




THE INFLUENCE OF A SOCCER EVENT SPONSORSHIP ON CONSUMER ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS AND SPONSORSHIP AWARENESS

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Keywords

Soccer event sponsorship, sports sponsorship, consumer attitudes, consumer perceptions, supporter involvement, sponsorship awareness

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the influence of a soccer event sponsorship characterised by supporter involvement on consumer attitudes, perceptions and sponsorship awareness. An explanatory design was adopted and a pre-designed questionnaire was administered on a simple randomly selected soccer supporters' sample. Descriptives and correlation statistics were used to understand the influence of soccer event sponsorship on consumer attitudes and perceptions, and the influence of supporter involvement on sponsorship awareness. The study findings revealed that soccer event sponsorship has a positive impact on consumer attitudes and perceptions. Furthermore, the results revealed that supporter involvement has a positive influence on sponsorship awareness. This study provides empirical evidence on how consumer attitudes and perceptions are influenced by a soccer event sponsorship when the sports supporters are involved in the team selection. The study shows how a single-day soccer event sponsorship uniquely structured around a brand sponsorship, supporter involvement and football clubs can be an effective marketing or promotional tool that influences consumer attitudes and perceptions. Since this study was cross-sectional, there is a need for future studies to measure the relationship between the constructs using a longitudinal design, and large samples.

INTRODUCTION

Sports sponsorship prominence continues to rise in the past three decades amidst the movement from being a corporate social responsibility perspective to becoming a critical marketing strategy element used to create brand value (Biscaia et al., 2014). Consequently, there has been a significant growth in research to evaluate the effectiveness of sponsorship, as sports sponsorship budgets in organisations have been growing within different sporting contexts. However, whilst many research studies have focused on the constructs that drive consumer behaviours, not many studies have focused on the influence of sport sponsorship events on consumer attitudes and perceptions. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the influence of soccer event sponsorship on consumer attitudes, perceptions and sponsorship awareness of an annual soccer event.

Globally, sports sponsorship is estimated to be expensing and investing above US\$57 billion annually in various sporting disciplines and is expected to grow to over US\$90 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2021). In light of these huge budgets, it shows the importance of sports sponsorship as a vital marketing tool in organisations. Koeke-moer (2014) argue that sponsors are attracted to sports such as soccer which are often characterised by large audiences and the popularity of the game around the world. In addition, because each event lasts for a set amount of time, it provides a very simplistic way of segmenting and a higher chance of sponsorship visibility (Westmattmann et al., 2021). For example, the sponsorship of the football Premier League by Barclaycard, is motivated by the potential to reach large, specific audiences (Thomas, 2015). However, Baker (2013) argues that poor team performance or any misfortune a tournament or event suffers can also affect the sponsor.

As such, consumers can be attracted to companies that are sponsoring athletes in high-profile events, such as the Professional Golf Association (PGA) (Bai et al., 2021). Furthermore, a specific sport has a variety of sponsorship opportunities, including the naming of the stadium, logos for uniforms, and sponsorship of competitions. In this way, the sports sponsorship role becomes significant in impacting consumer attitudes towards the sponsorship and its brand. Yet in the present case of this study, the sponsor involves consumers by selecting and voting for the eleven team members to be fielded in the soccer match whenever they purchase the sponsor's beer product.

Past research has focused on the psychological aspects of team supporters on the sponsor (Hong, 2022; Ko et al. 2017; Lee, 2021). However, to fully understand how sponsorship impacts consumer behaviour, it is critical to assess consumer attitudes and perceptions of a sponsorship brand. According to Melovic et al. (2019), sponsors invest in sports team goodwill with the supporters which should in turn affect their attitudes and perceptions towards the sponsorship brand. Additionally, Parker and Fink (2010) argue that the team and sponsor's relationship makes the sponsor part of the team-supporter network.

Other studies have focused on team sponsors and their effect on sponsor awareness (Hong, 2022). However, this study is focused on a single-day annual soccer sponsorship event and how it influences consumer attitudes, perceptions and sponsorship awareness.

Sport event sponsorship and its importance

According to Keller (2020), the purpose of a brand is to become an identifiable entity for consumers to perceive it as relevant, unique, valuable, and meeting the needs and desires of the consumers. Sponsorship plays a pivotal role in the marketing mix, providing brand-building opportunities, differentiation marketing platforms, direct business benefits, networking opportunities, and hospitality to sponsors (Keshkar et al., 2019). Therefore, the alcohol industry is increasingly seeking contracts to sponsor high-profile sporting events as it recognizes the potential for synergy between promotion and advertising (Lim et al., 2015). The integration between marketing communication and sports sponsorship can provide a variety of positive communication that enhances consumer behaviour or decision to purchase the product in the market (Batra & Keller, 2016).

Through such an integrated process, many companies are using various strategies to promote their products and services in which sports sponsorship plays an integral part (Latif et al., 2016). Companies prefer to procure exclusive sponsorship rights in a specific category (Cobb, 2011). As a result, companies enjoy a highly advantageous monopolistic position to be synonymous with the sponsored subject. The sponsorship of a product category ensures that competitors within that category cannot compete in the controlled sports environment of that sponsor. To differentiate their brands from competitors, companies eliminate competitors from the sponsored subject (Mahdi et al., 2015).

As held by Van Heerden and Du Plessis (2013), sponsorship in sports involves acquiring rights from rights holders or teams to leverage sponsorship for brand awareness by using elements including but not limited to naming rights, match day programmes, and broadcast features. These elements are exclusive to the sponsor and concurrent with the sport sponsorship agreement. Hence, when brands develop their marketing plans and strategies, sponsorship always plays a part in their 360-integrated approach as sponsorship increases brand awareness and promotes brand loyalty (Chien et al., 2021).

However, according to Keshkar et al. (2019), a doping scandal involving the sponsee or a scandal about the sponsee's personal life can further damage the company's image. As an alternative, an increasing number of companies sponsor attractive sporting events since there is a limited risk of reputation damage. Despite all these, successful marketers will need to be creative and inventive to maximize return on investment from sponsorships (Dostie, 2020). In addition, the inherent problems in measuring sponsorship effectiveness by awareness, image or behaviour raise the question of whether such means can be effectively utilized to evaluate sponsorships (Angell et al., 2021). Despite the difficulty of measuring sponsorship effectiveness, researchers and theorists agree that using sponsorship as part of a marketing campaign is generally beneficial to the company (Hickman, 2015). In essence, sponsorship contributes to the effective coordination and impact of the other elements of the promotional mix. Thus, sponsor deals can either be highly effective or negatively impacted by other elements of the promotional mix (Kim et al., 2021). Since there is no clear evidence as to how sports sponsorships influence attitudes and perceptions, this study seeks to examine the influence of sports event sponsorship on consumer attitudes, perceptions and sponsorship awareness.

Influence of soccer event sponsorship on consumer attitudes and perceptions

According to Koronious et al. (2016), supporters' attitudes and behaviours are influenced by a sponsor's investment in professional sports. Similarly, Biscaia et al. (2013) contend that once sports teams and sponsors establish a strong foundation for support, they become acquainted. In addition, Tyler et al. (2021) and Peluso et al. (2019) maintain that a supporter of a team can have a positive impact on the attitudes toward sponsors given that the positive feelings supporter of a team feel toward the sponsor can be transferred to sponsors through the link that the team has with the sponsor. However, in both studies, names of actual sponsors were not provided to respondents, but rather names of abstract sponsors were used.

Yet, Yue et al. (2013) noted that consumers' participation in a sport has a significant effect on how likely they are to purchase the products of sponsors. Consumers who attend sports events more frequently also tend to take advantage of the product offerings of sponsors more often than others (Lee, 2021). These investigations have been conducted with the understanding that the stronger the link between the sponsor and the team, the greater the chance that the team's supporters will feel the need to utilize the sponsor's products to repay the sponsor for their support (Crimmins & Horn, 2016).

Sponsorship effectiveness can be underpinned by a positive attitude toward a sponsor, and this is a major aspect for sponsors to consider that is aligned with the theory of planned behaviour (Lobo et al., 2014). The theory of planned behaviour is explicit that an attitude towards an object plays a significant role in predicting an individual's behavioural response (Ajzen, 1991). Consumer attitudes are also consumer opinions and feel-

ings about an object such as a product or company however because attitudes are enduring values and beliefs, they are hard to change (Fang et al., 2017). In addition, attitude toward an object also plays a considerable role in predicting the behaviour of a person and it can influence the behaviour of the person when confronted with the object (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2015). Likewise, a consumer's attitude can be defined as a "psychological perspective resulting from a strong subjective impression of either favouring or disfavouring some specific entity of the product or brand (Eagly & Chaiken, 2013). To shape consumer attitudes there is a need to direct experiences with an entity or information exposure to enhance product or brand understanding (Shukla et al., 2022). Beliefs are someone's perceptions about an object. Their outlook on that object is based on their beliefs about that object. Beliefs can be viewed as the links between the attitude object and its attributes, characteristics, outcomes, goals, or values (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2015). Similarly, Lee and Johnson (2019) support the idea that consumers express their opinions of a brand sponsoring an event in the form of perception of how the company stands out from others.

As part of sports sponsorship activities, companies expect to see a corresponding increase in awareness about the sponsorship, similar to the positive reaction they receive from sports consumers about their team (Shaw & McDonald, 2016). However, most sports supporters believe that the sponsor is an important part of the team's success as a whole, so they often have an affable attitude toward the sponsor (Cornwall et al., 2016). Strand and Robertson (2020) further suggest that the sponsor's acceptance of consumers is indicative of the attitudes of consumers targeted by sponsorship activities as they serve to transfer trust and kindness to the sponsor. Accordingly, attitudes and perceptions toward a company sponsor are a significant factor that impacts the likelihood of making a purchase decision. Whereas most studies have focused on abstract sponsors, in this study, the focus is on specific one-day annual soccer event sponsorship and how that it influences supporters' attitudes and answers the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive attitude amongst supporters towards the soccer event sponsorship.

Influence of supporter involvement on sponsorship awareness

According to Ko et al. (2017), supporter involvement refers to the level of interest and importance that individuals place on their involvement in a sporting event. Supporter involvement aligns with the social judgement theory which recognises the interconnectivity between participation and learning of sports consumers (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). On the other hand, team identification represents a supporter's relationship with the team and whether they consider themselves to be an extension of that team (Prayag et al., 2020). These constructs reflect the psychological link between an individual and a team and may reflect that individual's commitment to that team and excitement to be involved in the event. However, the term that is used to describe attitudinal loyalty needs to include both the tendency to remain loyal as well as the attitude concerning purchasing the brand (Biscaia et al., 2014). Frequently, loyalty behaviours towards a team are linked to a strong positive attitude towards the sponsor (Cunningham et al., 2014). It is often the case that true loyalty is demonstrated when customers repeatedly purchase a particular product and demonstrate a solid attitude towards the brand and its products (Arslan, 2020). Therefore, the core focus of the current research initiative on team loyalty concerns attitudinally and behaviourally driven aspects of team loyalty as a means of better understanding the relationship between the current, and future, actions of supporters of their team (Ferm & Thaichon, 2021).

Solid sponsorship awareness increases brand equity and also avoids competitors' tactics of ambushing the market (Schmid, 2017). As a result of the bond that exists between the consumer and their favourite sports team, their reactions toward the sponsors are extremely important. That is, supporters who have a stronger devotion and involvement with their favourite team will have more knowledge of the event-specific environment, and as a result, will be more likely to analyse sponsorship information with a more discriminate eye (Roy

& Cornwell, 2014). For example, Biscaia et al. (2017) report that to ensure appropriate sponsorship recognition, the level of team identification and the number of home games attended must be at the right level. Additionally, Ko et al. (2017) found that there is a positive correlation between the consumer's participation in a sporting event and sponsorship awareness. A review study by Jensen and Cornwell (2017) also found that sponsorship involvement has an impact on consumer behavioural outcomes, affection and awareness. However, despite these results, there is a need to understand the merits of a one-day annual sports event sponsorship where there is supporter involvement using the following hypothesis:

H2: Supporters' involvement in the soccer sponsorship cup has a positive effect on sponsorship awareness.

METHODS

Research approach

The case of this study is a major beer soccer cup event in South Africa coupled with a massive marketing campaign that makes substantial use of mobile phones to vote for selected team players of two big soccer clubs to play in the one-day soccer cup event held once annually. The big idea stemmed from the simple fact that South African soccer supporters aspire to participate in the game and the beer organisation recognized this and initiated the process of soccer supporter-team selection. To participate in the 'Be the Coach' initiative, supporters must own a mobile phone in addition to purchasing the beer and using the free short message service. In addition, to selecting the teams playing, the supporters participate in making live substitutions using mobile phones during the match.

A cross-sectional survey approach was used to collect quantitative data that enabled descriptive and inferential statistics to answer the research questions. A pre-designed 5-point Likert-scaled questionnaire was administered to a randomly selected sample of 400 soccer supporters who attended and watched the soccer event virtually at the sports club and supporters branch meetings due to COVID-19 restrictions forcing the match to be played in an empty stadium with no supporters.

Version 25 of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel software were used to compute and analyse the data obtained from the questionnaire, emphasizing frequencies, means, standard deviations, and percentages to create graphs and frequency tables. Correlations were used to test the hypothesis.

RESULTS

Demographic data

The respondents' demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data

Variable	Category	Soccer Supporters n=400 (%)
Age	Below 25 years	21.4%
	25-35 years	16.5%
	36-45 years	24.3%
	46-55 years	15.8%
	Above 55 years	22%
Gender	Male	55.5%
	Female	44.5%
Standard of Event Soccer	Excellent	25.7%
	Good	36.7%
	Fair	21.3%
	Poor	11.8%
	Uncertain	4.5%
Supported Team	Football team 1	43%
	Football team2	52%
	Others	5%
Employment Status	Student	14.4%
	Employed	57.5%
	Unemployed	23.8%
	Others	4.3%

The majority of the respondents were male (55.5%), aged 36-45 years (24.3%), employed (57.5%), from football team 2 (52%), and regarded the event standard as good (36.8%).

Data collection and analysis procedure

Reliability data

The Cronbach alpha test of the items was computed to 0.878. This means that the research instrument was reliable and above the threshold of 0.7 (Samuel, 2015).

Descriptive data

Consumer attitudes

Figure 1 shows the respondents' attitudes towards the sponsor's beer.

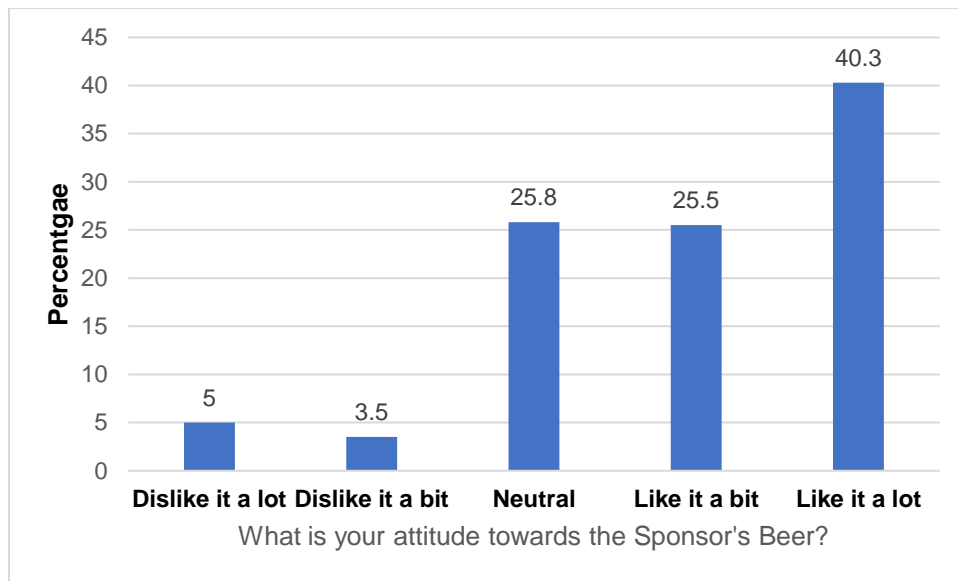


Figure 1. Attitude towards the sponsor's beer

The responses show that (40%) of the respondents liked the sponsor's brand of beer a lot, (26%) liked it a bit and (26%) were neutral. However, there was a small percentage that did not like the sponsor's branded beer (8%).

Consumer perceptions

Table 2 shows the consumer perception towards the sponsor of the event

Table 2. Consumer perceptions towards the sponsor

Perception on CBL sponsorship of the Cup	N	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Min	Max
There is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor	400	4,53	1,95	1	4
The image of the event and the image of the sponsor are similar	400	4,31	1,67	1	4
The sponsor and the event fit together well	400	4,14	1,46	1	4
The company and the event stand for similar things	400	4,09	1,34	1	4
It makes sense to me that this company sponsors this event	400	4,02	1,21	1	4

The result (Table 2) shows that the most common response on sponsorship perceptions of the respondents was the item "there is a logical connection between the soccer event with the sponsor" (M=4.53, S.D=1.95), and the item "the image of the event and the image of the sponsor are similar" (M=4.31; S.D=1.67). However, the least common response was the item, "it makes sense to me that this company sponsors the event" (M=4.02; S.D=1.21).

Hypothesis testing result

Influence of soccer event sponsorship on consumer attitudes

To test hypothesis, H1: There is a positive attitude amongst supporters towards the soccer event sponsorship, The Pearson correlation coefficient test was used between attitude and sponsorship constructs which yielded the results shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation result of attitude towards soccer event sponsorship.

		Attitude towards the sponsor's image	Attitude towards the sponsor's value	Attitude towards the sponsored event	Attitude towards the Sponsor's brand
Soccer event sponsorship	Pearson Correlation	.260**	.607**	.269**	.229**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0013	0.0065	0.0026	0.0017
	N	400	400	400	400

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results (Table 3) show that there is a significant positive correlation between attitudes and the soccer event sponsorship items, with the items sponsor's image ($r=.260$, $p<0.01$), sponsor's value ($r=0.607$, $p<0.01$), sponsored event ($r=.269$, $p<0.01$), sponsor's brand ($r=.229$, $p<0.01$). Hence, H1 is supported that there is a positive attitude amongst supporters towards the soccer event sponsorship.

Influence of supporter involvement on sponsorship awareness

To test hypothesis 2: Supporter involvement has a positive effect on sponsorship awareness, the Pearson correlation test was used between supporter involvement and sponsorship awareness constructs to yield the result shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations of supporter's involvement and sponsorship awareness

		The logical connection between the event and the sponsor	Image of the event and image of the sponsor	The sponsor and the event	The company and the event	Company suitability to sponsor the event
Supporter Involvement	Pearson Correlation	.602**	.553**	.585**	.503**	.495**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.0044	0.0039	0.0041	0.0036	0.0033
	N	400	400	400	400	400

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results (Table 4) show that there is a significant positive correlation between supporter involvement and the soccer event sponsorship items, with the main items "logical connection between event and sponsor" ($r=.602$, $p<0.01$), " image of the event and image of the sponsor" ($R=0.553$, $P<0.01$), "the sponsor and the event" ($r=.585$, $p<0.01$), " the company and the event" ($r=.503$, $p<0.01$), "suitability of the company to sponsor the event" ($r=0.495$, $p<0.01$). Hence, H2 is supported that supporter involvement positively influences sponsorship awareness.

DISCUSSION

Influence of soccer event sponsorship on consumer attitudes and perceptions

The study findings show that the supporters have a positive attitude and perception towards sports sponsorship. Cho et al. (2021) also assert that sponsorship in professional sports develops a positive impact on supporter attitudes and purchase behaviour, which in turn influences the sponsors' outcomes. Similarly, Ntshike (2016) contends that the core effect of sponsorship on consumers is a change of attitude towards the event. In this case, the soccer supporters have been stimulated by the event sponsorship to pay attention to the brand (Florian, 2017). This means the soccer sponsorship event is being used to bring brand awareness and reach out to the target market. In this sponsorship deal, it means the primary goal is achieved which is to build the brand image so that consumers become highly interested and enthusiastic about the event (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2015). In addition, an individual's beliefs on a brand or product represent the basis of their attitude towards it (Lu et al., 2014). In this way, developing a favourable attitude towards the event sponsor becomes pivotal for sponsorship effectiveness (Shin et al., 2018). However, if the supporters' attitude is not aligned with the event, the sponsorship would have reflected its ineffectiveness to influence the consumer's psychological tendency to disfavour or favour the sponsorship. Therefore, consumer attitude towards the event is an essential attribute contributing to the event sponsorship success.

Influence of consumer involvement on sponsorship awareness

The study findings show through a positive and significant correlation that consumer involvement in the event has a positive effect on brand awareness. This is similar to Ko et al. (2017) study findings of a positive correlation between the consumer's participation in a sporting event and sponsorship awareness. Su et al. (2021), further argue that supporter involvement determines their level of interest or importance of a sporting event. On the other hand, the supporter's identification with the soccer teams means the supporter becomes an extension of the team that reflect an individual's commitment and loyalty (Pryag et al., 2020). In this case, supporters are involved in the selection of the teams playing the soccer match which makes them more aware of the sponsorship and the associated brand. As a result of the bond that exists between the consumer and their favourite sports team, their reactions toward the sponsors are extremely important. That is, supporters who have a stronger devotion to their favourite team will have more knowledge of the event-specific environment, and as a result, will be more likely to analyse sponsorship information with a more discriminate eye (Roy & Cornwell, 2014). Cornwall et al. (2016) contend that sponsors' contributions to teams are likely to influence supporters' preferences and lead to positive outcomes for the sponsor and the related brand. In this manner, an important predictor of consumer purchase intentions is achieved through these attitudes towards a sponsor.

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Soccer supporters exhibit positive attitudes and perceptions toward a sports event sponsorship and show much awareness of the sponsorship brand. The consumers' attitudes toward sponsorship thus serve as a reflection of how they feel about the sponsors, the brand and the products. Furthermore, consumer involvement makes them more aware of the sponsorship to increase the intimacy within the team-supporter-sponsor networks. Therefore, sponsoring companies must pay attention to sponsorship that involves consumers to yield better brand value and target significant sporting events to stimulate brand loyalty.

The study is limited to a specific brand and event using a cross-sectional design. The study tested the influence of sport sponsorship on attitudes towards the brand and post-purchase behaviour using two big well-

known football teams and a major beer sponsor within the context of South Africa. Thus, researchers should test the findings with other brands that are not beer and in other countries.

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