

Is doping in international cycling really a problem from a business perspective? – Making sense of professional road cycling sponsorships

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Aim

The purpose of this study is to investigate how sponsors of professional cycling make sense of sponsoring a sport that is infamous for its many doping cases and scandals.

A common conclusion in much sponsorship theory is that the sponsee's image will transfer onto the sponsor (Walliser, 2003). However, sponsors continue to endorse sports with somewhat tainted images, such as professional road cycling. It is therefore interesting why sponsors keep sponsoring cycling and how they justify their engagements (make sense of them). Studies on the negative sides to sponsorships are still uncommon. Even rarer are studies concerning the effects and organisational and economic impacts on the commercial shareholders of doping scandals. One study by Danylchuk et al. (2016) suggests that the many doping scandals in cycling have had limited economic impact on sponsors and even suggests that some have benefited from the increased exposure. Consequently, our study will look into the sponsorship decision making and the decision makers' risk assessments as they may be closely related to the dissolution of sponsorship relationships (Farrelly, 2010).

Theoretical background

Departing from the work of Karl Weick (1995), sport sponsorship relations are perceived as processes of sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking consists of the connection between a frame and a cue. Organisational sensemaking works retrospectively, is context-dependent and emerges when phenomena are becoming events through organising. In this way, via enacting, organising and corporate action, elite sport sponsorship becomes a sensemaking occasion as it is perceived as an incongruous event compared to ordinary business activities. This study has especially focused on Weick's Seven Properties of Sensemaking. In particular the identity, retrospective, social and ongoing properties are important to this study, as the interviewed sponsors identity is central to how they interpret their decision making and how they look back (retrospectively) on their decisions. Moreover is sensemaking a social activity that includes both interviewer and interviewee and the sensemaking is ongoing and may change over time as the interviewee shape it in accordance with his environment.

Research methods

Inspired by Alvesson's (2009) reflexive approach to qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with sponsorship decision makers, such as marketing directors and CEOs representing five companies currently engaged in professional road cycling sponsorships and five companies that previously sponsored the sport. This study has conducted one interview round and will conduct a second in the spring of 2016. During the first round the interview guides were constructed on

the basis of existing sponsorship and anti-doping literature with primary focus on sponsorship breakdowns, risk assessments and corporate strategies. In the second interview round the interview guides will be constructed upon the first round's responses and will, inspired by Maitlis' (2005) study on organisational sensemaking in orchestras, incorporate Weick's sensemaking properties into the interview guides thus focusing more on the sensemaking behind the sponsorships. This approach enables us to explore elements of organisational strategy, corporate identity creation and strategic sponsorship knowledge by focusing on 1) social contexts of interviewees' accounts, 2) interviews as an event of intensive interactional sense-making and 3) individual accounts that indicate the strategic orientation of the firm.

Results, discussion and implications

Interestingly, during the first interview round, the majority of the sponsors did not perceive doping as a threat to their sponsorships. These findings are in accordance with Danylchuk et al. (2016) findings regarding the economic impacts of doping. It is however, surprising that a number of the sponsors actually saw benefits that the doping issues had developed for them; 1) The price of the sponsorship was relatively low (compared to other sports with the same exposure), 2) A new communication platform had arisen - previously the media was only interested in the riders', the team's or the team manager's opinions, however now the sponsors are being interviewed as well. In addition, the results from the second interview round will also be presented. This study, given its qualitative approach, is only able to provide limited general recommendations, thus future quantitative inquiry into corporate strategic use would be useful to explore corporate strategic approaches to sponsorships of professional cycling.

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