

Do sponsoring brand familiarity and credibility matter in professional sport league website sponsorship?

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Abstract

Sport sponsorship has been significantly growing in the global sport industry and is expected to reach \$108 billion by 2030 (Mills, 2024). Kim, Walker, Heo, and Koo (2017) found that perceived website interactivity, website fit, and website credibility influence consumers' attitudes toward the corporate sponsor advertisement and their willingness to click on its banner advertisement to search for more information on the corporate sponsor product. Furthermore, Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Geus (2006) found that consumers who are aware of a brand have a more positive perception of that brand than consumers who do not know about that brand. In addition, Lafferty (2007) found that corporate credibility was not only positively related to consumers' attitudes toward its advertisement, but also the advertising brand and purchase intentions. Despite the significant impact of brand familiarity and brand credibility in the advertising and sponsorship context, no empirical research has examined how brand familiarity and brand credibility play an important role in consumer behavior in the context of online sport sponsorship for a professional sport league website. The researcher developed the four versions of a mock NBA website that respectively feature the four different corporate sponsors including Mountain Dew, Kia, Foot Locker, and Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA). The first page of the mock NBA website was the main page. The second page was composed of the 30-second commercial and banner advertisement of each corporate sponsor. The third page included the 3-minute game highlight video as well as the sponsor banner advertisement. Consumers who were more familiar with the sponsoring brand (i.e., Mountain Dew) were more likely to spread positive information on the product of the corporate sponsor by word of mouth than consumers who were less familiar with the sponsoring brand (i.e., Kia). In addition, these high brand familiarity consumers were more likely to express their intention to purchase the product of the corporate sponsor than those low brand familiarity consumers. Also, research participants who perceived the sponsoring brand as credible (i.e., Foot Locker) while viewing its commercial, banner advertisements, and game highlight video on the NBA website demonstrated a stronger intention to purchase the corporate sponsor's product. However, brand credibility did not strongly impact word of mouth in the study. The findings suggest that both professional sports leagues and their corporate sponsors should consider consumers' familiarity with the sponsoring brands and their perceptions of the sponsors' credibility as critical factors.

Key Words: Online sponsorship, professional sports, brand familiarity, brand credibility, consumer behavior

Introduction

Sport sponsorship has been significantly growing in the global sport industry and is expected to reach \$108 billion by 2030 (Mills, 2024). High-profile sport leagues and teams have offered their website to corporate sponsors that have been utilized as an effective marketing and communication tool to reach out to their consumers. Previous research found that there are three factors of a professional sport league website which include perceived website interactivity, website fit, and website credibility. These factors influence consumers' attitudes toward the corporate sponsor advertisement and their willingness to click on its banner advertisement to search for more information on the corporate sponsor product (Kim, Walker, Heo, & Koo, 2017). In addition, many sport fans use portable electronic gadgets, such as mobile phones, tablets, and laptop computers, to watch their favorite sport games. Therefore, companies that want to be involved in sport sponsorship should take advantage of utilizing this newly emerging digital marketing communication to connect with sport fans (Pakk & Karjaluo, 2023).

Another research found that sport fans who frequently visit their favorite sport team's website are more likely to have a positive attitude toward its corporate sponsor and strong purchase intentions for the sponsor's products (Koroniosa, Dimitropoulos, Travlos, Douvis, & Vanessa Ratten, 2020). Researchers discovered that in the online food sponsor category, promoting a healthy food sponsor on a sport team's website not only

enhances positive brand awareness among consumers but also reduces their preference for unhealthy food products. (Dixon, Scully, Wakefield, Kelly, & Pettigrew, 2017). During the COVID pandemic period, many professional sport leagues played their season without their spectators. Sport fans had only consumed sport contents via digital media.

Corporate sponsors that leveraged the social media of a professional sport league were able to build stronger relationships with their consumers and satisfy them in the competitive sponsorship environment (Mastromartino & Naraine, 2021). Aguilo-Lemoine, Rejón-Guardia, and García-Sastre (2020) also found that corporate sponsors who are more congruent with sport event websites are more likely to generate high brand recall, positive attitude toward the sponsor brand, and intent to purchase sponsor products.

In addition to the online sport sponsorship research, brand familiarity has been widely studied in advertising literature including online platforms. Previous research found that consumers who are familiar with a certain brand are more likely to have a positive attitude toward that brand than consumers who are not familiar with that brand. Also, consumers who are aware of a brand have a more positive perception of that brand than consumers who do not know about that brand (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006; Laroche, Kim & Zhou, 1996). Additionally, consumers who have a positive perception of the brand image are more likely to be satisfied with that brand and have strong intent to purchase the products of the brand.

In the context of traditional sport event sponsorship and consumer behavior, research examined whether there are significant differences between consumers who are familiar with a corporate sponsor brand and consumers who are not familiar with that brand. It was found that the consumer group familiar with the sponsoring brand is likely to show more positive word-of-mouth about the corporate sponsor than the consumer group whose brand familiarity is low (Soderlund, 2002). Furthermore, a study found that brand familiarity influences image elaboration for online apparel-shopping consumers and has an impact on the synergy of online and offline marketing programs (Yu, Cho, & Johnson, 2017). Familiar brands particularly were more influential in the online marketing program than the combination of the online and offline marketing program (Pauwels, Demirci, Yildirim, & Srinivasan, 2016). Despite these research findings, little empirical research on the impact of brand familiarity has been conducted in the context of online sponsorship for a professional sport league website. Therefore, based on the significant effect of brand familiarity on consumer behavior in the field of advertising and sponsorship, the current study established the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Consumers who are more familiar with the sponsoring brand will be more likely to spread positive information on the product of the corporate sponsor by word of mouth than consumers who are less familiar with the sponsoring brand.*

Hypothesis 2: *Consumers who are more familiar with the sponsoring brand will be more likely to purchase the product of the corporate sponsor than consumers who are less familiar with the sponsoring brand.*

In addition to the important role of brand familiarity in the advertising and sponsorship studies, many researchers found the significant impact of brand credibility on consumer behavior. For example, Keller (1998) defined corporate credibility as "... the extent to which consumers believe a firm can design and deliver products that satisfy customers' needs and wants" (p. 426). According to MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), if consumers perceive a sponsoring company as sincere, that perception positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the advertisement that the company promotes. Several studies (e.g., Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Lafferty, 2007) found that corporate credibility was not only positively related to consumers' attitudes toward its advertisement, but also the advertising brand and purchase intentions. In an online platform, the credibility of an advertising company has been found to significantly influence consumers' perception of the advertisement's credibility, attitude toward the brand, and intent to purchase an advertised product (Choi & Rifon, 2002). Also, Shams, Brown, and Alpert (2017) found that brand credibility helps build the relationship between brand innovativeness and purchase intention.

In international apparel market research, the positive relationship between endorser credibility and brand credibility was found to enhance consumer attitudes toward the brand and increase their intent to purchase its products (Chin, Isa, & Alodin, 2020). In the emerging platform of influencer marketing strategy, Lee and Kim (2020) also found that brand credibility positively affects the effectiveness of Instagram promotional posts. Despite the significant impact of brand credibility in the advertising and sponsorship context, no empirical research has examined how brand credibility plays an important role in consumer behavior in the context of online sport sponsorship for a professional sport league website. Therefore, based on the previous research findings, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 3: *Consumers who perceive the sponsoring brand to be a more credible brand will be more likely to spread positive information on the product of the corporate sponsor by word of mouth than consumers who perceive the sponsoring brand to be a less credible brand.*

Hypothesis 4: *Consumers who perceive the sponsoring brand to be a more credible brand will be more likely to purchase the product of the corporate sponsor than consumers who perceive the sponsoring brand to be a less credible brand.*

Materials and Methods

This study chose the National Basketball Association (NBA) as its research context for the following reasons. It is one of the five major professional sport leagues in the United States. The league is regarded as the most globally popular sport organization in the World, and approximately 48 million people visited its website (McMurray, 2023). NBA fans are more receptive to corporate sponsor activations compared to other consumers, offering substantial advantages to sponsoring brands (Mees, 2024). Therefore, many large national and international corporations have made sponsorship contracts with the league.

To test the hypotheses via experimental survey design, the researcher developed the four versions of a mock NBA website that respectively feature the four different corporate sponsors including Mountain Dew, Kia, Foot Locker, and Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA). Each version of the mock NBA website looks the same as the original one. During the data collection, each of the corporate sponsors had been the official sponsor for the NBA, and therefore their commercial and banner advertisements had frequently appeared before and during game highlight videos on the NBA website. The first page of the mock NBA website was the main page as described in figure 1. The second page was composed of the 30-second commercial and banner advertisement of each corporate sponsor as described in figure 2. The third page included the 3-minute game highlight video as well as the sponsor banner advertisement as described in figure 3. To control the effect of a particular team on consumer behavior, this study chose the general weekly highlight video that features all league games.



Figure 1. First page of mock NBA website

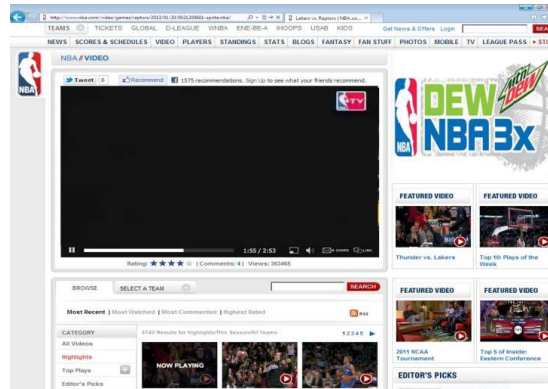


Figure 2. Second page of mock NBA website

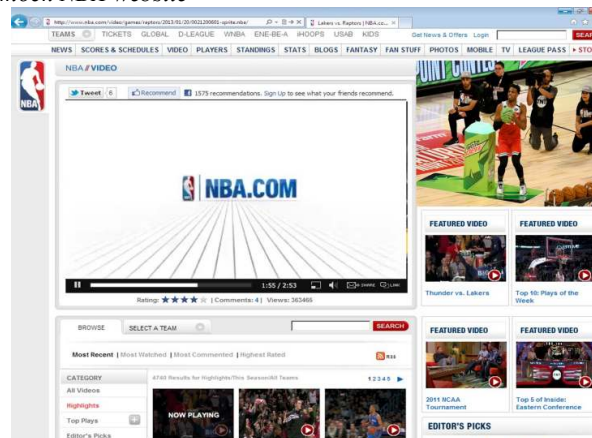


Figure 3. Third page of mock NBA website

The current study conveniently drew the sample from a large public university in the Southern United States. College student samples seem to be appropriate for the study. According to Petrosian (2023), 98 percent of college students and graduates in the United States use online platforms for different purposes such as education, entertainment, and shopping. Many of these students regularly enjoy watching video clips of sports game highlights (Giorgio, Jarvis, Auxier, Bobich, & Harwood, 2023).

The researcher provided each research participant with an informed consent letter that explained the purpose and procedure of the study. Based on the instructions, each research participant was randomly assigned to one of the four mock NBA websites and asked to navigate the three predetermined webpages on the university library computer. For example, on the first page, each participant clicked on the “top plays of the week” clip to move to the second page. On the second page, the participant was asked to click on the video clip that shows the 30-second commercial of a chosen corporate sponsor. After watching it, the participant was asked to click on any highlight video clip below the sponsor’s banner advertisement and move to the third page. On the third page, the participant clicked on the game highlight video clip and watched the three-minute game highlight video. After watching the video, each participant filled out a paper survey questionnaire. The researcher included a selection question that asked each research participant to recall the name of a sponsoring brand on the website.

The current study adopted reliable and valid scales that were previously used in other studies as described in table 1. For example, brand familiarity was measured with two items adapted from Laroche, Kim, and Zhou (1996). Three items were adapted from Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) to examine corporate credibility. Word of mouth and purchase intentions were measured by adopting the existing three-item scales from Walker and Kent (2009). All of these scales were anchored from 1 (i.e., strongly disagree) to 7 (i.e., strongly agree). All internal consistency scores for each scale were adequate (ranging from $\alpha=.85$ to .93).

Table 1. *Measures and Reliability* Questionnaire

Factor and Items	α
Brand Credibility	.89
The corporate sponsor is an organization with a strong value system	
The corporate sponsor is an organization that I can trust	
The corporate sponsor is an organization that I believe in	
Brand Familiarity	.85
I have enough information about the sponsor to make informed judgment about whether to buy their product	
I have enough experience with the corporate sponsor to make a rational judgment about whether to buy their products	
Word of Mouth	.93
I will favorably speak about the corporate sponsor to others	
I will encourage others to buy the corporate sponsor products	
I will encourage others to support the corporate sponsor	
Purchase Intention	.93
I will buy the product of the corporate sponsor in the future	
I will buy the corporate sponsor’s products or merchandise	
I will buy other products and services of the corporate sponsor	

This study used the IBM SPSS 28.0 program to analyze data. T-tests were employed to examine whether there were significant differences of word of mouth and purchase intentions between the higher brand familiarity group (i.e., Mountain Dew) and the lower brand familiarity group (i.e., Kia). T-tests were also used to examine whether there were significant differences of word of mouth and purchase intentions between the higher brand credibility group (i.e., Foot Locker) and the lower brand credibility group (i.e., BBVA). The researcher considered brand familiarity to be the independent variable in the first t-test and brand credibility to be the independent variable in the second t-test, while considering word of mouth and purchase intentions to be the dependent variables in both analyses. The sample size of each group which ranged from 25 to 33 met the rule of thumb for conducting a t-test (Field, 2024).

Results

In terms of the demographic information, 60% were male ($n=68$), 53% were White ($n=60$), and 43% were African American ($n=48$). Ages ranged from 18 to 48 ($M=22.14$, $SD=3.29$). The researcher visually checked histograms and found that the data did not violate the assumption of normality. In addition, no outlier was found. Lavene’s test was also used to inspect homoscedasticity. The analysis indicated no violation of the assumption. After these preliminary analyses, this study conducted the main analyses (i.e., t-test). First, the 33 participants who were individually exposed to the 30-second commercial and banner advertisements of Mountain Dew ($M=5.15$, $SD=1.78$) compared with the 28 participants who were individually exposed to the 30-second commercial and banner advertisements of Kia ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.26$) showed significantly higher brand familiarity scores, $t(59) = 5.11$, $p < .001$ as described in table 2. In addition, the Mountain Dew group ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.54$) reported higher levels of word of mouth than the Kia group ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(59) = 2.22$, $p = .015$ as described in table 3. Furthermore, the Mountain Dew group showed higher scores of purchase intention ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.68$) compared with the Kia group ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(59) = 3.71$, $p < .001$ as described in table 3. Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported.

Table 2. Group-Based Comparison of Brand Familiarity Measure

Measure	Mountain Dew		Kia		<i>t</i> (59)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Brand familiarity	5.15	1.79	3.09	1.27	5.11	.001	1.31

Table 3. Group-Based Comparison of Consumer Behavior Measures

Measures	Mountain Dew		Kia		<i>t</i> (59)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Word of mouth	4.60	1.54	3.69	1.63	2.22	.015	0.57
Purchase intention	4.89	1.68	3.31	1.63	3.71	.001	0.95

Second, the 27 participants who were individually exposed to the 30-second commercial and banner advertisements of Foot Locker ($M=4.15$, $SD=1.22$) compared with the 25 participants who were individually exposed to the 30-second commercial and banner advertisements of BBVA ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.06$) showed significantly higher brand credibility scores, $t(50) = 2.94$, $p = .003$ as described in table 4. In addition, the Foot Locker group showed higher scores of purchase intention ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.80$) compared with the BBVA group ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(50) = 2.20$, $p = .016$ as described in table 5. Therefore, hypothesis 4 was supported. However, there was no significant difference of word of mouth between the Foot Locker group ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.49$) and the BBVA group ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.39$), $t(50) = 0.67$, $p = .252$ as described in table 5. Therefore, hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Table 4. Group-Based Comparison of Brand Credibility Measure

Measure	Foot Locker		BBVA		<i>t</i> (50)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Brand credibility	4.15	1.22	3.21	1.06	2.94	.003	0.82

Table 5. Group-Based Comparison of Consumer Behavior Measures

Measures	Foot Locker		BBVA		<i>t</i> (50)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Word of mouth	4.46	1.49	4.19	1.39	0.67	.252	0.19
Purchase intention	4.59	1.80	3.61	1.36	2.20	.016	0.61

Discussion

The results of the current study supported the critical function of sponsoring brand familiarity on consumer behavior in the context of the sponsorship for the professional sport league website. In other words, consumers who were more familiar with the sponsoring brand (i.e., Mountain Dew) were more likely to spread positive information on the product of the corporate sponsor by word of mouth than consumers who were less familiar with the sponsoring brand (i.e., Kia).

In addition, these high brand familiarity consumers were more likely to express their intention to purchase the product of the corporate sponsor (i.e., Mountain Dew) than those low brand familiarity consumers (i.e., Kia). This research finding aligns with earlier studies conducted in different contexts (Pauwels, Demirci, Yildirim & Srinivasan, 2016; Soderlund, 2002; Yu, Cho, & Johnson, 2017), which have established a positive relationship between brand familiarity and patronage intention. In other words, research participants who perceived a higher level of brand familiarity, while watching its commercial and banner advertisements as well as the game highlight video on the NBA website, were likely to show more positive word of mouth about the sponsoring brand and stronger purchase intention for the product of the corporate sponsor.

Furthermore, this research found that brand credibility plays an important role in predicting consumer behavior in the context of the online sponsorship for the professional sport league. Research participants who perceived the sponsoring brand as credible while viewing its commercial, banner advertisements, and game highlight video on the NBA website demonstrated a stronger intention to purchase the corporate sponsor's product. This result supported the previous research findings (Chin, Isa, & Alodin, 2019; Choi & Rifon, 2002; Lee & Kim, 2020) and suggested that research participants evaluate the online advertisements and products of the corporate sponsor based on the credibility of the sponsoring brand as a source for information delivery.

However, in contrast to hypothesis 3, brand credibility did not strongly impact word of mouth in the study. One potential explanation for this non-significant result is that word of mouth can be influenced by economic incentives (Shen, Huang, & Lee, 2016). In this study, the research participants were not provided any incentives by watching the commercial and banner advertisements of the corporate sponsor on the NBA website. Consequently, this might lead to a non-significant result in this study. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that if corporate sponsors like Foot Locker and BBVA created commercials and banner advertisements that included incentives—such as gift cards, promotional codes, discounts, or sweepstakes—these incentives would likely encourage research participants to engage in more substantial word of mouth promotion, which could be further enhanced by higher brand credibility (i.e., Foot Locker).

Conclusions

This study offers practical insights for sports marketers. To anticipate consumer behavior related to sponsorship on one of the five major sports league websites (such as the NBA), the findings suggest that both professional sports leagues and their corporate sponsors should consider consumers' familiarity with the sponsoring brands and their perceptions of the sponsors' credibility as critical factors for the following reasons.

First, to ensure successful online sponsorship results for both existing and potential corporate sponsors, it is essential to select corporate brands that consumers recognize. Consequently, it is recommended that both potential sponsors and professional sports leagues assess the familiarity of sports fans—who are the target consumers for corporate sponsors—that are regular users of the league's website with the brand before entering into a sponsorship agreement. Although this statement appears intuitive, many companies enter the sport sponsorship industry without a solid marketing strategy and fail to achieve a return on investment (Lawley, 2024). For instance, it is reasonable to assert that the participants in this study, who were college students, were more familiar with Mountain Dew than with Kia, as they likely encounter Mountain Dew products in their daily lives far more often than they would purchase a vehicle from Kia, which might occur only once in a lifetime. Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that sponsoring brands familiar to fans on professional sports league websites generate more favorable consumer patronage intentions, such as word of mouth promotion and purchase intent.

Second, to maximize the effectiveness of their sponsorship, both sponsors and sponsees should consider the study's findings regarding the crucial role of the sponsoring brand's credibility in influencing consumer behavior in online professional sports league sponsorship. Fans who frequently watch game highlight videos on the NBA website typically overlook the sponsor's advertisements, such as commercials and banner advertisements. However, once they click on a highlight video clip, they have no option to skip the commercial that plays. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that these consumers may develop an interest in viewing and assessing the corporate advertisements presented to them. In today's environment, consumers are inundated with a multitude of advertising messages, resulting in diminished impact for each advertisement (Mosa, 2022). However, when consumers have an established perception of the advertising (or sponsoring) brand's credibility, it can help overcome this clutter and capture the audience's attention (Liang, 2023). Thus, this research finding highlights the importance for current and potential corporate sponsors to recognize that building trust with consumers can enhance their intention to purchase the sponsor's product. Additionally, it is advisable for professional sports leagues to select companies that fans perceive as credible. By doing so, the leagues can better assist corporate sponsors in achieving favorable consumer purchase intentions, ultimately increasing their return on investment in online professional sports sponsorship.

Despite the implications discussed, there are some limitations to the current research findings. For instance, this study focused on measuring participants' behavioral intention variables, such as word of mouth and purchase intention. Future research should investigate actual purchasing behavior of the sponsoring brands' products to identify significant differences in this outcome variable between the high brand familiarity and low brand familiarity groups, as well as between the high brand credibility and low brand credibility groups. Additionally, since this study utilized a cross-sectional design, it is recommended that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to enhance the generalizability of the findings and assess whether purchasing behavior varies over time, along with identifying any influencing variables on this behavior. Furthermore, the data for this study were conveniently collected from a university in the southern United States. Given that the NBA is the most globally popular professional sport league, it would be interesting and valuable for future researchers to employ a cross-cultural research design, gathering data from countries across various continents and cultural contexts to examine how cultural factors impact consumer behavior among diverse populations.

Conflicts of interest - The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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