



Not All Desirable Companies are Good Sponsors: Consumers' Perceptions of the Transfer of Sponsorship of Their Sports Team

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the adverse effects of undesirable sports sponsorships. It specifies and empirically tests the impact of the main sponsor by attribute type (original/undesirable/pro-social) on consumers' team perceptions and purchase intentions for the team jersey. The moderating role of fan identification (high versus low) with the team and value congruence (high versus low) between consumers and the sponsor are also investigated. Using a sample of undergraduate students ($n = 185$) from the Republic of Korea, we found that the sponsor's attribute type influences participants' attitudes toward the sports team and purchase intentions for the team jersey. More specifically, participants scored their attitudes toward the team ($M_{\text{original sponsor}} = 4.672$, $M_{\text{pro-social sponsor}} = 3.325$, $M_{\text{undesirable sponsor}} = 2.015$, $F = 73.491$, $p = .000$) and purchase intentions for the jersey ($M_{\text{original sponsor}} = 3.471$, $M_{\text{pro-social sponsor}} = 2.786$, $M_{\text{undesirable sponsor}} = 1.918$, $F = 16.100$, $p = .000$). The results show that fan identification moderates the main effects of sponsor attributes on consumers' attitudes toward the team ($F = 4.571$, $p = .011$) and purchase intentions team ($F = 8.454$, $p = .000$). They further reveal that value congruence moderates the effects of sponsor attributes on consumers' attitudes toward the team ($F = 6.132$, $p = .002$). However, no significant interaction on the effects of sponsor attributes on consumers' purchase intentions for the team jersey is found ($F = .344$, $p = .853$). The findings of the comprehensive analysis conducted in this study have several implications for practitioners of sports sponsorship communication. In addition, this study suggests focus areas for academic discussion and outlines future research directions.

Key words: sponsorship, value congruence, team identification, sports marketing, sponsor attributes

Introduction

Sponsorship has been one of the most favored marketing communication strategies for business organizations to increase brand awareness and market

share since the early 1990s (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Scott & Suchard, 1992; Stotlar, 1999). Consequently, small companies worldwide as well as global corporates such as Nike and Adidas have begun to take sponsorship seriously and consider it a highly influential part of the integrated marketing communication strategy of the firm. While companies may choose to sponsor various fields, histories and data continue to show that the sports market is the most preferred option for businesses,

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having approximately 70% of the total sponsorship market share in the North American region (PwC, 2025) and reaping over 57 billion U.S. dollars in the global sports sponsorship market in 2020 (Gough, 2024). Various product and service enterprises contribute to the growth of the sports sponsorship market by investing over several billion U.S. dollars; for instance, financial services, technology, automotive, telecoms, retail, and soft drinks companies invested more than 20 billion U.S. dollars in the sports sponsorship market in 2020 (Gough, 2024).

Although the significant effect of sports sponsorship on increasing companies' awareness and brand image is evident, academia has continued to explore its relationship with consumer behavior using various theories. For instance, Kahle and Homer's (1985) match-up hypothesis, one of the various names used for the congruence theory, has been adopted to explain the importance of the fit between the endorser and endorsee in maximizing the endorsing effect. Furthermore, beyond the emphasis on fit, the frequent use of sports stars in marketing strategies (Boyland et al., 2013; Bush et al., 2005; Lear et al., 2009; Stafford et al., 2003), has led to the application of McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model, which highlights how consumers interpret meanings based on sports stars' background. Recent sports sponsorship studies have highlighted the negative impact that sponsors would face when their sponsoring sports stars deliver negative meanings to the product or sponsors by becoming involved in unethical conduct (Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Koo, 2015; Yoon & Shin, 2016, 2017).

However, when considering unethical conduct, it is somewhat ironic that professional sports teams have long been sponsored by harmful products, potentially promoting unethical behavior among consumers (Howard & Crompton, 1995). However, legal efforts have led to the creation of many jurisdictions that ban the sponsorship of harmful products—most representatively tobacco companies—in professional sports, due to concerns that such sponsorship may encourage fans to experiment with or consume tobacco, which can easily lead to addiction (Aitken et al., 1986; Hoek et al., 1993; Sparks, 1999). Similar jurisdictional

efforts have recently emerged in the new eminent sports sponsorship market, sports gambling. For instance, in English Premier League, although online gambling companies sponsor 9 teams out of 20, the United Kingdom government is planning to ban such sponsorships from the league (Parker-Turner, 2021). Furthermore, academia has constantly raised caution, pointing out that watching sports teams sponsored by online gambling companies may encourage fans to engage with the sponsors' online gambling services (see Hing et al., 2013).

Hence, various efforts have been made to prevent the ethically undesirable entry of companies into the sports sponsorship market (Aitken et al., 1986; Hing et al., 2013; Hoek et al., 1993; Howard & Crompton, 1995; Parker-Turner, 2021; Sparks, 1999), and the question remains whether it will be beneficial for professional sports teams to receive sponsorship from ethically undesirable companies at the first place. Studies have shown that negative public image of sports stars adversely impact their sponsors (Yoon & Shin, 2016, 2017). Therefore, it is more likely that ethically undesirable meanings will be transferred to sports teams when they are sponsored by such companies (McCracken, 1989). Therefore, more research is needed to identify whether fans will remain loyal to their sports teams when their teams' meanings and images become ethically undesirable. In summary, this study aims to identify the possible adverse effects of sports sponsorships by undesirable sponsors in accordance with fans' attitudes and perceived congruence between the sponsor and their favored teams.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Theoretical Backgrounds

Since the 1990s, corporate sponsorship has been explained as a function when corporates expect the positive image of the event that their target consumers have will be transferred to their brand or organization when they sponsor the event (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). This explanation is based primarily on Heider's (1946) balance theory, which states that people seek a balance

between two objects of different values. For instance, when people find one highly valued object linked to another that is not valued much, balance theory posits that their beliefs become unbalanced and unstable. This theory further explains that people will ultimately find a balance between two objects, whether one high-value object becomes a low-value object or vice versa. However, Rifon et al. (2004) stated that this explanation is missing the cases of events sponsored by different corporates, as well as people's cognitive beliefs toward the sponsors and the relationship that people have already formed with the sponsored event.

In addition to Heider's balance theory, the congruence theory is widely utilized to explain the effect of corporate sponsorship (Solomon, 2007). However, it is recommended to first understand schema theory, as it is used to best explain congruence theory (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Chang, 2014; Kahle & Homer, 1985; Koo & Lee, 2019). A schema is a cognitive structure that illustrates a certain concept or stimulus and the features of a certain concept or stimulus, including the relationship among the features (Fiske, 1982). Fiske further explained this concept as one that people encounter existing in their memories as a form of schema. When people receive new information, their thought processes operate as the information matches well with the existing schema; the better the information is memorized, while the unmatched information acts in the opposite direction. Congruence theory (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Kahle & Homer, 1985) explains the effect of sponsorship concerning the interaction between the sponsor and sponsee; the more congruent the image between the sponsor and the sponsee, the stronger the advertising impact. Moreover, schema theory is also used to illustrate the congruent effect of previous studies, sharing the result that when there are greater similarities in the schematic knowledge of the sponsor and sponsee, more linkages in consumers' minds are likely to be formed (Keller, 1993).

Image Transfer Model

The image transfer model (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999)

originated from McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model. The meaning transfer model developed from the notion that practitioners and scholars alike misunderstand how the celebrity endorsement process works. McCracken highlighted that it is not the attractiveness and credibility of celebrities that make an endorsement work. Yet, it is the meaning, which reflects the overall representation of the celebrity to the consumers, that is transferred from the celebrities to the product and from the product to the consumers (McCracken, 1989). The meaning is established in consumers' minds by interpreting the celebrity's public image portrayed in "television, movies, military, athletics, and other careers" (McCracken, 1989, p. 315).

Gwinner and Eaton (1999) utilized McCracken's (1989) meaning transfer model to suggest that the image of sponsoring brands may also be transferred to a sporting event. Hence, he explained the effect of image transfer in two ways, through the different effects that event managers and firms may experience. Event managers should boost the image of their event and how that image may strengthen the similar image of the sponsor when the sponsors look for events with similar images to leverage most of their sponsorship dollar. The more congruent the image of both the event and the sponsor, the better the sponsorship effect (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999).

Congruent Effects on Sport Sponsorship

Image congruence is a critical factor contributing to sponsorships' effectiveness (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). For instance, a sponsorship that shows high congruence (or fit) with the sponsoring event may lead to positive brand attitudes (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Lee & Cho, 2009) and stronger consumer purchase intentions to buy the sponsor's products (Devlin & Billings, 2018; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012). However, this relationship is also affected by consumers' cognitive and affective responses (Koo et al., 2006), as well as sponsors' receptiveness and integrity (Smith et al., 2008). In addition, the fit between the event and the sponsor impacts the brand quality of the sponsor, which leads to consumers' purchase

intentions (Papadimitriou et al., 2016). However, studies have noted that sponsors with a low fit to the sponsoring events can also benefit from sponsorship and achieve positive outcomes, such as positive image and purchase intention, when an effort is made to provide positive experiences to consumers during the event (Coppetti et al., 2009; Smith, 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

However, unlike the degree of fit, when a mismatch exists between sponsors and events, negative results may occur for the sponsor, such as the transfer of the event's negative image to the sponsor (Abreu-Novais & Arcodia, 2013). In addition, in the case of endorsements provided to star athletes, even a small negative change in an athlete's public image may lead to a significant difference in the endorsed brand (Ge & Humphreys, 2021; Knittel & Stango, 2014; Lee & Koo, 2015; Um, 2013). Research has shown that when consumers transfer athlete's unethical behavior to the sponsoring brand, they may develop a negative attitude and image toward the event, as well as a reduced intention to purchase the endorsed products (Lee et al., 2015; Lee & Koo, 2015). Hence, the image of the event (or athlete) and the sponsor are intertwined, requiring an in-depth analysis of the effect of sponsorship. Although the image of both the event (or athlete) and sponsor are important in determining the impact of sponsorship, there remains a lack of research on whether the image of the sponsor—when linked to professional sports teams—simultaneously impact consumers' attitudes toward the team and sponsor. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H1: A pro-social sponsor (sponsor with a positive image) generates a more positive consumer attitude toward a sports team than an undesirable sponsor.
- H2: A pro-social sponsor (sponsor with a positive image) generates a more positive purchase intention toward a team's jersey than an undesirable sponsor.

Moderating Role of Identification with a Supporting Team

Team identification refers to the psychological connection an individual has with a particular sports team. Spectators' responses to sports games vary depending on the level of team identification. Moreover, team identification plays a key role in sports fans' consumption behavior, making it an important factor (Wann, 2006). For instance, when individuals identify with a team, they are more likely to associate themselves with the team (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and become more willing to participate in sports team consumption behaviors (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). Furthermore, regarding the sports sponsorship effect, sponsors are said to gain more sponsoring effects from those who strongly identify themselves with a sponsoring team; therefore, it is recommended that sponsors focus more on fans with higher identification with a team to ensure a greater and stable sponsoring effect (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). These sponsoring effects are based on the notion that fans' positive attitudes toward their favored teams may be transferred to sponsoring brands (Madrigal, 2001). Hence, fans' positive attitudes toward the team contribute positively to their attitudes toward the sponsor (Hong, 2011; Parker & Fink, 2010).

Drawing from the literature reviewed above, team identification is a psychological connection between fans and sports teams that can be strengthened through customer satisfaction derived from using or purchasing team-related products or services (Funk & James, 2001). This identification fulfills the consumer's need to affiliate with a desirable or successful entity and functions similarly to brand association (Wann & Dolanet, 1994; Wann & Pierce, 2005). Major sports clubs and national teams serve as sources of collective identity and influence social behaviors, emotions, and participation patterns (Elmose-Østerlund, 2019). Social media further amplifies these patterns by providing platforms for fans to express their views and emotions during events (Aloufi & El Saddik, 2018).

High identification with a team leads to increased loyalty, which is defined as a strong and sustained

commitment to the team (Özgen & Argan, 2017; Yoshida et al., 2015). Loyal fans engage in behaviors that benefit not only themselves (e.g., viewing, attending, purchasing) but also their teams and fellow fans (e.g., fan support, positive word-of-mouth, community building) (Yoshida et al., 2015). Thus, increased identification contributes to the growth and reinforcement of fan loyalty, making it crucial for sports organizations to strategically manage fan identification. Identification also acts as a mediator between the sport and fan loyalty, and serves as a key predictor of consumer behavior, such as game attendance, media consumption, and long-term affiliation with a team (Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Shapiro et al., 2013; Theodorakis et al., 2012; Trail et al., 2005).

Furthermore, loyalty explains the relationship between fans' psychological connections with a team and their constant and lasting positive attitudes and behaviors toward the team (Funk & James, 2001). Loyalty can be classified as behavioral or attitudinal. Behavioral loyalty represents purchasing behavior and game attendance, whereas attitudinal loyalty represents commitment and attitudinal preference for a team (Bauer et al., 2008; Bee & Havitz, 2010; Bodet & Bernache-Assollant, 2011; Kaynak et al., 2008). Research has shown how an individual's attitudinal loyalty affects their intention to purchase a product from the sponsor of their favored team; in other words, fans with a strong identification with their favored team are more likely to have a sponsoring effect on the sponsor's aspect (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2001). Therefore, the more committed fans sports teams have, the more attractive the team becomes for corporate sponsors (Hong, 2011).

Consumers' intention to purchase a product from a sponsoring brand is considered the most useful indicator from the sponsor's perspective to measure the sponsorship's effectiveness and impact on future sales (Crompton, 2004). Purchase intention refers to the conscious plan or effort people make to purchase a product from a sponsoring brand (Spears & Singh, 2004). Purchase intention is also a key index for sports organizations to prove the effectiveness of current sponsorships and is instrumental in negotiating future

sponsoring contracts (Hong, 2011).

Hence, previous studies have attempted to analyze how fans' identification with or loyalty toward a favored team affects the degree of the sponsoring effect. However, this study intends to take the topic further by analyzing the moderating effect of fans' identification with their favored sports teams on how changes in sponsors may affect their attitude toward a sponsor and team, as well as their intention to purchase a team's goods. Therefore, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

- H3: A consumer's team identification level moderates the consumer's attitude; a highly identified consumer exhibits a more negative drastic attitude change toward the team than a lowly identified consumer in the presence of an undesirable sponsor.
- H4: A consumer's team identification level moderates the consumer's attitude; a highly identified consumer exhibits a more negative drastic purchase intention change toward a team's jersey than a lowly identified consumer in the presence of an undesirable sponsor.

Moderating Role of Value Congruence (VC)

Another factor of interest in this study that affects consumer behavior is perceived value congruence (VC). Consumer behavior studies have indicated that consumers' purchase intention is affected not only by the product's or service's functional (utilitarian) features but also by a symbolic feature (value) (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Sirgy et al., 1997; Sirgy et al., 2000). Values are associated with status when someone (or something) is in a desirable or normative form when judged or chosen from other forms (Elizur & Sagie, 1999). Then, VC is defined as "the similarity between a consumer's own personal values and his or her perceptions of the service brand's values" (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008, p. 163). The authors also emphasized that the study of VC in marketing literature remains limited, although a growing interest in relationship marketing attempts to determine affective commitment using VC.

Several studies have illustrated the relationship between perceived VC with a brand of interest and purchase intention. For instance, when consumers' VC is met with the values that companies pursue, consumers may trust, commit, and intend to be loyal to the company's brand (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Morgan and Hunt (1994) use empirical data from automobile tire retailers to demonstrate that buyers exhibit a stronger commitment to suppliers when there is a high degree of VC between the two parties. This finding suggests that the alignment of values plays a crucial role in fostering relational commitment in business-to-business contexts. In this context, Corley et al. (2012) found that the greater the VC between consumers and brands of interest, the more likely consumers are to become loyal to the brands of interest and intend to purchase their products. Furthermore, a recent study indicated that VC contributes to behavioral intentions, such as positive word-of-mouth intentions (You & Hon, 2021).

Conversely, VC research offers general support for a positive effect on affective commitment across various disciplines. Hence, it can be inferred that consumers judge companies according to the values they pursue and intend to support companies that pursue values that are congruent with their own (Trayner, 2017). Still, it remains unclear how sports fans' perceived VC with the sponsoring corporate affect fans' attitudes toward the team they follow and their intentions to purchase the merchandise of the team of interest. Although the direction of the moderating effect of VC may vary depending on the context, previous research suggests that VC plays a moderating role in consumer behavior (e.g., commitment and purchasing behavior) based on similarity attraction theory brands (Zhang & Bloemer, 2011). Therefore, this study approach with hypotheses that has no directions, from an exploratory

perspective to provide a theoretical foundation for future research. The following hypotheses are proposed to test the moderating effect of one's VC with a sponsor of the favored team on one's attitude toward the team and sponsor, as well as the intention to purchase a team's jersey:

H5: A consumer's VC level moderates their attitude; a consumer with a high levels of congruence exhibits a more favorable attitude toward the team than a consumer with a low level of congruence, in the presence of an undesirable sponsor.

H6: A consumer's VC level moderates their attitude; a consumer with a high levels of congruence exhibits a stronger purchase intention toward a team's jersey than a consumer with a low level of congruence, in the presence of an undesirable sponsor.

Methods

Data Collection and Design of Experiments

Data were collected from a university in Busan City, Republic of Korea. A total of 183 undergraduate students participated in this study. Experiments were designed to check the effect of manipulating sponsor attributes on participants' perceptions of the sponsor and team and their intention to purchase a team's jersey. Based on the existing team in the Korean professional baseball league, Lotte Giants, scenario-based news articles were prepared to portray sponsor attributes as original, pro-social, and undesirable. In addition to the original sponsor (Lotte Corp.; original sponsor-Lotte Giants' parent company), two artificial sponsors were generated, and each participant was given a scenario

Table 1. Design of the experiment: Scenario Description

Sponsor type	Description
Original	Giants decided to stay with the original sponsor
Pro-social	Giants decided to switch sponsor to JESCO, described as a pro-social corporation
Undesirable	Giants decided to switch sponsor to JESCO, described as an undesirable corporation (personal finance loan corporate)

of Lotte Giants' changing the sponsor. Each new sponsor was designed with a good image (JESCO, a pro-social corporation) and an undesirable image (JESCO, a personal finance loan company).

Procedure

Participants were independently assigned to each scenario (original, pro-social, and undesirable sponsors). After reading the scenario, participants were asked about their perceptions of the (new) sponsor, team, and jersey purchase intentions. Each participant was exposed to a single scenario independently. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. Next, the results (participants' perceptions of the sponsor, team, and jersey purchase intentions) were compared among the groups using multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA). Post-hoc analyses were conducted to identify statistically significant differences among the results of the experiment groups.

Results

Pilot Test

Prior to testing the hypotheses, a pre-test was conducted using the manipulated jersey without sharing the scenario to test whether the manipulation effect existed. Eighty-two participants from the same university participated in the pilot study. Participants were shown one of two pictures of uniforms: one with an original jersey and one with a manipulated jersey with an artificial sponsor. They were asked to share their attitudes toward the team and purchase intentions for the jersey. The results indicate that there is no significant manipulation effect between uniform types (Table 2).

Manipulation Checks

Next, the authors conducted manipulation checks to determine whether adding the scenario of changes in sponsors—in other words, adding sponsor attributes (original/pro-social/undesirable) to scenarios, in addition to showing the picture of a uniform with a changed sponsor—would affect participants' attitudes toward the sponsor. The participants were asked about the sponsor's image with questions such as "I think JESCO is a good company," "I happen to be fond of JESCO," "I have a positive attitude toward JESCO," and "I like JESCO," rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 7 being ("Strongly Agree"). The results indicate significant mean differences in attitudes depending on sponsor attributes ($M_{\text{original}} = 4.294$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.507$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 2.319$, $df = 2$, $F = 31.550$, $p = .000$), and post-hoc verification results confirmed that statistically significant differences existed among all groups. In addition, Bartlett's test of homogeneity of variances confirmed that the assumption of equal variances across groups was met ($p = .899$). This result shows that the manipulation of the type of sponsor attributes is well established (Table 3).

Main Effects of Sponsor Attributes (original/pro-social/undesirable)

The main effects of sponsor attributes on consumers' attitudes toward the team and jersey purchase intention were tested. The MANOVA showed a significant main effect of sponsor attributes on consumers' attitudes toward the team and jersey purchase intention. The results indicated that participants who read the scenario in which the team would change its sponsor contract to the pro-social corporate showed a more positive

Table 2. Pilot study: Uniform type and consumers' perceptions

Variables	Sponsor Type	Mean	<i>t</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i> -value)
Consumers' attitudes toward the team	Original	4.51	-1.04	.30
	Manipulated	4.18		
Consumers' jersey purchase intention	Original	2.83	-.63	.53
	Manipulated	3.07		

Table 3. Manipulation Checks

Variables	Sponsor Type	Mean	<i>F</i>	Sig. (<i>p</i> -value)
Consumers' attitudes toward the team	Original	4.294	31.550	.000
	Pro-social	3.507		
	Undesirable	2.319		
Post Hoc (Comparison)				
Comparison	Difference	<i>p</i>	LCL	UCL
Original - Pro-social	.787	.006	-1.395	-.178
Original - Undesirable	1.975	.000	1.362	2.587
Pro-social - Undesirable	1.188	.000	.618	1.758

attitude toward the team ($M_{\text{original}} = 4.672$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.325$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 2.015$, $F = 73.491$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$). Moreover, participants who read the scenario in which the team would change its sponsor to a personal financing company (an undesirable company) had the lowest jersey purchase intention ($M_{\text{original}} = 3.471$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 2.786$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 1.918$, $F = 16.100$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$). Hence, H1 and H2 are supported by participants who read the scenario with pro-social sponsor attributes, showing both a more positive attitude toward the team and a higher jersey purchase intention than those who read negative sponsor attributes.

Moderating Effects of Team Identification and Value Congruence

The results revealed a significant moderating effect of team identification on consumers' attitudes toward the team and their jersey purchase intention (Figure 1). Considering consumers' team identification, participants who identified themselves more with the

team showed more positive drastic changes in attitude toward the team ($M_{\text{original}} = 5.365$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.400$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 2.220$) than those with less identification ($M_{\text{original}} = 4.056$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.242$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 1.888$, $df = 2$, $F = 4.571$, $p = .011$). Considering the moderating role of consumers' team identification on consumers' purchase intention of team's jersey, participants who identified themselves more with the team showed more drastic changes in attitude toward the team ($M_{\text{original}} = 4.819$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.333$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 2.147$) than those with less identification ($M_{\text{original}} = 2.272$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 2.188$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 1.775$, $df = 2$, $F = 8.454$, $p = .000$). Hence, H3 and H4 are supported.

A significant moderating effect of VC was found only in consumers' attitudes toward the team (Figure 2). The more congruent the value between the consumer and the sponsor was, the more strongly this congruence contributed to the establishment of favorable attitudes toward the team ($M_{\text{original}} = 4.642$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 3.974$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 3.000$) compared to participants with lower levels of congruence (M_{original}

Table 4. Results of Hypotheses tests

	Attitude toward Team			Purchase intention of Jersey		
	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig.	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Sponsor type	2	73.491	.000	2	16.100	.000
Sponsor type × Identification	2	4.571	.011	2	8.454	.000
Sponsor type × Congruence	2	6.132	.002	2	.344	.853
Sponsor type × Identification × Congruence	2	1.661	.193	2	1.349	.262

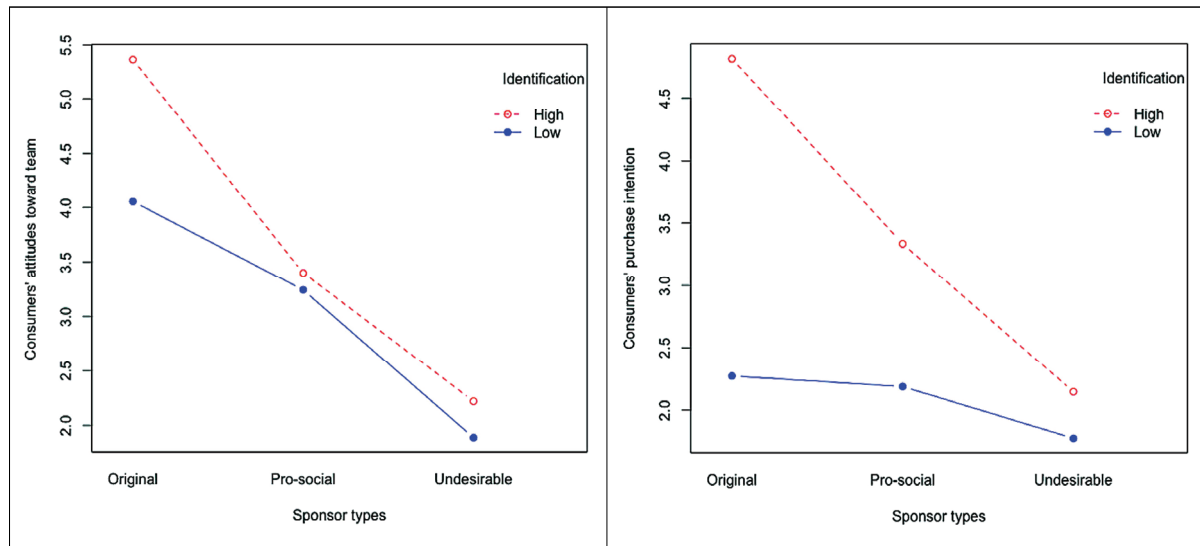


Figure 1. The moderating role of consumer-team identification level

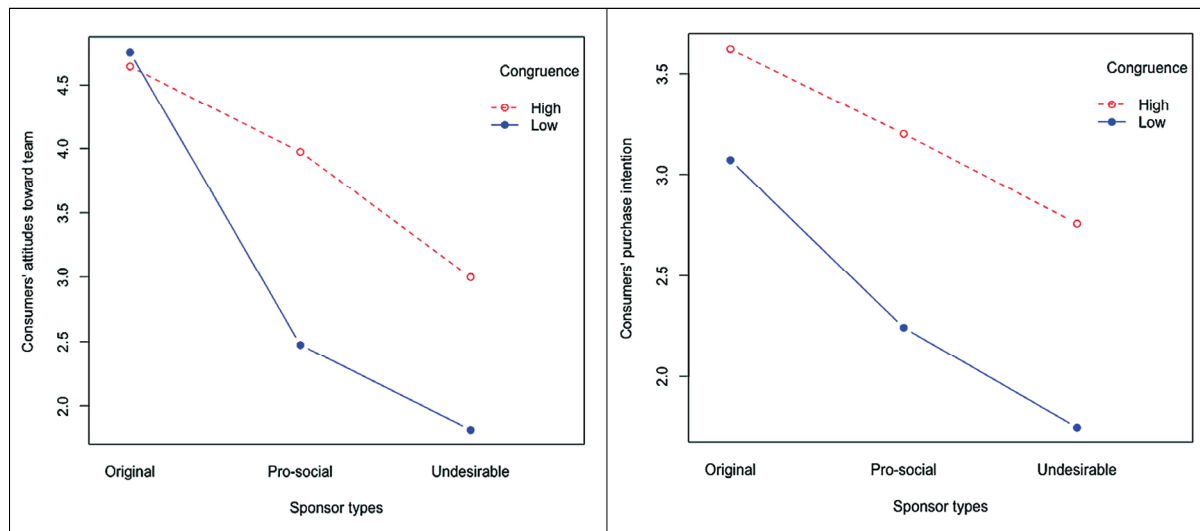


Figure 2. The moderating role of consumer's value congruence level

$= 4.750$, $M_{\text{pro-social}} = 2.474$, $M_{\text{undesirable}} = 1.815$, $df = 2$, $F = 6.132$, $p = .002$). On the other hand, considering the moderating role of consumers' congruence level on their intention to purchase the team's jersey, perceived value congruence did not have a moderating effect on consumers' purchase intention ($df = 2$, $F = .344$, $p = .853$). Hence, H5 is supported, but H6 is not.

Discussion

Discussion and Implications

Previous studies have shown that sports teams' sponsors affect consumers' perceptions of the team in various ways (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Hong, 2011; Lee & Cho, 2009; Parker & Fink, 2010) as well as the intention to purchase sponsor-related merchandise

(Devlin & Billings, 2018; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012). However, due to the scarcity of studies on whether sports teams' sponsors affect consumers' intention to purchase merchandise related to the sports teams they follow—especially when the sponsor is changed to an undesirable sponsor—this study strives to extend the findings of previous studies by empirically testing the impact of three attributes of a sports team's sponsor (original/pro-social/undesirable) on consumers' attitudes toward the team and their intention to purchase the team's jersey. Moreover, previous studies have indicated the significance of the effects of consumers' identification toward the team (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998) and the importance of consumers' and corporates' value congruity (Corley et al., 2012; Trayner, 2017; You & Hon, 2021) on consumers' attitude toward the company and corporates' product purchase intention. Therefore, this study expands on previous research by analyzing the moderating effect of team identification and value congruity on consumers' attitudes toward the team and their intention to purchase teams' jerseys.

Our findings suggest that there are significant differences in consumers' attitudes toward the team and intention to purchase the team's jersey depending on sponsor's attributes. These results can be explained by previous studies that showed how the congruence (or fit) of the sponsor and the event affects consumers' attitudes (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Lee & Cho, 2009) and purchase intention to buy the sponsor's product (Devlin & Billings, 2018; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012). Furthermore, in line with previous studies, our findings also implied that between sponsors with undesirable and pro-social images, participants exhibited a more positive attitude and higher intention to purchase the jersey of the sponsor with a pro-social image than with an undesirable image. However, when comparing the effect of a sponsor's image, our findings showed that consumers exhibited the most positive attitude and the highest intention to purchase a jersey when the sponsor did not change. Hence, our study's findings provide suggestions in two ways: while it may be best for the teams to avoid changing sponsors to maintain a positive brand image and purchase intention,

when a change is necessary, consumers prefer to have a sponsor with a pro-social image rather than an undesirable image.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the more sports fans identify with the team, the more their attitudes toward the team and intention to purchase the team's jersey are influenced by the sponsor's attributes. These results expand the findings of previous studies on how team identification affects team consumption behavior (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and how attitudes toward the team are shared with the sponsor (Hong, 2011; Parker & Fink, 2010). In line with these studies, our results emphasize that when highly identifying fans face a change in the sponsor of the team they follow, their purchase intention is more strongly affected than that of low-identifying fans. Furthermore, while the gap between the purchase intention of the sponsor and an undesirable sponsor is not large, with both high- and low-identifying fans unwilling to buy the jersey, when the sponsor is changed to a pro-social one, the gap increases. Interestingly, the gap is largest when the sponsor remains the same.

The findings also suggest that fans who perceive greater VC with the sponsor are more affected in their attitude toward the team, depending on the sponsor's attributes. Interestingly, fans' value congruity did not significantly affect the mean differences in jersey purchase intention. Zhang and Bloemer (2008) stated that the more consumer value is in line with that of companies, the more consumers become loyal and may commit themselves to the companies. Our study develops on the results of previous studies by examining the relationship between fans' value congruity toward the sports team and their attitudes toward the team during a sponsor change. Intriguingly, although the attitude toward the team shows similarities between fans who share high- or low-value congruity with the team when the team stays with the same sponsor, the attitude of low-identifying fans becomes drastically low when there is a change in the sponsor, regardless of its attributes. Moreover, the gap between high- and low-value congruent fans in their attitudes toward the team with a changed sponsor does not change significantly depending on the sponsors' attributes.

Hence, the results suggest that no matter how much congruity fans have with the changing sponsor, the team will find it difficult to expect any positive outcomes compared with a situation in which the sponsor remains the same.

A practical implication of this study's findings is that it may be difficult to expect positive outcomes from a sponsor change, regardless of fans' identification with the team and the share of perceived values. Our findings show that the scores were highest when the sponsor remained the same, regardless of the conditions. Hence, while it is best not to change the sponsor, teams should consider the value attributes of the sponsor if there is a need to do so. Participants in our study showed that when the sponsor changed to a socially undesirable one, they exhibited strong negative attitudes toward the team and weak jersey purchase intentions. Hence, in the long run, receiving socially undesirable sponsorships, such as sports betting companies, may immediately bring financial benefits to teams. However, fans may not continue to identify with the team or intend to purchase a team's jersey.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study strives to provide empirical insights, issues may be found, and there is room for future study development. First, only one team from the Korean professional baseball league was included in the experiment. Thus, caution should be exercised when extrapolating these findings to broader baseball teams in general and to other sports leagues and countries. Hence, future research should examine other Korean professional baseball league teams or teams in other countries. Second, some features of sports teams, such as their performance and how well the players engage with their fans, may affect the team's image, which in turn may affect the acceptance of sponsor change. For instance, fans may not be interested in changing the sponsor of a team that is not performing well or engaging with fans. Therefore, an expansion of the model that considers these features is proposed.

Author Contributions

Seongyeon Shin developed the theoretical background for the research model and conducted the experiment. The data were analyzed by Seongyeon Shin. Seongyeon Shin and Kibaek Kim wrote the manuscript. Revising and editing of the manuscript was carried out by Seongyeon Shin.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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