

**An Investigation of Highly Identified Fans and their Marketplace Support of Official Team
Sponsors**

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ABSTRACT

Across nine product categories, this study investigated the reported purchases of fans of a professional football team. Results indicate that highly identified fans possessing a favorable disposition toward sponsorship reward team sponsors with increased marketplace support provided they are aware of the firm-team affiliation. In addition, the importance of fan awareness of the official sponsors is documented as it is shown that awareness of the sponsor is highly variable across the product categories that were studied. Theoretical and managerial implications of the findings are discussed and direction is provided for future research.

Keywords: sponsorship, sponsorship awareness, share of wallet, social identity theory

INTRODUCTION

Social identity theory (SIT) provides a framework for understanding why individuals seek to demonstrate behavior that is consistent with their own self-concept. Specifically, SIT postulates that people categorize themselves into personally meaningful classifications such as their religious affiliation or country of origin in order to give structure to their lives (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). By extension, social identities are an influential driver of behavior due to the psychological attachment the individual has with that particular social identity (Ashforth & Mael 1989). Notably, parallel research has found that individuals are drawn to products that share key tenants of an important social identity (Lantz & Loeb, 1998). In fact, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) suggest that identity based customer-company commonalities accelerate the creation of brand loyalty. Therefore, if firms are able to become integrated into a meaningful social identity of a current or potential customer, the firm should be able to increase the likelihood of favorable business outcomes such as increased sales and brand loyalty.

Through sponsorship, firms seek to capitalize on the social identity that fans share with their favorite teams. Nevertheless, a favorable transfer of affinity for the team to an affinity for the firm rests on fans being both aware of the affiliation and approving of the firm's attachment to the team. Clearly, companies involved in sponsorship believe this is attainable as sponsorship spending in North America is projected to continue its upward trajectory and increase by 4% to \$21.4 billion in 2015 (IEG, 2015). Two separate studies have confirmed that increased sales are, in fact, a central concern of marketing managers actively engaged in sponsorship (Lough & Irwin 2001; O'Reilly & Madill, 2009). The extant literature has made tremendous inroads in discovering how various fan characteristics translate into increased purchase intentions of products and services sold by sponsoring firms (e.g., Madrigal, 2000). Yet, little empirical

evidence exists that demonstrates how actual spending, rather than purchase intentions, is impacted by sponsorship. Studying how share of wallet, which is the percentage of a customer's spending within a product category on a particular brand, changes as a result of sponsorship provides a method to measure the effectiveness of this marketing communications vehicle. Accordingly, this study analyzes the influence of sponsorship awareness on share of wallet among fans with high levels of fan identification and a high favorability toward sport sponsorship. In doing so, this research provides consequential information for practitioners while advancing the knowledge of the power of social identity to impact purchase decisions.

THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Social identity theory and self-categorization theory posit that people define themselves in terms of membership in social categories which provides meaningful structure to their lives (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). This study focuses on fan identification which is defined as, "the personal commitment and emotional involvement customers have with a sport organization" (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997, 15). The agenda of several research programs has investigated sports fans' relationships with their teams which has substantiated that highly identified fans ride an emotional rollercoaster not only during games but also throughout the season (e.g., Bizman & Yinon, 2002; Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992).

Firms attempt to become interlaced with the emotional, identity-based investment that fans have made with their team through sponsorship which has been conceptualized as a "cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically a sports, entertainment, non-profit event or organization) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with the

property” (Ukman, 1995, 1). Consistent with the aim of sponsors, research has indicated that increased levels of fan identification translate into increased purchase intentions of sponsors’ products and services. For example, Madrigal (2001) concluded that highly identified fans use a firm-sponsorship linkage that drives elevated purchase intentions. Also consistent with SIT, Madrigal (2000) found that purchase intentions increased when the respondent perceived that supporting sponsors was a behavioral norm among fans of the team. Hickman (2011) provides additional documentation of the strength of social identification as it relates to sponsorship by demonstrating that fans who are highly identified with the fan club to which they belong report higher intentions to support team sponsors.

In addition to fan identification, an individual’s favorability toward sponsorship has been shown to be a key component in the ultimate success of the investment. For instance, Close, Finney, Lacey, and Sneath (2006) determined that a positive attitude toward the sponsor as a result of the firm’s sponsorship increased purchase intentions. Additionally, Alexandris, Tsaousi, and James (2007) demonstrated that positive attitudes about sponsorship result in a greater likelihood for fans to develop a positive image of the sponsor, to engage in positive word of mouth about the sponsor, and to report positive purchase intentions. Further, Dees, Bennett, and Ferreira (2010) find evidence that fan identification moderates both the attitude toward the sponsor as well as purchase intentions. Finally, DeGaris and West (2012) conducted a study that utilized NASCAR fans’ perceptions of the official soft drink sponsor. They report that fans who believe the brand’s sponsorship is effective consume about twice as much of the product as fans that do not agree that the sponsorship is effective.

Despite the wealth of research that suggests sponsors should be routinely rewarded with increased sales through sponsorship, a separate stream of literature chronicles that fan awareness

of team sponsors is often very low (e.g., Eagleman & Krohn, 2012; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Pitts & Slattery 2004). More promising information regarding awareness was found by Gwinner and Swanson (2003) who report that increased identification with the team is predictive of sponsor recognition. Like Madrigal (2000, 2001) and Hickman (2011), this determination provides evidence that social identification is influential as it relates to desirable sponsorship outcomes.

To summarize, social identity theory suggests that individuals seek to behave in ways that are consistent with their own self-ascribed categorizations. Further, it has been demonstrated that individuals confer goodwill to the firm if they perceive it as sharing a meaningful identity. In the case of sponsorship, identity-congruent behavior consists of marketplace support of sponsors by highly identified fans provided they have a positive attitude toward sponsorship and are aware of the firm's affiliation with the team.

Therefore, this study hypothesizes that firms will attain a higher share of wallet among individuals with high fan identification and high favorability toward sponsorship who are able to correctly identify the official team sponsor as opposed to similar fans who are unsuccessful in recognizing the firm as a sponsor.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for the study was collected within the greater metropolitan area of a National Football League (NFL) team at locations that attract a variety of people (e.g., a large city park and large outdoor shopping area). Since it was critical to the external validity of the study, the locations selected were in areas that were void of any cues regarding team sponsors. Further, a

systematic procedure was used to select the sponsors to study in this research. First, sponsors had to offer products or services that were not in product categories where switching costs to the customer are relatively high or where there is a strong likelihood that a customer's share of wallet with one competitor in the product category is 100% and zero for all other competitors. Therefore, sponsors like banks and insurance companies were eliminated from consideration. Second, each sponsor had to be a primary sponsor with full rights to leverage the sponsorship in their promotions mix. Third, each sponsor needed to have acted as an official sponsor for a minimum of three years at the time of data collection. This requirement is supported by the findings of Walraven, Bijmolt, and Koning (2014) who determined that the most substantial awareness increases occurred in the second year of a sponsorship agreement. Ultimately, nine team sponsors were chosen for analysis that met each of these three key requirements. The product categories associated with this study were supermarkets, sporting goods stores, milk, soft drinks, hot sauce, packaged rice, sports drinks, pizza restaurants, and fast food chicken restaurants.

The study took place during the fourth week of the season. Potential respondents that appeared to be at least 18 years old were approached at each location and were screened for residency within the metropolitan area. Upon confirmation of the age and residency requirements, respondents were advised they would be asked questions about household spending and sport sponsorship. Importantly, they were not told prior to taking the survey that these two areas of study would be linked or that the sponsorship questions were related to a particular team. After the respondents completed the survey they were given their choice of snacks as a token of appreciation for their participation.

The initial set of questions directed respondents to consider all of their spending in each of the nine product categories over the course of one year. Further, they were instructed to enter the percentage of money they spent at each of five competitors (the sponsor and four of its competitors) in that category over the one-year timeframe. This methodology is similar to economic impact studies (Bernthal & Regan, 2004) where respondents are given a set of spending categories such as lodging, dining, and shopping and are subsequently asked to report their actual spending in each of the categories. Although this study required respondents to estimate spending over the course of one year, a pilot study with qualitative feedback indicated that this was not a difficult task and that respondents were confident in their ability to provide accurate spending information.

This initial phase of the study alphabetically arranged each sponsor with four dummy sponsors in the same product category. The utilization of dummy sponsors is routine in sponsorship recognition studies (e.g., Brownlee, Shreffler, & Ross, 2012; Wakefield, Becker-Olsen, & Cornwell, 2007). Johar and Pham (1999) instruct that relatedness and prominence heuristics can be problematic in recognition tasks because respondents use these cues to increase their odds of correctly guessing the sponsor. Therefore, dummy sponsors were chosen that shared similar marketplace stature as the official sponsor. For example, the official supermarket was a regional supermarket, therefore, other regional supermarket chains were selected as dummy sponsors. On the other hand, the official soft drink was an internationally distributed brand. In this case, the dummy sponsors were other well-established brands with a global presence. In addition to the sponsor and four dummy sponsors, an “other” option was also listed within each category to account for spending with brands or firms that were not among the five

listed. Respondents were directed to skip any product categories where they did not make purchases.

Next, respondents completed the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS; Wann & Branscombe 1993) to determine their respective levels of fan identification. Each of the seven items of the SSIS utilized a Likert scale anchored by strongly agree/strongly disagree which allowed respondents to record their answers to (1) It is very important to me the (name of team) wins; (2) I am a strong fan of the (name of team); (3) My friends see me as a strong fan of the (name of team); (4) During the season, I closely follow the (name of team) live in person, on TV, on the radio, in the newspaper, or on the Internet; (5) It is very important for me to be a fan of the (name of team); (6) I strongly dislike the (name of team's) greatest rivals; and (7) I often wear (name of team) apparel at work or at home. Then, subjects were asked to rate their general favorability of sponsorship using three-items consisting of modified versions of measures utilized by previous studies (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008; Smith, Graetz, & Westerbeek, 2008). Again, seven-point Likert scales anchored by strongly agree/strongly disagree were used which allowed respondents to report their level of agreement with (1) All things considered, I have a favorable opinion of companies that sponsor the (name of team); (2) All things considered, my feelings about companies that sponsor the (name of team) is very positive; and (3) I think it is good to see companies sponsor the (name of team).

At this point, respondents were asked to select the official sponsor in each product category. The choices they encountered were displayed in the same format described in the household spending phase of the study. Specifically, in each product category, respondents were given an alphabetical list consisting of the official sponsor and four dummy sponsors followed by an "other" option. Next, subjects reported whether the team associated with this research was

their favorite NFL team. Only the surveys completed by respondents that indicated the focal team was their favorite were included for analysis because previous research has determined that fans have a negative bias of sponsors of rival teams (Hickman & Lawrence 2010). This resulted in keeping 420 of the 454 surveys that were collected.

RESULTS

Demographic data was obtained from 414 of the 420 respondents. Males represented 58.5% of the sample and 76.1% of respondents reported being Caucasian. Respondents were required to be at least 18 years old with 19.1% indicating they were from 18-24; 60.6% were aged 25-44, and the remaining 20.3% were 45 years or older.

Utilizing SPSS version 19, the seven-item SSIS was found to be a reliable measure of fan identification ($\alpha = .92$), exceeding the 0.70 minimum recommendation (Nunnally, 1978). A FanID score that ranged from one to seven was generated for each respondent based on the mean response of the seven-item SSIS. FanID was then dichotomized using a median split and respondents were either categorized as high or low in fan identification. This procedure is similar to previous studies using median splits of measured variables (e.g., Shiv & Fedorikhin, 1999). Although surveys were only included for analysis if the respondent indicated the team associated with the study was their favorite NFL team, those categorized as high in fan identification ($M = 6.74$, $SD = .25$) scored significantly higher in FanID than those classified as low in fan identification ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.10$); $t(418) = 21.70$, $p = .000$.

An identical process was carried out with the three-item sponsorship favorability scale. Analysis demonstrated the items exhibited strong reliability ($\alpha = .90$) which allowed for the

creation of a sponsorship favorability (FAVOR) score based on the average response of the three relevant items in the survey. As with the FanID variable, FAVOR was dichotomized using a median split. A significant difference in FAVOR scores was found with respondents categorized as high in FAVOR ($M = 6.44$, $SD = .46$) reporting higher favorability of sponsorship than respondents categorized as low in FAVOR ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.06$); $t(418) = 27.69$, $p = .000$. Consistent with Gwinner and Swanson's (2003) findings, the correlation of FanID and FAVOR was significant and positive ($r = .65$, $p < .001$).

Finally, within each product category, respondents were either categorized as SponsorAware Yes or SponsorAware No to indicate whether they successfully completed the recognition test in the given category. A series of three-way interactions (FanID: High vs. Low) x (FAVOR: High vs. Low) x (SponsorAware: Yes vs. No) were performed and planned contrasts were examined to test the hypothesis associated with this study. Specifically, the analysis isolated fans categorized as high in FanID and high in FAVOR and compared the sponsor's share of wallet reported by respondents based on their SponsorAware status. While each respondent's classification in FanID and FAVOR was consistent across product categories, each respondent's SponsorAware status was reclassified as either SponsorAware Yes or SponsorAware No for each product category to reflect their individual success rate of recognizing official team sponsors. A total of 36.2% (152/420) of the fans that participated in the study were categorized as High FanID and High FAVOR. As shown in Table 1, the percentage of these respondents that successfully completed the sponsorship recognition task in a given category ranged from 28.3% (supermarkets) to 82.2% (packaged rice).

Based on the series of three-way interactions, the results shown in Table 1 indicate broad support for the hypothesis. Specifically, respondents that recognized the sponsor reported a

significantly greater share of wallet in seven of nine product categories among those fans classified as High FanID and High FAVOR. For example, respondents that recognized the official supermarket as the team sponsor reported a significantly higher share of wallet for that store than those that failed the recognition test in the supermarket category ($M_{\text{SponsorAware Yes}} = 50.67$; $M_{\text{SponsorAware No}} = 28.95$; $F(1, 412) = 13.72, p = .000$). Additionally, an eighth category, chicken restaurants, showed marginal support for the hypothesis ($M_{\text{SponsorAware Yes}} = 29.27$; $M_{\text{SponsorAware No}} = 21.50$; $F(1, 382) = 2.83, p = .093$). Only the official sporting goods store failed to enjoy a higher share of wallet among fans that recognized it as the sponsor ($M_{\text{SponsorAware Yes}} = 69.90$; $M_{\text{SponsorAware No}} = 77.27$; $F(1, 378) = 1.23, p = .268$).

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DISCUSSION

Social identity theory posits that firms are well-positioned to create a lasting loyalty with their customers if they share a meaningful identity with them (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). One such mechanism for firms to achieve identity congruence with their customers is through the sponsorship of a sports franchise. The research described in this article demonstrates the potential power of sponsorship to act as a bridge from the firm to the customer through an identity-based connection with the fan. Further, the results of this study provide empirical evidence of the vital role that awareness of the sponsorship plays in the measurable success of

sponsorship initiatives. In fact, the findings of this study, with respect to highly variable recognition rates, are similar to the results of previous research (e.g., Pitts & Slattery, 2004). Moreover, the current study magnifies the awareness problem by demonstrating that even among highly identified fans with a positive temperament toward sponsorship that an enormous disparity exists among the sponsors in their successful ability to communicate their partnership with the team. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that sponsoring firms must effectively leverage the sponsorship through efficient marketing communications. Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan (2008) explain that activation, which is the creation of opportunities for fans to interact with the sponsor, is a critical component of leveraging the sponsorship. These interactive opportunities may be particularly impactful among highly identified fans due to their natural inclination to reward firms as a result of a shared social identity. Ultimately, successful sponsorship activation may serve as a mechanism to create long-term customer loyalty.

Several studies have demonstrated that firms benefit from a logical fit with the sponsored entity (e.g., Johar & Pham, 1999). This can result from an image-based fit where noteworthy similarities exist in the image of the sponsor such as a prestigious automobile manufacturer sponsoring a prestigious tennis event. Alternatively, sponsor fit can be achieved through a functional fit where the sponsor's products are used or could potentially be used by the sponsored property (Gwinner & Eaton, 1997). Although this study did not instruct fans to make determinations on the level of fit that these nine sponsors shared with the sponsored team, it is likely that the sponsoring firms in the sporting goods stores and sports drink categories would score higher on both fit dimensions than sponsors in the remaining seven categories studied. Even so, the sporting goods store was the only sponsor that did not experience a higher share of wallet among highly identified fans with a favorable disposition toward sponsors who correctly

identified the sponsor. In contrast, sponsors in disparate categories such as milk, pizza restaurants, and hot sauce enjoyed a significantly higher share of wallet among these same respondents. Importantly, the results of this study suggest that sponsors in non-congruent product categories have the potential for successful sponsorship outcomes. This outcome supports Aaker's (2013) assertion that the right audience can still connect with a brand even in the absence of a readily apparent fit.

Finally, a key methodological contribution of this study was the measurement of reported purchasing behavior as opposed to purchase intentions which have been the standard method to gauge marketplace support of sponsoring firms (e.g., Madrigal, 2000). As a result, the findings of this article are an important extension to the findings of previous research that has demonstrated that the auspicious fan characteristics of high fan identification (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003) and a favorable attitude toward the sponsor (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013) promote increased purchase intentions of sponsors' products and services.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study challenge the belief held by numerous scholars (e.g., Prendergast, Poon, & West, 2010) that a firm should not engage in sponsorship in the absence of a coherent fit with the sponsored property. While it seems unlikely that sponsors in product categories such as milk or supermarkets would have scored particularly high on either the functional or image fit dimension, respondents were not asked which sponsors possessed a fit with the sponsored team. Therefore, future research can ascertain respondents' assessment of sponsor fit to gauge the influence of fit on share of wallet. An additional limitation of this study

was the reliance on the respondents' memories of their purchases in the respective product categories. This limitation is substantially mitigated since faulty recollections should impact actual and dummy sponsors at a similar rate. Even so, future research could attempt to develop a procedure where fans track their actual spending over a period of time in product categories of interest to the study. Indeed, future research that is able to assess actual purchasing behavior as a consequence of specific theoretical underpinnings will build upon the findings of this article and should certainly attract the attention of both scholars and practitioners.

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TABLE 1

Share of Wallet: High Favorability of Sponsors and High Fan Identification x Sponsorship Awareness ($N = 152$)^a

Product Category	Sponsor Awareness Percentage	n	Sponsor Identified	Sponsor Share of Wallet	Std. Error	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Supermarkets	28.3%	43	Yes	50.67	4.97	13.72	.000
		109	No	28.95	3.12		
Sporting Goods Stores	68.4%	104	Yes	69.90	3.77	1.23	.268
		48	No	77.27	5.47		
Milk	48.7%	74	Yes	30.27	3.51	8.76	.003
		78	No	15.61	3.49		
Soft Drinks	80.3%	122	Yes	71.51	3.17	10.20	.002
		30	No	47.96	6.66		
Hot Sauce	41.4%	63	Yes	27.22	4.16	6.40	.012
		89	No	13.73	3.34		
Packaged Rice	82.2%	125	Yes	41.60	3.50	4.06	.045
		27	No	25.04	7.44		
Sports Drinks	53.9%	82	Yes	62.93	3.85	22.98	.000
		70	No	34.29	4.57		
Pizza Restaurants	39.5%	60	Yes	12.38	2.24	7.64	.006
		92	No	4.38	1.84		
Chicken Restaurants	52.0%	79	Yes	29.27	3.21	2.83	.093
		73	No	21.50	3.32		

^a A total of 152 respondents were classified as both High FanID and High FAVOR. The full sample size of the study was 420. The results displayed represent the planned contrast of interest and are based on the series of three-way interactions performed on the full sample.