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## **The Balance Theory Domino: How Sponsorships May Elicit Negative Consumer Attitudes**

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# The Balance Theory Domino: How Sponsorships May Elicit *Negative* Consumer Attitudes

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that fan identification with an entity contributes to a positive attitude toward companies that associate with that entity. In this study, we examine if sponsorship of an entity they *dislike* may actually alienate consumers and make them look at the sponsoring company in a less favorable manner. We surveyed NASCAR fans and found that, while there is a strong positive connection between attitude toward their favorite driver and attitude toward that driver's sponsor, the reverse was true as well. That is, respondents' attitudes for brands that sponsor their least favorite driver appear to be negatively impacted.

## INTRODUCTION

Companies continue to increase their expenditures on sponsorships with hopes that positive emotions toward a property (e.g., sporting event, sport team, arts organization) will transfer to the sponsoring brands, therefore enhancing brand image and resulting in positive outcomes for the sponsors (Crimmins and Horn 1996; Gwinner 1997; Gwinner and Eaton 1999; Miyazaki and Morgan 2001). The magnitude of sport sponsorship is particularly impressive; according to the International Events Group (IEG), the leading sponsorship organization, even during the recent slowing down of the American economy, sponsorship continued to grow. Specifically, 30% of the companies surveyed indicated that they allocate 11-20% of their marketing budgets to sponsorship, compared to only 18% of respondents spending 10% or more of their budgets on sponsorship in 2001 (IEG Sponsorship Report 2003). Such growth is not limited to just the United States; sponsorship spending worldwide exceeds \$20 billion per year (Ukman 1999). Consequently, the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of sponsorships is becoming increasingly important.

Fan identification with the sponsored property has been found to be an important factor that influences response to sponsorships; highly identified fans tend to have more favorable attitudes toward sponsors and are more likely to use the sponsor's products (Dalakas and Kropp 2002; Madrigal 2000; Madrigal 2001). Sports organizations with strongly identified fans make a point of using the fans' identification as a way to attract potential sponsors.

Previous research has examined how a fan's identification with a sports team or an athlete makes consumers like the companies associated with that team or athlete. However, no attempt has been made to study if a company's sponsoring a sports property in hopes of winning consumers, in some cases may actually alienate consumers and make them look at the sponsoring company in a *less favorable* manner. Previous research has called for further investigation of this question by recognizing that fan identification might elicit negative attitudes toward sponsors of rivals (e.g., Dalakas and Kropp 2002). This can be particularly relevant in cases where fans' strong identification with one team or athlete is likely to elicit strong disliking for rival teams or athletes, and consequently, their respective sponsors.

Our study examines how fans' strong attachment to one entity is associated with negative attitudes toward competing entities, and whether this negativity translates into more negative attitudes towards the sponsors, thus, reducing the impact of a sponsorship. NASCAR provides a great context for this because it allows national companies from the same industry to sponsor competing racing teams. For example, Dale Earnhardt Jr. is sponsored by

Budweiser while rivals Sterling Marlin and Rusty Wallace are sponsored by other beer companies (Coors Light and Miller Lite respectively). Similarly, Tony Stewart is sponsored by Home Depot while competing driver Jimmie Johnson is sponsored by Lowe's.

The aforementioned discussion stresses that a company's decision to sponsor a team with fans that are extremely passionate, either positively or negatively should be carefully considered. This research topic merits further examination. Therefore, our study makes a meaningful contribution to the field by concentrating on whether or not sponsorships may backfire and actually elicit negative rather than positive attitudes.

## BACKGROUND

The strong impact of fan identification on response to sponsors can be linked to Heider's balance theory (1958; also see Crimmins and Horn 1996). Consumer psychologists Eagly and Chaiken state that "balance theory has proven to be one of the most enduring of the theories that have been applied to attitudinal phenomena, and it has been pursued with considerable rigor" (Eagly and Chaiken 1993, p. 144). Balance theory claims that people, in general, prefer to have balance, order, and harmony in their lives. Therefore, every time there is imbalance, people would change their attitudes and/or behavior in a way that would restore balance. As a result, individuals will tend to like whatever is associated with what they already like and will tend to dislike whatever is associated with what they already dislike; otherwise, there will not be balance. The commonly known statements "my friends' enemies are my enemies" and "my enemies' enemies are my friends" illustrate nicely the key premise of balance theory.

Within the context of sports and sponsorship, the implications of balance theory are straight-forward. When fans have a strong attachment to a sports team or athlete, the fans will have similarly positive attitudes toward the sponsors that become associated with their favorite team or athlete. The stronger the attitude toward the original object (in this case, the sports team), the more likely it is that this attitude will impact in a similar fashion whatever is associated with that object (in this case, the sponsor). This mechanism explains previous research findings linking fan identification to positive attitudes toward sponsors (e.g., Madrigal 2000; Madrigal 2001).

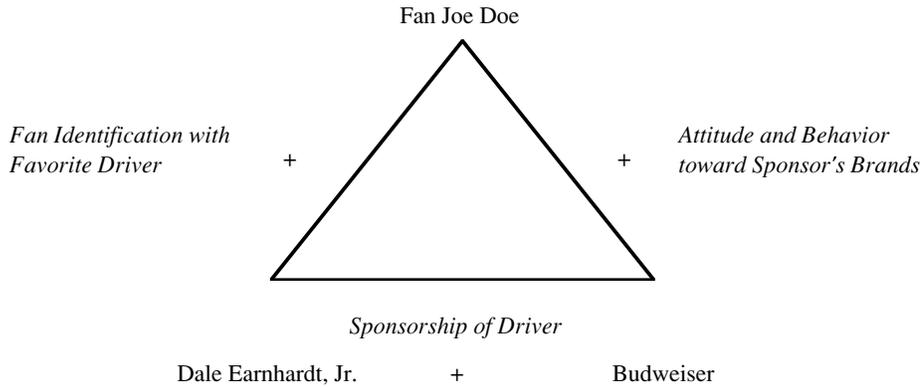
An analogous process is likely to occur when fans strongly *dislike* a sports property. The fact that many fans have very strong negative attitudes towards certain teams or athletes is well-established. The competitive nature of sports facilitates development of such attitudes (Hack 2002). Zillmann, Bryant, and Sapolsky (1989) found that in competitive contexts like sports, fans derive enjoyment by witnessing victory of their favorite party *and also* by witnessing failure and defeat of a disliked competing party. This explains why die-hard fans are elated when their favorite team beats a hated rival and, similarly, they are distraught when losing to a big rival.

According to the premises of social identity theory (Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel and Turner 1986), people define their identity in terms of the groups they like and, consequently, use a social categorization process of "us" and "them." The "mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups—that is, social categorization per se—is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group" (Tajfel and Turner 1986, p.13). Based on this theory, we

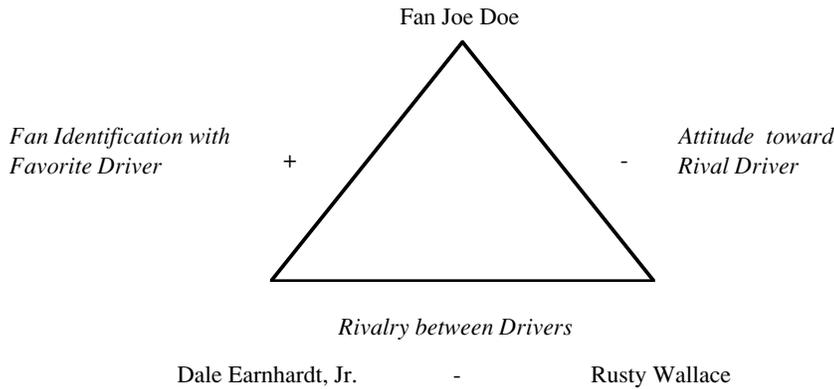
**FIGURE 1**

Conceptual Links Between Balance Theory and Sponsorship Responses

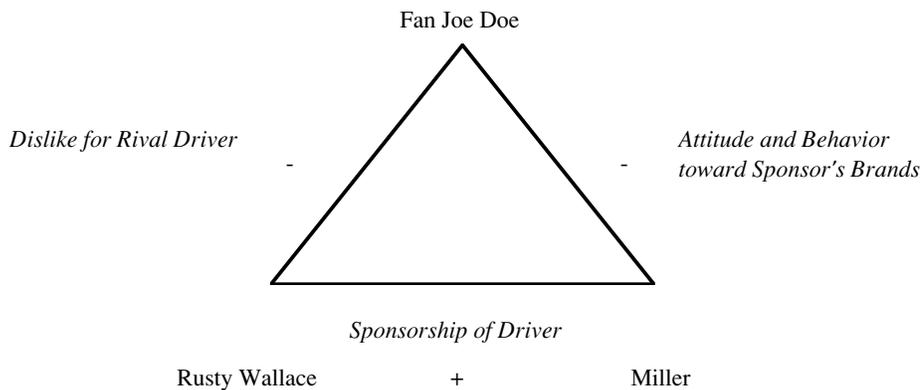
Panel A: Identification with Favorite Driver and Responses to Driver's Sponsors



Panel B: Identification with Favorite Driver and Dislike for Driver's Rivals



Panel C: Dislike for Rival Driver and Responses to Driver's Sponsors



expect highly identified fans to strongly dislike their team's rivals. As soon as a sponsor aligns with one of the competing parties, fans of the other party have to dislike the sponsor of their competitor. Therefore, sponsorships in sports as well as any other context revolving around competition, runs the risk of alienating some consumers while winning others. Consequently, we expect that such strong dislike should translate into a similarly strong dislike of a rival team's sponsors.

**RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESES**

Based on our discussion of balance theory (Heider 1958) and sponsorships in NASCAR, we expect that strong liking for certain NASCAR drivers inevitably would create negative attitudes towards competing drivers, and, consequently, elicit negative attitudes towards these drivers' sponsors. Figure 1 illustrates how each step of this process relates to the premises of balance theory.

Previous research has examined consumer response to sponsorships primarily based on the relations depicted in panel A of Figure 1. Our study expands on this research by extending the applicability of balance theory through the relations described in panels B and C. Our main new contribution to sponsorship research lies predominantly in testing the relations in panel C; we propose that, within a context of highly identified fans, sponsorships may backfire by eliciting negative attitudes in certain fans.

Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1: Fans will have favorable attitudes toward the sponsor of their favorite driver (panel A).
- H2: Given their liking for their favorite driver, fans will have unfavorable attitudes toward other competing drivers (panel B).
- H3: Given their dislike for competing drivers, fans will have unfavorable attitudes towards the sponsors of drivers they dislike (panel C).

## METHOD

### Data Collection

We collected data from NASCAR fans attending the Kroger 300 Presented by Oreo race in June of 2002. The selected race is a NASCAR Busch Series Race; the Busch Series is the second tier in NASCAR racing, under the Winston Cup Series. Our data revealed that most patrons of the Busch Series race are also fans of NASCAR Winston Cup racing. The race took place at the Kentucky Speedway in Sparta, Kentucky.

Respondents were intercepted in the campground adjacent to the Kentucky Speedway. The surveys were administered from approximately 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. The Busch Series race began at 8:00 p.m. In order to ensure that people in the campground were fans that were going to the race, they were asked "Are you going to tonight's race?" as a screener question. We approached 287 fans to participate in the survey. Of that number, 17 did not qualify because they were not going to the race and 42 did not want to participate.

A total of 228 fans agreed to participate. We obtained complete surveys from 220 of them. Sixty-eight percent of the sample was male; 58% were married; 50% had annual household income of \$60,000 or more, with almost 20% reporting annual household income of \$90,000 or more. The average age of the respondents was 38.7 years.

### Measures

First, subjects were asked "How passionate of a NASCAR fan would you say you are? (1=Not passionate at all and 10=Extremely passionate) Then, subjects were asked to indicate how often they attend NASCAR races as well as how many times they watch NASCAR on television.

The next section of the survey asked subjects to write down their favorite NASCAR Winston Cup driver. After identifying their favorite driver, each respondent's identification with that driver was assessed through a modified version of the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann and Branscombe 1993). Given that the original scale was developed to assess fans' identification with a sports team, rather than an individual driver, questions were adjusted to apply to the context of this study. The scale had seven questions, each using a 1-10 scale. Sample questions included the following:

- How important is it to you that this driver wins?
- How big of a fan of this driver do you see yourself as?

- How often do you follow this driver through the television and the radio?
- How often do you wear or display material with this driver's name or picture or number at home or at work?

After completing the fan identification scale, subjects were asked "How likely are you to purchase and use products from a company that sponsors drivers you like?" The answer options ranged from 1=not likely at all to 10=extremely likely.

Next, subjects were asked to indicate who their *least* favorite NASCAR Winston Cup driver was, as well as who the sponsor of that driver is, followed by the following question: "How likely are you to purchase and use products from a company that sponsors drivers you dislike?" The answer options ranged from 1=not likely at all to 10=extremely likely.

Attitudes toward 11 of the best known NASCAR Winston Cup drivers were then assessed on a 10 point scale, where 1=extremely dislike and 10=extremely like. To compile the list of drivers to include, we used the results from the 2002 NASCAR Winston Cup Most Popular Driver Award voting (Smith 2002) and selected the ten drivers that had received the most votes. By the time the survey was prepared, more than 130,000 votes had been cast. The ten most popular drivers were (in order of popularity): Dale Earnhardt, Jr.; Tony Stewart; Bill Elliott; Jeff Gordon; Mark Martin; Ricky Rudd; Kyle Petty; Rusty Wallace; Kevin Harvick; Dale Jarrett.

We assumed that popular drivers would have a strong following but would also be likely to have people strongly disliking them because of rivalries with other popular drivers. In addition to these drivers, we also included Sterling Marlin in the survey because he was ranked first in the Winston Cup rankings at the time the survey was conducted.

The next part of the survey measured attitudes toward companies or brands that sponsor each of the aforementioned drivers. A 1-10 scale was used, where 1=extremely dislike and 10=extremely like.

### Sample Characteristics

Overall, the respondents were quite involved NASCAR fans. On average, during the 2002 season, they had attended in person almost 2 Winston Cup (out of a possible 14 at that time) and 2 Busch Series races (out of a possible 16 at the time). It is worthwhile noting that, at that point, the closest Winston Cup race to the Kentucky Speedway was the one in Bristol, Tennessee, which is located approximately 350 miles away. This fact confirms that our participants were quite involved NASCAR fans, willing to travel considerable distances to attend races. In addition, they had watched about 6 Winston Cup races and 2 Busch Series races on television. When asked "How passionate of a NASCAR fan would you say you are," the respondents' average score was 8.0 (s.d.=2.3) on a 10-point scale, where 1 corresponded to "not passionate at all" and 10 corresponded to "extremely passionate."

## RESULTS

### Favorite Driver

When asked to identify their favorite driver, two drivers were noticeably above the rest: Dale Earnhardt, Jr. (with 34.1% of the fans) and Jeff Gordon (with 21.1% of the fans). The top 5 also included Mark Martin (8.6%), Tony Stewart (7.6%), and Dale Jarrett (5.9%).

Consistent with previous studies that have used the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (e.g., Dalakas and Kropp 2002; Madrigal 2000; Wann and Branscombe 1993), scale reliability in

TABLE 1

Average score on the identification scale summary measure by fans who listed a driver as their favorite

Driver	Average Score (on 10-point scale)
Dale Earnhardt, Jr.	7.66 (s.d.=2.25); n=63
Jeff Gordon	7.39 (s.d.=1.90); n=39
Mark Martin	6.87 (s.d.=1.82); n=16
Tony Stewart	8.34 (s.d.=1.53); n=14
Dale Jarrett	7.66 (s.d.=1.64); n=11

this study was high ( $\alpha=.87$ ). Thus, a summary (average) score was computed. Overall, fans were quite highly identified with their favorite driver. The average score on the scale summary measure was 7.40 (s.d.=2.0) on a 10-point scale. Table 1 lists the average score on the identification scale summary measure for each of the five drivers with the most fans.

### Testing Hypothesis 1

We tested our first hypothesis, that fans will have favorable attitudes toward the sponsor of their favorite driver, in two ways. Consistent with our predictions and with previous research findings, respondents indicated a strong likelihood to prefer products from sponsors of their liked drivers. The average response score to that question was 7.20 (s.d.=2.81). Overall, almost all of the respondents (93.6%) identified correctly the primary sponsor of their favorite driver, without any cue. For example, 96.8% of the fans who listed Dale Earnhardt, Jr. as their favorite driver, listed Budweiser as his primary sponsor.

We also examined fans' attitude scores towards numerous companies/brands including the ones sponsoring NASCAR drivers. Table 2 summarizes the respondents' attitudes toward the different companies by showing both the overall average attitude score and the average score among the fans who had listed as their favorite driver the sponsored driver for each brand.

In all cases, the average attitude score among the fans of the sponsored driver was higher than the overall average. In four of the five cases, the average among the driver fans exceeded a score of 9 out of 10. These findings again confirm our hypothesis by showing a strong favorable attitude towards the company sponsoring one's favorite driver. This is consistent with other research that sports fans tend to have positive affect toward sponsors of their favorite teams (e.g., Madrigal 2001).

### Least favorite driver

Interestingly, Jeff Gordon also topped the list of *least* favorite drivers, being mentioned by 39.9% of the respondents. This finding was not surprising, given that there are even web sites just for Jeff Gordon haters, like "Fans against Jeff Gordon page" and "I hate Jeff Gordon page." Parsons (2001) attributes fans' negative attitudes toward Gordon to the fact that when Gordon won an amazing 33 Winston Cup Series races between 1996 and 1998, he beat many of the fans' favorite drivers, like Dale Earnhardt, Bill Elliott, and Rusty Wallace. Consequently, because of their identification with those drivers, many fans developed a strong dislike for Gordon that was confirmed by our findings. Other drivers that were mentioned as least favorite included Tony Stewart (12.8%), Rusty Wallace

(11.5%), Jimmy Spencer (9.5%), Sterling Marlin (8.8%), and Kevin Harvick (8.1%).

### Testing Hypothesis 2

We tested our second hypothesis, that given their liking for their favorite driver, fans will have unfavorable attitudes toward other competing drivers by comparing attitudes toward a driver between the fans of that driver and the fans of competing drivers. We looked at attitudes in terms of overall average and also by whom a fan had identified as his or her favorite driver (only including drivers that were mentioned as favorite by at least 5% of the respondents). Table 3 summarizes the findings.

The findings are quite revealing: fans of certain drivers dislike certain other drivers. In some cases, this dislike is quite strong, as the average attitude score was below the mid-point of the 10-point scale. Most noticeable are the following dislike relationships: Dale Jarrett fans, Dale Earnhardt, Jr. fans, and Mark Martin fans disliking Jeff Gordon (average attitude scores toward Gordon of 2.50, 4.41, and 4.94, respectively), Jeff Gordon fans and Mark Martin fans disliking Tony Stewart (average attitude toward Stewart of 4.18 and 4.73, respectively), Jeff Gordon fans disliking Rusty Wallace (average attitude score of 4.22) and Mark Martin fans and Dale Jarrett fans disliking Kevin Harvick (average attitude of 4.67 and 4.90, respectively). These findings confirm our hypothesis that the competitive nature of NASCAR, like all sports, fosters rivalries and elicits negative feelings by fans of one driver towards competing drivers.

### Testing Hypothesis 3

The third hypothesis stated that fans will have unfavorable attitudes towards the sponsors of drivers that they dislike. Because this was our most important hypothesis, we tested it in several ways.

First, we examined respondents' awareness of who sponsors their least favorite driver. Interestingly, fans were quite aware of the sponsors of the drivers they dislike with 83% of the participants correctly identifying the primary sponsor of their *least* favorite driver. This unusually high level of awareness for a driver who a fan actively dislikes may suggest that fans make an effort to know who sponsors the drivers they dislike in order to *avoid* supporting that company. When asked "How likely are you to purchase and use products from a company that sponsors drivers you dislike?", the average response was 4.3 on a 10-point scale, reinforcing this possibility.

In addition to the self-report measure listed above, we further tested hypothesis 3 by comparing the mean attitude toward sponsors between subjects who listed a driver as their favorite and those

**TABLE 2**  
Attitudes toward sponsoring brands by all fans and by fans of sponsored drivers

Company/Brand	Average Attitude Score Among All Fans (n=220)	Average Attitude Score Among Fans of Sponsored Driver
Budweiser (Earnhardt)	8.49 (s.d.=2.48)	9.39 (s.d.=1.50) n=61
Dupont (Gordon)	6.50 (s.d.=3.25)	9.42 (s.d.=1.20) n=36
Viagra (Martin)	5.97 (s.d.=3.21)	7.62 (s.d.=2.87) n=13
Home Depot (Stewart)	7.53 (s.d.=2.72)	9.54 (s.d.=1.66) n=13
UPS (Jarrett)	7.80 (s.d.=2.60)	9.50 (s.d.=.85) n=10

**TABLE 3**  
Mean attitude ratings toward a driver for fans of that driver and fans of competing drivers (standard deviations in parentheses).

Driver	Avg Attitude	Earnhardt Fans n=61	Gordon Fans n=36	Martin Fans n=13	Stewart Fans n=13	Jarrett Fans n=10
Gordon	5.49 (3.67)	4.41 (3.10)	9.18 (2.48)	4.94 (2.98)	5.33 (3.23)	2.50 (3.24)
Stewart	5.70 (3.10)	5.90 (3.42)	4.18 (2.45)	4.73 (2.96)	9.67 (1.15)	5.60 (2.01)
Wallace	5.32 (3.00)	5.05 (2.86)	4.22 (2.61)	6.69 (2.96)	5.42 (2.91)	6.50 (2.95)
Marlin	6.17 (2.84)	5.95 (2.83)	5.27 (3.05)	7.06 (2.21)	6.92 (2.61)	6.40 (2.63)
Harvick	6.29 (3.14)	7.36 (3.03)	5.84 (2.86)	4.67 (3.39)	6.17 (2.62)	4.90 (3.57)
Earnhardt	8.12 (2.32)	9.65 (1.35)	7.32 (2.36)	6.50 (2.03)	8.33 (2.10)	6.70 (3.02)
Martin	7.11 (2.36)	6.87 (2.49)	6.95 (2.44)	9.94 (2.25)	7.92 (1.68)	6.40 (1.71)
Jarrett	7.02 (2.53)	6.56 (2.51)	6.71 (2.66)	8.00 (2.22)	7.42 (2.31)	9.90 (.32)

TABLE 4

Mean ratings of brands sponsored by subjects' favorite and least favorite drivers, and correlations between attitude toward drivers and attitude toward brands

Driver	Sponsor	Mean rating of sponsor for all respondents (sd)	Mean rating of sponsor for subjects who chose this driver as their favorite (n)	Mean rating of sponsor for subjects who chose this driver as their least favorite (n)	Pearson correlation between attitude toward the driver and attitude toward the sponsoring brand
Dale Earnhardt Jr.	Budweiser	8.49 (2.48)	9.39 (61)**	5.20 (5)*	.370
Jeff Gordon	Dupont	6.50 (3.25)	9.42 (36)**	3.87 (52)**	.681
Tony Stewart	Home Depot	7.53 (2.72)	9.54 (13)**	6.67 (18)n.s.	.397
Kevin Harvick	GM Goodwrench	7.48 (2.76)	9.14 (7)**	4.64 (11)**	.535
Rusty Wallace	Miller Lite	5.96 (3.3)	6.00 (4)n.s.	3.60 (14)**	.289
Dale Jarett	UPS	7.80 (2.6)	9.50 (10)**	6.50 (2)n.s.	.412
Sterling Marlin	Coors Light	5.82 (3.24)	5.67 (3)n.s.	3.08 (12)**	.228
Mark Martin	Viagra	5.97 (3.21)	7.62 (13)*	1.00 (2)n.s.	.170
<b>Overall Means</b>		<b>6.89 (1.44)</b>	<b>9.08 (147)**</b>	<b>4.31 (116)**</b>	<b>.385</b>

For mean differences between favorite driver's sponsor/least favorite driver's sponsor and mean rating of sponsor for all respondents, \*\*=significant at the .01 level and \*=significant at the .05 level. All correlations (last column) are significant at .01, with the exception of the correlation between attitude toward Mark Martin and attitude toward his sponsor (Viagra), which is significant at .05.

who listed that driver as their least favorite. Only those drivers who received a combination of ten or more "favorite driver" or "least favorite driver" votes were included in the analysis. As Table 4 shows, fans who rated a driver as their favorite were significantly more favorable to the sponsor than those who listed that driver as their least favorite. Overall, fans rated brands that sponsored their favorite driver a 9.08 on a 10-point scale. Conversely, fans rated brands that sponsored their least favorite driver a 4.31.

With the exception of Sterling Marlin (Coors Light), the average attitude score among the fans of the sponsored driver was higher than the overall average, and the average attitude score among fans who disliked the sponsored driver was lower than the overall average. These findings again confirm a strong favorable attitude towards the company sponsoring one's favorite driver. The findings also suggest that the transfer of affect can be just as powerful between disliked drivers and their sponsors. It can be seen from Table 4 that mean ratings of sponsors for subjects who chose the driver as their favorite were significantly higher than mean ratings for all respondents, and mean ratings of sponsors for subjects who chose the driver as their least favorite were significantly lower than mean ratings for all respondents (most of the non-significant results can be attributed to small sample size). These differences are of approximately the same magnitude.

These results confirm H3 and provide support for the notion that balance theory can help explain how attitudes toward drivers impact attitudes toward sponsors. To further explore this relationship, a set of bivariate correlations was computed on all subjects' ratings of drivers and brands that sponsor those drivers. As the last column of Table 4 illustrates, all correlations were significant in the

predicted direction, showing support for the notion that fans tend to reward sponsors of drivers they like, and punish sponsors of drivers they dislike.

### CONCLUSION

Our findings confirmed the hypothesis that sponsoring one property usually evokes positive attitudes from fans of that property but may also elicit negative attitudes by fans of other properties. Given the competitive nature of sports in general, this possibility extends beyond just NASCAR and motor sports. Consequently, companies interested in being involved in sport sponsorships have a potentially challenging decision to make.

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