship deal primarily because of personal or emotional, and much less commercial motives as compared to private sponsors. Furthermore, the findings indicate the use of inappropriate evaluation practices used by sponsors, while much research has been trying to address the factors improving sponsorship effectiveness, such as attitudes, sincerity of the sponsor, and fan identification.

One of the main methodological issues that arose from the analysis was the fact that most of the studies are descriptive, lacking an underlying theoretical foundation. Moreover, several concerns have been raised with regard to sampling methods, their appropriateness and quality. In addition, the study indicated that there is a need for more longitudinal research, as well as for more fruitful, qualitative methods to investigate the phenomenon of sport sponsorship rather than the predominant quantitative, nomothetic approaches that the vast majority of the researchers relied on.

Based on the aforementioned findings of the systematic review, the value of this study is that it highlights areas and topics that deserve more research attention, in order to illuminate further the sport sponsorship management practices adopted by sponsors. For example, there is clearly a need to conduct research in less developed sponsorship contexts. It would be interesting to explore the sponsorship management practices employed by sponsors operating in less sophisticated contexts from a sponsorship perspective, in order to identify unique perceptions, different decision-making processes, criteria for involvement, motives, objectives, or evaluation practices. Moreover, there seems to be a need for research examining differences in the

sponsorship management practices used by local and global sponsor, small and larger businesses, or sponsors operating in different industries. In addition, the certain systematic review highlighted the need for conducting qualitative research that can provide potential insights into the sponsorship selection and management practices adopted by sport sponsors.

It is also important to note that, the certain study differs substantially from previous reviews in the field, since it is a systematic review that is based on a concrete, rigid, and highly structured method that aims at minimizing bias and making the process as objective as possible. The findings of the review can enable researchers draw attention to the several sponsorship management practices that are used in differently developed contexts, by different sponsors pursuing different goals, being driven by different motives, and employing different selection, management and evaluation practices. From a management perspective, the review is important in that, it provided more insight into the different sponsorship practices that are adopted by different types of organizations, in terms of size, industry, private or public status etc. This is invaluable since, both the sponsors and the sponsees should be aware of those different management practices in order to be able to approach and manage sponsorship in the best possible way, and thus, to foster mutually beneficial sponsorship relationships.

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