

The Impact of Rivalry among Sport Teams on Sport Sponsorship Evaluation: Lessons from the German Bundesliga

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Aim

Sponsorships are powerful marketing tools with significant positive effects on various kinds of sport spectators including fans, occasional spectators and business people. In light of the inherent rivalries in sport, recent studies also tried to shed light onto the fans' responses to the sponsor of a rival team (Angell, Gorton, Bottomley, & White, 2016; Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015). While existing research particularly focused on extreme rivalries between specific teams, this paper aims to extend these insights by studying a wider range of rivalries and their impact on sponsorship evaluation in the German football Bundesliga.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

Rivalry is considered to have a crucial role for sport fans, both threatening and shaping the fans' identity at the same time (Berendt & Urich, 2016; Tyler & Cobbs, 2015). Especially balance theory and social identity theory suggest that dissociating from a rival out-group also may influence the perception of a rival team's sponsor and the behavioural responses towards this sponsorship. Emerging empirical studies support this assumption. For example, focussing on the rivalry between Newcastle and Sunderland, Angell et al. (2016) point out that higher fan identification increases attention to the sponsor of the rival team; however they also emphasize that schadenfreude is a better predictor of fans' affective and behavioural responses. Further, Grohs et al. (2015) find that negative perceptions of a rival team negatively affect perceptions of its sponsors. Finally, Bee & Dalakas (2015) use an experimental approach to demonstrate that sponsor affiliation with a rival team results in a negative response by highly identified fans.

Research Design and Data Analysis

The empirical study of this research focusses on the German Football Bundesliga, in which primary sponsorships are with the shirt sponsor. Therefore, the study focuses on kit sponsorships.

An online survey among fans, invited via email and sport-related online communities, was carried out. Out of 268 respondents, 215 were fans of a specific club from the 1. Bundesliga and revealed which club they support. The sample of our study comprises fans from all 18 Bundesliga clubs.

Existing scales were used to measure the constructs in the survey, which included team identification, perceived attitude and image of the club and the corresponding sponsor as well as sponsor fit (e.g., Olson, 2010). All respondents further rated the kit sponsorship of each of the 18 Bundesliga clubs and indicated how critical they considered the sponsorship to be on a scale from "critical" ("-3") to "not critical" ("+3"). Moreover, the respondents indicated the perceived rivalry of their favourite club towards the remaining 17 clubs in the Bundesliga on a scale ranging from "very low rivalry" ("-3") to "very high rivalry" ("+3"). This led to a total number of 4.824 sponsorship evaluations and 3.870 assessments of rivalry.

Results and Discussion

Average sponsorship evaluations range from rather critical evaluations such as “-0.67” (SV Werder Bremen/Wiesenhof; FC Schalke 04/Gazprom) to rather uncritical evaluations such as “1.952” (Sport-Club Freiburg/Schwarzwaldmilch). Furthermore, a t-test reveals that respondents with no direct affiliation to a team had overall less favourite sponsorship perceptions compared to fans (except for one sponsorship). Evaluations by industry experts and media analysis were used to identify the reasons for the position of each sponsor in this ranking and derive recommendations.

In terms of perceived rivalry, RB Leipzig, FC Schalke 04, Borussia Dortmund, and FC Bayern München are overall perceived as strongest rivals. A regression analysis demonstrates that perceived rivalry between the supported team and another team from the 1. Bundesliga significantly decreases the fans’ evaluation of the rival’s sponsorship ($\beta=0.124^{**}$). However, the results also demonstrate that the explanatory power of rivalry for sponsorship evaluation is rather small ($R^2=0.015$) as most aspects leading to a negative sponsorship evaluation trace back to sponsor-specific issues such as sponsor image and sponsor fit. This was supported by estimating a structural model that demonstrates that sponsor fit ($\beta=0.568^{**}$) and sponsor image ($\beta=0.401^{**}$) significantly influence attitude towards the sponsorship ($R^2=0.709$). Another structural model estimation finally shows that rivalry with other teams ($R^2=0.108$) increases with increasing team identification ($\beta=0.329^{**}$).

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, we contribute to the literature by being the first to provide a broader and more generic view of the interdependencies between rivalry and sponsorship perceptions within a sports league. In particular, our results indicate that perceived rivalry with other teams has significant negative effects on the perception of rival teams’ sponsorships. Sponsors can learn from this study how a sponsorship engagement with a specific club is perceived both by fans and rival fans as well as by individuals who are neither football fan nor fan of a rival team. Our findings thus may help companies to design sponsorship activities in the context of rival-team sponsorship, where size and scope of out-groups (i.e. rival fans, non-fans) matter and may influence sponsorship outcomes.

References

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