“The Name Remains the Same For Fans” – Why Fans Oppose Naming Right Sponsorships

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While the fit between sponsor and sponsee is frequently mentioned and empirically examined as a success factor of sponsorship, little knowledge exists to guide the management of such companies that are in the particular situation of a low fit or even reactance of consumers. The present article contributes to the literature by examining the determinants and consequences of sponsorship fit using a qualitative and a quantitative study. Results of the two studies demonstrate that negative effects of sponsorships are especially relevant for the sponsoring company since both brand image and word-of-mouth intention are affected negatively. Based on the results, management implications are derived.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The selling of a stadium’s naming right is one very common type of sponsorship. For example, 14 out of 18 German soccer stadiums have sold their stadium’s name in the last 15 years. Although financially highly profitable for a club, naming right sponsorships are not without risk. Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt talk of “high controversy surrounding sponsorship deals” (Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt 2002, p.17). Greenberg and Gray (1996) as well as Crompton and Howard (2003) refer to some examples of public opposition to stadiums’ name selling. While the fit between sponsor and sponsee is empirically examined as a success factor of sponsorship (e.g. Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006, Speed and Thompson 2000), little knowledge exists to guide the management of such companies that are in the particular situation of a low fit or even reactance of consumers. The present article contributes to the literature by examining the determinants and consequences of sponsorship fit using a qualitative and a quantitative study.

To gain a first idea of possible reactance motives of soccer fans, we followed an explorative approach by conducting in-depth interviews with 22 fans of Borussia Dortmund. The popular German soccer club sold the stadium’s naming right to a local insurance company which was followed by negative reactions of its fans. To uncover the fans’ deeper motives, the laddering-technique was applied (Gutman 1982, Reynolds and Gutman 1988). In summary, several aspects seem to influence the naming right-reactance. These include the fans’ sense of tradition and their regional identification, their fan identity, and their attitude towards commercialization. Other aspects compromise the sponsor’s regional identity as well as the perceived benefit of the sponsorship for the soccer club. A central factor was the perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsee.

The second study aims to quantify the directions and strengths of effects that the attitudes identified in study 1 have on the evaluation of the sponsorship. More precisely, in accordance with findings from existing literature we propose that the perceived fit between sponsor and sponsee is crucial for the evaluation of the brand (club) image and intentions toward the brand (club), i.e. positive word-of-mouth. From a theoretical point of view, a misfit perceived by the consumer is equivalent to incongruence between sponsor and sponsee. Such incongruence causes psychological tensions in the consumer’s mind and forces to reestablish congruence (Festinger 1957, Heider 1946 and 1958, Osgood and Tannenbaum 1955). Hence, a perceived miss-fit should be related to a more negative evaluation of the sponsor and the sponsee.

Due to the crucial role of fit for the success of the sponsor partnership, it is important to assess the effects of possible determinants of fit. The aspects derived from study 1 are used to develop theoretical explanations for possible effects on the perceived sponsor-sponsee fit. First, the degree to which fans identify themselves with the soccer club could be negatively related to the perceived fit. Consumers classify themselves and other consumers as being an in-group member or as being a member of the out-group (Carlson 2005). We propose that fans that identify themselves strongly with their soccer club are more likely to treat a sponsor as an intruder. Taking the same rationale, we propose that regional connectedness and tradition consciousness contribute to consciousness of kind and consequently increase the likelihood that the sponsor is not accepted as in-group member. Moreover, a negative attitude towards commercialization in general is likely to have a negative influence on sponsorship-fit. Finally, two positive aspects were mentioned in study 1 that could contribute to a positive perception of sponsor-sponsee fit: perceived benefits of the partnership and perceived regional identification of the sponsor.

To test the hypotheses, data was collected via an online survey. A total of 524 respondents participated, who are mostly male (93.2%), young (m=24 years), and highly involved fans showing a strong identification with their soccer club Borussia Dortmund. We measured attitude-related variables with multi-item scales. The dependent variables (brand image and word-of-mouth intention) are operationalized for the club (sponsee) and the sponsor. Three items are used to measure the brand/club image. Word-of-mouth intention is measured by four items adopted from existing literature again for the sponsor and the sponsee (e.g. Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005). The evaluation of the sponsor-sponsee fit is included as a mediating construct (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). As determinants of sponsor-sponsee fit, scales for attitude toward commercialization (Lee, Sandler, and Shani 1997), and fan identification (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005) were adopted from existing literature. Based on the findings of study 1, the fans’ sense of tradition and their regional identification, and the sponsor’s regional identification as well as the perceived benefit of the sponsorship for the soccer club were measured by multi-items scales developed by the authors.

Structural equation modeling was used to estimate the parameters of the structural model. Goodness-of-fit statistics indicate the overall acceptability of the structural model. The proposed positive relationship of fit and the dependent constructs brand (club) image, and brand (club) WOM intention is only valid for the sponsoring brand. The negative fit is attributed to the sponsor, while the sponsor’s image remains unaffected. Furthermore, the perceived benefits for the club have the strongest positive impact on fit. The regional identification of the sponsor is another important positive determinant. The degree of regional connectedness and the attitude toward commercialization have a negative influence on fit. No significant influence is found for fan identification and tradition consciousness. A total of 63.6% of the variance of fit is captured by the determinants above.

Results of the two studies demonstrate that negative effects of sponsorships are especially relevant for the sponsoring company since both brand image and WOM-intention are affected negatively. Some attitudes that affect the sponsor-sponsee fit like attitude toward commercialization and regional connectedness seem to be difficult to influence. The good news is that the strongest determinants of the sponsor-sponsee fit are at least potentially manageable by the sponsor: through communication of the benefits of the partnership, and by communicating the regional identification of the sponsor.

REFERENCES


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