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Conceptual distinctions in general and local sponsorship objectives

A qualitative inquiry

Gregg Rich, Jori N. Hall, and Billy J. Hawkins

Introduction

Sponsorship has been defined “as the provision of assistance either financial or in-kind to an activity by a commercial organization for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives” (Meenaghan, 1983, p. 9). According to Gardner and Shuman (1988), sponsorship can be implemented to “support corporate objectives (e.g. enhancing corporate image) or marketing objectives (e.g. increasing brand awareness)” (p. 44). Through securing category exclusivity in sponsorships and integrating them within their overall marketing strategies, companies are believed capable of establishing distinct and sustainable competitive advantages in their markets (Amis, Pant, & Slack 1997; Amis, Slack, & Berrett, 1999; Fahy, Farrelly, & Quester, 2004). Consequently, companies continue to invest resources towards securing sponsorships. Global sponsorship spending in 2017 is expected to reach \$62.8 billion, with North American spending to represent 37 percent of that projection (IEGSR, 2017). Sponsorship spending is anticipated to continue increasing. Over the past four years, global spending for sponsorships has grown at an approximate annual rate of 4.3 percent (IEGSR, 2017).

As company investments into sponsorships increase, marketing expenditure accountability has received greater managerial emphasis (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). Yet, the characteristic that arguably produces sponsorship’s importance within the marketing mix, its integration with other marketing mediums, creates challenges in effectively isolating and measuring its returns (Pearsall, 2010). While there has been question as to whether practitioners truly desire to understand sponsorship returns (Javalgi, Traylor, Gross, & Lampman, 1994), some scholars (Cornwell, 2008; Meenaghan, McLoughlin, & McCormack, 2013) suggest that measurement difficulties may be attributable to an incomplete understanding of their effects.

Furthermore, sponsorship leveraging practices are continually evolving with the emergence of social media and other new technologies (Meenaghan et al., 2013). In 2016, to support its partnership with NCAA March Madness, and create brand interaction with college students, Reese’s

created a multi-platform, social media campaign. The candy manufacturer posted content on Twitter and Facebook that utilized streaming videos and cleverly positioned copy that engaged fans with entertaining commentary throughout the tournament. These social “chatter” initiatives were coupled with an Instagram contest and a Snapchat promotion (Social Media Fuze, 2016). As an activation approach in support of its NBA partnership, American Express allowed fans to experience the signature moves and personal stories of four NBA players using interactive digital video. During NBA All-Star Weekend in New York, fans could pivot around life-size digital representations of John Wall, Anthony Davis, LaMarcus Aldridge, and Mason Plumlee as they performed passes, dunks, and drives; allowing fans the ability to experience the players from vantage points of their own preference (O’Loughlin, 2016).

Opportunities for consumer brand interaction through social media and emerging technologies continue to increase. With new tools and resources for leveraging and activating sponsorships, opportunities for sponsors to engage and interact with individuals in new and different ways may be created. This evolution is reflected in academic literature. Earlier investigations of the phenomenon generally adopted a traditional marketing mix approach (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Olkkonen, Tikkanen, & Alajoutsijärvi, 2000; Walliser, 2003); whereas, scholars now acknowledge that sponsorship’s common elements – fostering strategic, long-term relationships and incorporating interactive marketing communications – align more with relationship marketing practices (Cousens, Babiak, & Bradish, 2006; Grönroos, 1994).

The frequently-cited challenges of obtaining objective, quantitatively-calculated, and transactional returns (Pearsall, 2010) is likely to continue as companies use their sponsorships as interactive, relationship management platforms. In other words, measurement challenges may reflect a misalignment between sponsorship objectives and their measurement practices, or measurement practices inadequately capturing sponsorship leveraging practices. Sponsorship objectives are chiefly important because they generally serve as the basis for how companies develop their leveraging practices and evaluate sponsorship success (Chadwick & Thwaites, 2004). In short, sponsorship objectives are the foundation of sponsorship management and evaluation processes. Additionally, given their foundational importance, it is reasonable to assume that companies’ sponsorship decision-makers use selection criteria that reference back to these objectives (Figure 14.1).

Review of literature

Research on sponsorship objectives has revealed similar findings (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Walliser, 2003). Previous studies regularly reference increasing brand awareness (Abratt, Clayton, & Pitt, 1987; Crowley, 1991; Quester,

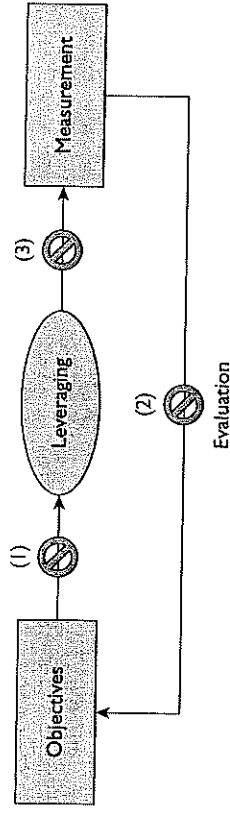


Figure 14.1 Identified areas for sport sponsorship evaluation misalignment

Farrelly, & Burton, 1998), enhancing brand or product image (Mihalik 1984; Polonsky et al., 1995), and entertaining clients (Scott & Suchard, 1992) as primary sponsorship objectives. Sponsorship selection criteria heavily mirror these objectives. Common criteria that are identified in research include the ability to provide media coverage (Abratt et al., 1987; Crowley, 1991), access to on- and off-site audiences (Irwin, Asimakopoulos, & Sutton, 1994; Meenaghan, 1991), and offering the ability to reach specific target markets (Irwin et al., 1994; Thwaites, Aguilar-Manjarrez, & Kidd, 1998). Sponsorship costs and sponsor-property fit are also considerations (Irwin et al., 1994; Meenaghan, 1991). With companies using sponsorships more as integrated and interactive relationship management platforms, the ability of their sponsorships to reach *specific* target markets may possess even greater importance. From a relationship management perspective, developing strong relationships with groups that associate with these sponsored properties – most notably fans – determines whether companies’ sponsorships succeed; for these fans ideally represent existing consumers and/or target markets (Crowley, 1991).

Defining sponsorship objectives

Cornwell and Maignan (1998) emphasize that many sponsorship objective studies are descriptive in nature, and are conducted by “giving sponsors a pool of objectives and asking them to rank the goals that explained their involvement in sponsorship” (p. 12). When considering concerns previously highlighted with this article, a difficulty isolating and measuring sponsorship effects from other marketing mediums (Pearsall, 2010) and an incomplete understanding of how sponsorship works (Cornwell, 2008; Meenaghan et al., 2013), the question becomes whether the sponsorship objectives that are stated within literature are, in actuality, stating marketing-level or corporate-level objectives. This is important because to further academic understanding of how sponsorship functions, and its subsequent effects, researchers must first ensure that they possess an accurate understanding of its objectives (Figure 14.2).

attributes as they pertain to sponsorship objectives, a social identity approach serves as this study's theoretical lens of inquiry. Both theories have previously been applied within sponsorship contexts (Alexandris & Tsotsou, 2012; Cobbs, Groza, & Rich, 2015; Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000; 2001).

Social identity approach

A social identity approach applies the theories of self-categorization and social identity to explain group association and intergroup behavior respectively. Finding meaning in their environments, individuals will accentuate differences between and similarities within social categories (Haslam, Oakes, Turner, & McGarty, 1995). Through the psychological process of stereotyping, individuals categorize themselves (i.e., self-stereotyping) and others into groups (Turner & Oakes, 1986). There are innumerable social identities into which individuals may self-categorize themselves throughout the day (Reynolds & Turner, 2006), with these social identities likely residing at different levels of abstraction (e.g. individual, city citizen, state resident, national citizen, etc.). From this theoretical perspective, the self is perceived as both "personal and collective," with changes in how individuals self-categorize themselves, influencing their judgements of others (Reynolds & Turner, 2006, p. 233). Individuals engage in social behavior that can reflect interpersonal or intergroup behavior, as they fluctuate along a continuum of self- and social-group orientation (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Desiring to maintain a positive self-concept (i.e. positive distinctiveness), social identity theory asserts that individuals exhibit an assortment of strategies towards this end. While several strategies exist within the theory's framework, many of these strategies are predicated upon individuals' perceptions of legitimacy, stability, and permeability associated with these groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Groups into which individuals identify themselves as members are referred to as in-groups, with all other groups – those in which these individuals do not identify as members – being referred to as out-groups.

Two strategies that individuals may employ to maintain positive distinctiveness are in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). By employing these strategies to either perceive the in-group positively or out-group negatively, individuals are believed to strengthen their social self-esteem. These identity-maintenance strategies are thought to be employed by individuals when they feel strong group identification or receive negative group feedback (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). A social identity approach is anticipated to offer explanation for how fans of sport properties, through sponsorship leveraging and activation, self-categorize themselves into groups with their teams' sponsors. Once associated with sponsoring brands, social identity theory is believed capable of providing explanations for fans' behaviors towards those brands and their competitors.

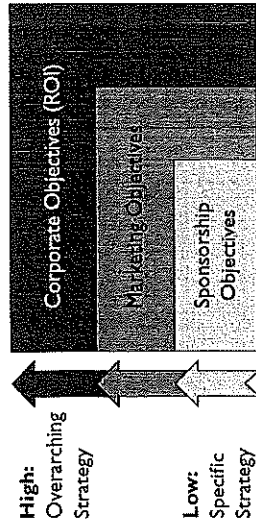


Figure 14.2 Level categorization of sport sponsorship objectives

Many of the studies that examine sponsorship objectives do provide categorical distinctions. For instance, two studies categorize sponsorship objectives into being corporate-related or product/brand-related (Irwin & Asimakopulos, 1992; Irwin & Sutton, 1994). Sandler and Shani (1993) applied three categories, including broad corporate objectives, marketing objectives, and media objectives. The categories from these studies are primarily determined by authority-level. Further, a more recent study by Chadwick and Thwaites (2004) outlined four categories that are delineated more by function: Marketing communication objectives (i.e. strategic promotions), relationship marketing objectives (i.e. building relationships with consumers), network objectives (i.e. collaborating with related organizations), and resource objectives (i.e. allocating sponsorship resources to establish a competitive advantage). These researchers adopted the approach from earlier studies on sponsorship objectives (Irwin et al., 1994; Shani & Sandler, 1993), believing that they should be associated with the structures and authorities that institute them. Consequently, conceptual categories for objectives at the corporate, marketing, and sponsorship levels are acknowledged in this study. Higher-level objectives (i.e. corporate) are expected to be more overarching, while those at a lower-level are likely more specified towards function (i.e. marketing, sponsorship).

However, with sponsorship leveraging practices evolving into more relational applications (Olkonen et al., 2000) and with greater emphasis on interactive activations (Meenaghan et al., 2013), sponsorship objectives should be framed in relational contexts. Olkonen et al. (2000) argued that earlier sponsorship research followed narrow theoretical and methodological perspectives, demonstrating a concerning lack of theory development. This may explain why sponsorship objectives in previous studies are often generalized to the degree that they are conceptually ambiguous. Moreover, considering the medium integration and relational complexity to which sponsorship leveraging has currently evolved, more attention should be ascribed to the many environmental contexts in which individuals may engage with sponsorships (Cornwell, 1995). Focusing on the relational

Examining hometown sponsorship

A sponsorship context that has currently been neglected within extant literature is hometown sport sponsorship. This context warrants examination, considering the emotional connections many individuals likely possess for their hometowns and local teams. Also, many corporations possess large employee bases within their hometowns; therefore, many low abstraction groups based on geographic location and their related affiliations are present in hometown contexts. These group associations (i.e., city resident, fan, employee) represent social identities. If adhering to a social identity perspective, these group synergies suggest a potential for hometown corporations to employ their local sponsorships as means for achieving sustainable competitive advantages in their local markets. Thus far, no research—the author's knowledge—is known to have examined hometown sponsorship objectives. Based on the lack of research in this area, a study exploring sport sponsorship's common objectives from a relational perspective was conducted. This study focuses on identifying and examining hometown sponsorship objectives in relation to the phenomenon's more common objectives. This study is intended to better capture any nuances and distinctions that may exist between the two contexts.

Method

From a managerial perspective, the purpose of this study was to identify key objectives of sponsorship in two contexts. First, the common objectives of corporate sport sponsorship were identified and examined from a relationship management perspective using a social identity approach as a theoretical lens of inquiry. Then, using similar methods, the context of corporate hometown sport sponsorship was examined. Given these aims, the following research questions guide this study:

- 1 What do sponsorship managers perceive to be common sponsorship objectives? How do these objectives function with one another when applying a social identity approach?
- 2 When asking sponsorship managers to narrow their focus to consider hometown sponsorship objectives and effects, what are distinctive or nuanced differences in sponsorship strategy that emerge?

Sampling and participants

The metropolitan area of Rivendell (a pseudonym) located in the southeastern United States with nearly 5.5 million residents was chosen to conduct the study. A center of trade and commerce, it is home to 18 Fortune 500 companies. Many of these companies possess large, national (and some international) sponsorship portfolios. Additionally, the area has a diverse selection of sport and entertainment options, with many sport teams,

music venues, museums, and festivals present. Five major professional sport properties and two major collegiate athletic programs reside in Rivendell.

Typical case sampling, a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was employed in this study. Participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) Be involved in the management, negotiation, and/or leveraging of hometown sponsorships now or within the past year and (b) work for major sport properties (i.e. property representative), national marketing/sponsorship agencies (i.e. agency consultant), or sponsorship-active corporations (i.e., corporate sponsorship manager) located in Rivendell. To collect data that captured perspectives from all three roles, it was deemed necessary to have all roles represented in the sample. To be considered a major sport property, the property had to receive regular regional and national media coverage. Agencies with participants in the study operated nationally. Their clients were either large corporations with international or national sponsorship portfolios, and/or major sport properties with international and/or national reach. For the purposes of this study, sponsorship-active corporations needed to have an international or national sponsorship portfolio.

The 11 participants ($N = 11$) in this study consisted of sponsorship managers who represented sport properties ($n = 5$), agencies ($n = 4$), and corporations ($n = 2$) headquartered in Rivendell (Table 14.1). Every major property in the metropolitan area had managerial representation in the sample. The average experience participants had managing corporate sport sponsorships was approximately 14 years; ranging from two years to 25 years.

Participant interviews

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 11 participants, as two requested to be interviewed together. The two participants were property representatives who worked for the same property. The participant who held the more senior role was the primary speaker during this interview, with the participant in the less senior role interjecting when asked; demonstrating deference to the senior manager. Prior to their interviews, participants signed consent forms. Participant interviews averaged one hour in length, with the shortest interview being 35 minutes and the longest being one hour and 38 minutes. Typed transcriptions from interview recordings totaled 180 pages (in Times New Roman, 12-font, single-space, normal margins). Nine of the 11 interviews were conducted in-person. The last two interviews were conducted by phone after multiple attempts to schedule an in-person interview were unsuccessful. Based on experiences from the earlier interviews performed, there were minimal concerns regarding the interview participants' question sensitivities, or the interviewer's need to observe participants' physical cues during their interviews. Moreover, by the eighth interview, there was a noticeable decrease in new data captured. Following the two phone interviews—given the lack of new data/insights captured—it was determined that data saturation was achieved.

Table 14.1 Pseudonym names of interviewees and their background information

Participant Pseudonyms	Gender	Title (Level)	Interview Time
Penelope Cornwell	Female	Director	1:12:47
Eyan Joseph	Male	Vice President	0:35:04
Clint Castleberry	Male	Vice President	1:38:47
Theo Carey	Male	Director	1:24:02
AGENCY			
		Total	4:50:40
		Average	1:12:10
Nick Gunter	Male	Director	0:55:04
Herman Depp	Male	Vice President	0:54:04
CORPORATE			
		Total	1:49:08
		Average	0:54:34
Janet Bird	Female	Director	0:45:03
Mark Wall	Male	Manager	0:53:46
Rita Bell	Female	Vice President	1:01:13
Bobby Jones	Male	Vice President	0:55:07
Donny Bones	Male	Director	
PROPERTY			
		Total	3:35:09
		Average	0:53:45
		Total	10:14:57
		Average	1:01:30

Semi-structured interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. Upon transcription of interviews, these recordings were destroyed. In an effort to ensure interview participant confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms, which were applied to all documents. Given the small population (i.e., Rivendell sponsorship managers) sampled for this study, certain information was not provided (i.e. employer names), generalized (i.e. occupational title) or documented within the study as a collective summary – unassigned to a specific participant (i.e. years of experience). Any identifiable information (e.g., company's name, employee's name) provided within participant interviews were removed and replaced with appropriate, more generalized terms. A pseudonym list with identifying information was stored on an encrypted, password protected, data folder during the study, and was destroyed following the study's completion.

Data analyses

The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) was used to conduct an analysis of participant interviews. Coding occurred at three levels, including initial, focused, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2014). Coding involves "categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2014). Following the

recommendation of Charmaz (2014), initial codes were short, and designed to capture meanings and actions. Per her recommendations, these codes were generally designed to start with gerunds. Focused codes were built from the initial codes, through identification of initial codes that frequently arose and/or possessed more meaning than other codes. These codes were designed to focus and condense the data (Charmaz, 2014). Given the intentions of this study, focused codes were generally structural-functional (Glaser, 1998) in nature. Theoretical codes were created to reintegrate the data. Focused codes were weaved into theoretical conceptualizations; providing stronger explanation of the data (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes were weaved into theoretical conceptualizations; then, these theoretical codes were compared within a conceptual framework using a social identity approach to find emergent trends and to examine consistencies and inconsistencies identified during coding and framework development.

After an initial reading of interview transcripts, NVIVO software was used to conduct initial coding, as it was determined to be an effective tool for 1) retrieving data assigned to these codes, and 2) organizing initial codes with either a general (S) or hometown (H) context classification. Focused and theoretical codes were developed on a Microsoft Excel worksheet, allowing for easier manipulation and reorganization in the data and assist in coding to encourage increased engagement in the data and assist in coding analysis, particularly during its early stages (Charmaz, 2014). Three memo categories were used in the study for (a) reflections (e.g. thoughts from interviews), (b) applications (e.g. rationale for directions taken within the study), and (c) feedback. Reflection memos were used to organize thoughts following interviews with participants; application memos were used to document rationale for directions taken in the study, and feedback memos were used to document committee feedback pertaining to the study. During and immediately after interviews, the interviewer's notes were used as a methodological journal; documenting their "methodological dilemmas, directions, and decisions" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 165). Later, these journal notes were often refined and elaborated upon in memos.

Establishing trustworthiness

To strengthen the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1986), member checking and an audit trail were employed. When developing the interview guide, an informal interview with a senior sponsorship manager with property, agency, and corporate experience was conducted to assess contextual relevance (Kirkhart, 1995). Then, following the informal interview, the interview guides were reviewed with the same sponsorship manager to assess the intelligibility of their questions. Lastly, following revisions, a fellow researcher reviewed the interview guides and provided feedback (Fowler, 2002). The first two interviews were conducted in July and August of 2016 as a pilot, from which minor revisions were made

to the interview guide. These revisions included adding several role specific questions, and providing a definition (with example) of hometown sponsorship that was used in the study. Each interview participant confirmed that they understood and accepted the definition provided during the interview upon having it read to them. The pilot interviews were with individuals with backgrounds in multiple sponsorship roles, and both were qualified candidates for the study. Based on these revisions, a formal interview introduction and three interview guides – modified to reflect the roles of the interview participants – were used in the study.

Given that sponsorship is an abstraction in many aspects, interview participants were asked to provide the interviewer with their definitions for it. The purpose for this exercise was twofold. First, it helped ensure that interview participants possessed a similar sponsorship conceptualization, and that their responses were referring to the same phenomenon. Second, it provided the interviewer a means for establishing practical boundaries (i.e. what “is sponsorship” versus what “is not sponsorship”) when developing a conceptual sponsorship framework; considering that scholars have yet to agree upon a theoretical definition for the phenomenon (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Dolphin, 2003; Hoek, Gendall, Jeffcoat, & Orsman, 1997). Following this exercise, responses were found to be similar and in agreement with one another, while helping the researcher identify four core aspects of sponsorship as perceived by the study’s participants: (a) sponsorship creates associations between a company and a property, (b) sponsorship allows for emotional connection to a company’s target audience, (c) sponsorship encourages changes in normative behaviors through its leveraging, and (d) sponsorship offers business-related benefits. These definitional elements of sponsorship were considered when developing the conceptual sponsorship framework for this study.

Results

The data analysis procedure for this study revealed a descriptive framework for how sponsorship objectives may function towards meeting an overarching marketing-level goal, which in turn provided support for an overarching company-level goal. Further, from this framework and a hometown-focused examination of managers’ perceptions towards sponsorship, two dominant themes emerged for how hometown sponsorship may function within companies’ overall sponsorship objectives. Findings from this study were presented in the order in which they were identified.

Managerial objectives associated with sponsorship

During their interviews, participants were asked to provide a list of common sponsorship objectives. Then, participants were to prioritize these objectives. Prior to analyzing participants’ interviews, these objectives were then

consolidated – based on their functional similarities – into a set of five general managerial objective categories associated with sponsorship:

- 1 Generating a positive return-on-investment (ROI)
- 2 Engaging consumers (e.g. activation)
- 3 Increasing customer visibility (e.g. leveraging)
- 4 Investing in the community (e.g. non-profit leveraging extensions)
- 5 Engaging employees (e.g. employee recognition and appreciation tie-ins)

These findings served as an initial starting point for developing a framework, as they collectively reflected the interview participants’ general perceptions of what constituted the phenomenon’s “common” objectives. As depicted, these findings provide broadly-stated functions or outcomes; offering little explanation for how sponsorship works.

Following the analyses of participants’ interviews, a structural hierarchy for managerial objectives was discovered. “Generating a positive ROI” emerged as an overarching company-level objective; whereas, the remaining four managerial objective categories identified by interview participants were found to be at the sponsorship-level. When considered collectively, these sponsorship-level objectives revealed an overarching thematic objective at the marketing-level: “Building brand ambassadors for life.” As sponsorship and its associated marketing activities primarily function as corporate relationship management platforms, sponsorship- and marketing-level objectives were relationally thematized to better reflect their organizational functions. Thematic sponsorship objectives, and the overarching thematic marketing objective noted above, emerged from qualitative analysis protocols used after the creation of managerial objective categories. Consequently, although four thematic sponsorship objectives were revealed through this analysis, these thematic objectives – while capturing sponsorships’ general functions – do not perfectly correspond with the managerial objective categories identified prior. Furthermore, “Generating a positive ROI” was not thematized given its function as a quantitative metric of overall company performance.

To address the first research question, descriptions and supporting evidence for thematic objectives and their related sub-themes were provided. Then, these thematic objectives were applied into a theoretical framework that adhered to a social identity approach – which, from a general context, emphasized self-categorization theory – and a conceptual framework for corporate sponsorship was presented. To address the second research question, two thematic objectives specific to hometown sponsorship were presented from a secondary analysis of data. This analysis only examined data that was specifically relevant to a hometown sponsorship context. During interviews, the following definition for, and explanation of, hometown sponsorship was provided to participants prior to asking questions specific to hometown sponsorship:

For purposes of this study, the closest metropolitan area to possess a professional sport franchise or franchises from the Big Four sport leagues – including MLB, NBA, NFL, and the National Hockey League (NHL) – in relation to an individual's residence is considered their "hometown." Properties within these metropolitan areas would be considered "hometown properties." Additionally, athletic programs from public state universities, whether within the boundaries of that metropolitan area, would also be considered "hometown properties." For example, if individuals lived in New Hampshire, their "hometown" for purposes of this study would be the "Boston Metropolitan Area" in Massachusetts. Subsequently, the Boston Red Sox would be considered a "hometown property." Yet, the athletic program at the University of New Hampshire would also be considered a "hometown property" for New Hampshire residents. From a corporate perspective, this study assumes that corporations' international, national, or regional headquarters function like individuals' residences; making the metropolitan areas where their offices are located their "hometowns."

Upon having it read to them during the interview, each interviewee confirmed that they understood and accepted the definition provided.

Thematic sponsorship objectives of general context

The data analysis procedure used in this study revealed four common, thematic sponsorship objectives: (a) meeting people where their passions live, (b) fostering brand love, (c) committing to communities, and (d) empowering employees. Descriptions and supporting evidence for these thematic objectives and their related sub-themes were provided below.

Joining people where their passions live. A thematic sponsorship objective that emerged from the analysis was "meeting people where their passions live," which involved corporations identifying their brands' target audiences' passions, and anthropomorphically situating their brands within environments that connected to those passions. To this end, corporations partnered with sport properties to develop associations with their fans' and their passions, with nearly 70 percent of all sponsorship spending in North America tying back to sport (IEGSR, 2017). The following comment from Herman summarized this thematic objective: "Yeah, the beauty of sponsorships—particularly the big ones—is if you do it the right way, you're targeting the right consumer segment from a brand perspective, and they're super passionate about these spaces, so they're more in tune with commercial messaging" (Herman, Corporation). Nick highlighted aspects of this thematic objective when he provided an example of what he perceived to be an exemplar sponsorship:

I look at Home Depot and its partnership with College Gameday as a rather unique partnership . . . I think that it was a really unique way to take something that Home Depot was already doing with purchasing media on ESPN and target home improvement customers—making it more personal—and tying it to this brand of college football, which was really, really growing from an affinity standpoint (Nick, Corporation).

Additionally, three sub-themes were captured within the thematic sponsorship objective "meeting people where their passions live": (a) creating associations to specific audiences' social identities, (b) embracing a consistent brand personality, and (c) pursuing organic relationships. These three sub-themes represented common strategies that together can successfully help brands "meet people where their passions live."

Creating associations to specific audiences' social identities. Corporations' brands associated themselves with properties that were central to the social identities of their target audiences' passions; encouraging in-group inclusion and emotional connectedness. In other words, brands strategically positioned themselves in environments that promoted them being positively stereotyped by their target audiences. The following comment from Eyan captured the belief that these emotional connections between fans and properties led to positive outcomes for properties' sponsors through associative inclusion:

fans have an affinity for their products' sponsors – their teams' sponsors . . . if you're a big follower of a NASCAR driver, and he uses a Tide car, you're going to go buy Tide, because you'd like to support him. Same thing with college sports, so that's why you have long-term sponsors. We want to build affinity with these fans . . . they're die-hard fans, they're passionate . . .

(Eyan, Agency)

Janet touched on this thematic objective from a negative positioning; expressing the importance of corporations partnering with properties that reached their target audiences:

You know, you don't want to partner with a brand that doesn't reach your audience. And so, making sure you do sponsorships that are relevant to the audience you're targeting is really important, because, you know, sponsorship is proven to amplify marketing objectives. But at the same time, if you're not aligned with the right brand, you're not going to amplify, because you're targeting an audience that's not yours.

(Janet, Property)

Reinforcing a consistent brand personality. Corporations' actively attempted to reinforce their brands' intended personality characteristics among targeted audiences. This was functionally enacted by monitoring consumer brand

personality perceptions relative to sponsorship leveraging and activation; then, adjusting strategies to manipulate target audiences' perceptions as necessary – reflecting these brand personality characteristics. Additionally, interview participants commented on the importance of further managing these personality perceptions through the construction of their brands' sponsorship portfolios. The following discourse from Nick provided support for this sub-theme:

Do people see us as innovative? Do people see us as faster than the competition? Do people see our people as smarter than the competition? There's a long list of them. And we try and look and see if there are differences in the trends we're seeing at the macro marketing and communications level, and ones at the sponsorship level. And we talk about what we're doing to kind of influence some of those things.

(Nick, Corporation)

Clint also expressed the need for corporate brands to reflect the personalities of the target audiences that they were intending to reach. One of his "pet-peevs" involved sponsors failing to recognize the successes of their sponsored teams or players: "if you're a sponsor, you're supposed to be a fan. And it's a partnership, and you're supposed to take pride and have a rooting interest in it. And so . . . if you're not going to be a fan of the team, then what's the point?" (Clint, Agency)

Penelope commented on how corporations in the same industry would often develop their own market niches through their sponsorship portfolios; promoting unique brand personality characteristics through these portfolios:

Everyone kind of has their niche. T-Mobile does a lot with the NBA. Verizon traditionally has the NFL. AT&T traditionally has the NCAA. For example, AT&T was the collegiate brand, and they have a huge portfolio in collegiate sports when compared to their competitors, especially considering that Verizon was very focused on the NFL.

(Penelope, Agency)

Pursuing organic relationships. Once associations were developed, corporations utilized communication channels that reached their target audiences' in social contexts; attempting to establish anthropomorphic and archetypal brand characteristics that mirrored their target audiences' in-group members. As social media has evolved, with more individuals engaged in its use, sponsorship activations have increasingly incorporated the platform to interact with their target audiences. Sponsorship managers emphasized the importance of social interactions with potential consumers by adopting an organic communication approach:

We try to stay a lot more organic with our [social media] posts. We don't like to push a sponsor's posts. Like, "Come out and buy my [products]. I'm [a sponsor]. You're not driving someone to buy their products . . . [it's] very indirect. Because, really when it comes down to it, you're getting to the point where you're going to bog so many peoples' social media feeds down, they don't even want to see what you're posting anymore . . . a lot more of our posts are organic . . . just trying to engage people more, instead of constantly pushing sales messages down their throat.

(Rita, Property)

Theo felt that two important elements of "pursuing organic relationship" were the frequency and timing of communications. Moreover, he thought that brands should focus on making these social interactions fun, and something that was capable of going viral:

I think *timeliness is the key*. I think that [if social media communications are] too frequent, it's overkill . . . that's the primary thing with social media – and to make it relevant. *Not to make [social media posts] a corporate message, but rather something that's fun, and people want to interact with it, and want to share*. I think too many times you get corporate messaging through social, where the corporation thinks, "Okay, we've got to get this message out there," but they've got to find a fun way to do it to make people want to share it.

(Theo, Agency)

An advocate of social activation as a sponsorship leveraging element, Janet believed that sponsorship managers must stay relevant with trends. Her rationale was that staying relevant with trends allowed sponsorship managers to effectively develop organic communications through whatever medium was most appropriate for reaching their desired target audience—which, for her property, was often millennials:

I tell the folks working for me, as soon as you become too old for a medium, you age yourself out of being relevant in this industry. So, I listen to music that I'm not necessarily interested in. I have apps on my phone that I don't necessarily use that much, but I'm aware of them, because *if you're not staying current, you're not going to be able to speak to the needs that your clients are looking for*.

(Janet, Property)

Fostering brand love. Another thematic sponsorship objective that emerged from the analysis was "fostering brand love." Corporations attempted to foster brand love with individuals in their target audiences. Brand love, as defined in this study, is a construct that consists of seven dimensions: (1) self-brand

integration, (2) passion-driven behaviors, (3) positive emotional connection, (4) long-term relationship, (5) positive overall valence, (6) attitude certainty and confidence (strength), and (7) anticipated separation distress (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012). This thematic objective involved both pursuing anthropomorphic relationship with, and creating unique and exclusive experiences for, individuals of their brands' target audiences. These consistent social and experiential interactions were intended to make brands more central to their target audiences' self-identities. Theo was a major proponent of experiential activation as a means for fostering brand love:

A commercial might in that moment [make an impression], but someone actually *experiencing a product or service – hands on, can make that person a customer for life*. And I 100 percent believe in that. And that's why companies have also gone that route, because *you just have more impact when you're there in front of, and you're able to see it, touch it, feel it, and truly get immersed in whatever your product or service is*.

(Theo, Agency)

Clint shared his thoughts on how to enhance that experience for brands' target audiences, believing that the experience brands intend to offer these individuals should align with the root sources of their fandom:

the best practice that I would say is don't just do it because that's how it's always been done, but really think about the event type; where fans are going to be; what they're going to do; why are they there; *why they're a fan of that team; what makes that team unique; and really insert your brand there*.

(Clint, Agency)

Lastly, when Nick spoke to the importance of creating unique and memorable experiences, he also mentioned the need for these experiences to be “unreplicable” by competitors; allowing corporations to develop unique relationships with their consumers:

I would say hospitality is a big part of what we do. Entertaining customers is more than just a ticket, but *providing them with kind of a complete end-to-end experience, where we kind of maximize all the touch points that we have*. Influence those events with intellectual property and the assets we can, whether it be appearances, or something as simple as putting a logo on an invitation, but *making that experience unique and unforgettable, and unreplicable by our competition*.

(Nick, Corporation)

Committing to communities. This thematic sponsorship objective involved corporations fulfilling their perceived societal commitments through corporate social responsibility (CSR)-linked sponsorship activations or

charity extensions; encouraging cognitive consistency between their brands' intended personalities and those of their targeted audiences' social groups. Further, these community investments were amplified through their relationships with – and the resources of – sport properties. Support for “committing to communities” was provided through the following interview participant discourse:

Overall, my perspective on it is most of the companies that we do business with do a lot of stuff in the community, whether it's involved with us or not. They're going to do stuff, usually from a community perspective . . . ; *as a property, [we] can be a mouthpiece for what they're doing in the community*. But they're doing stuff well above and beyond [what the public sees them do with properties], that probably gets lost.

(Bobby, Property)

Herman's thoughts mirrored Bobby's when it pertained to the level of large, corporate involvement within communities: “if you're a big company that has a big presence in a market, *there's an expectation that you are giving back to your community*. So, we're obviously involved in a lot of different areas that may look like a sponsorship, but *go far beyond that*” (Herman, Corporation).

While admitting that CSR-linked sponsorship was likely underutilized by corporations, Nick felt that it was becoming an area of greater consumer focus:

I think like everybody *we could do [CSR-linked sponsorship] a little bit more*. I think particularly with the millennial audience; corporate social responsibility is becoming a much more important part of how people conduct business. Like, *what's your social profile? . . . people want to do business with people that kind of match their own*.

(Nick, Corporation).

Empowering employees as ambassadors. This thematic sponsorship objective was focused on corporations integrating their employees into their sponsorships. Corporations considered how they could incorporate their employees into their various sponsorship arrangements, often desiring to instill a sense of pride and emotionally connect with them; namely, to encourage passion and commitment towards their corporations and their brands. Corporations' intentions were to encourage their employees to adopt the brand as a central element of their self-identities. Consequently, employees were empowered to become their brands ambassadors and evangelists. Property representatives, such as Rita, mentioned that these types of employee-inclusive leveraging practices were executed by her property's sponsors regularly: “Companies use [event sponsorship hospitality] as *rewards for their employees, or to entertain clients*. Those are super easy, and *are included in almost any deal that we do*” (Rita, Property).

Both corporate sponsorship managers extolled the importance of emotionally connecting and empowering their employees through sponsorship. When asked about whether his company engaged their employees through sponsorship, Herman answered:

Yeah, definitely! Yeah. And we have incentives and opportunities to bring these [sponsorship] assets to the employees. It's a big part of what we do, for sure . . . and we do that across everything – from global partnerships, to national partnerships, to local. You'll always see us communicating with our internal employees because it gives them a sense of pride.

(Herman, Corporation)

Nick also discussed employee engagement through sponsorship, alluding to the thematic objective of “empowering employees as ambassadors”:

employees are usually a huge part of how a company presents itself, so how do you get them engaged and involved in the partnership? And not just excited about it, but use it to influence their behavior? We have [hundreds of thousands of] employees. How do we get them excited and engaged, and wanting to help spread the brand message?

(Nick, Corporation)

Thematic sponsorship objectives in local context

When sponsorship was examined from a hometown context, two dominant thematic objectives emerged: (a) weaving into the local fabric and (b) winning where you live. Descriptions and supporting evidence for these thematic objectives and their related sub-themes were provided below.

Weaving into the local fabric. This thematic sponsorship objective involved corporations reinforcing their in-group associations with their local communities. When “weaving into the local fabric” of their hometowns, corporations focused on leveraging and activation opportunities that were not commercially motivated – or minimally so. A common strategy related to this thematic objective was for corporations to integrate their prominent, hometown sport sponsorships with local charity and grassroots initiatives. Janet summarized this thematic objective well:

there is the belief that if you are a local sponsor, you should be invested in the local properties in your hometown. And there is that expectation from the citizens . . . I think they want a little bit more than you're a partner of that team . . . they would like to see how you are partnering with that team to help this community. I think that's where you get the real win . . . partnering with your hometown team and doing something great for the community that's an actual event.

(Janet, Property)

Expanding upon this thematic hometown objective of “weaving into the local fabric,” Theo commented on the perception of authenticity that he believed hometown corporations garnered when they included smaller properties, such as local festivals, into their sponsorship portfolios:

I think it depends. I think a good mix because your larger properties are going to resonate with the consumers in the market place, but some of the smaller ones are going to touch the consumer. Those are the ones that feel more like a hometown sponsorship to me . . . There's some authenticity to sponsoring a local festival . . . I think your smaller festivals and things like that – I think that's where you're interacting with consumers, and that's when the visibility to consumers changes . . . You don't view it as, “Oh yeah, they're in my hometown.” [It's more like], “Okay, look. They're actually integrated into my community, and supporting local events.”

(Theo, Agency)

Herman acknowledged that his company was highly involved with the local community through its sponsorship portfolio. The sole objective of one sponsorship, a golf tournament, was to tie into, and give back, to the local community:

We are a sponsor of the [Golf Tournament] out at [Hometown]. And that's part of a broader relationship with the [Golf Organization]. That is overtly and purposeful in helping to drive awareness and funds for the [Hometown Charity]. That's the focus, and giving back to our local hometown community. That is the objective of that relationship.

(Herman, Corporation)

Sport sponsorships were noted by interview participants as opportunities for corporate visibility within their hometowns, with sponsorships functioning like beacons, at times through naming rights, that communicated their hometown associations:

That may not necessarily be the goals and objectives for the out-of-market sponsorships that you do, but when you do hometown sponsorships – this is your home base . . . the people here are dear to you. So, you want to make sure that you're visible, and that they see you.

(Penelope, Agency)

With many of their employees located within their hometowns, corporations were capable of executing large, employee-focused activations around their sport sponsorships that also tied back to their communities. Many interview participants thought that these initiatives were effective resources for improving employees' attitudes towards their employers – instilling pride, while further reinforcing existing in-group associations:

[Sponsor] has a strong employee base here in Rivendell. It's their hub. And anything that they do with us in the community is not only to tie into the community — they always try to tie employee engagement into that as well. So, we'll do a [weekend event] as an example. And, they'll bring the employees out to work the various events that we do surrounding that weekend. Having them in uniforms, so you get the connection to them, but also [to] have your employee base knowing, "Hey, [sponsor] is out there doing solid stuff in our community." And so, I think it works both ways. *Both from an internal employee perspective, but also externally for their customer base.*

(Bobby, Property)

Winning where you live. Another thematic hometown objective that emerged from the data was "winning where you live." Where the thematic hometown objective of "weaving into the local fabric" focused more on reinforcing in-group associations through less commercially-driven endeavors, "winning where you live" involved corporations' openly attempting to establish sustainable competitive advantages against their competitors in their hometowns. From a social identity perspective, this involved strategies that reflected and encouraged managerial behaviors of in-group favoritism by prominent hometown corporations and sport properties. One interview participant, Clint, compared the rationale for this thematic objective to that of in-state, college sports recruiting:

I mean, it's very similar to college football recruiting, or college basketball recruiting, any major college sport recruiting. *You've got to win where you're [located].* If you've got a great sports or entertainment property in your hometown, and you're in the mindset of doing team deals, then you should probably look to take care of your own town for a multitude of reasons, but primarily because you don't want your CMO going to the game and seeing your competitor's messaging running everywhere; coming back and saying, "What are we doing in sponsorships?" So, it's protecting that home turf.

(Clint, Agency)

During his interview, Mark, spoke directly to the emotional motivations for corporations to adopt this thematic hometown objective:

I think, by nature, and probably for many things, *the closer you are to something, the more intimate you are with it.* And it means more. You want to be more involved. You want to know more. You want to be a part of it more. So, that's why a hometown sponsorship has more value. And in addition to that, you can look at it reversely, and *you don't want to lose that to a competitor.* So, yes, they're very intimate with it.

(Mark, Property)

To that end, corporations were seen by interview participants as investing more into hometown sport properties than they would for similar properties elsewhere: "Without a doubt, you will see hometown companies do more, and probably spend more on local partnerships than they otherwise would — I think the look at it very differently" (Nick, Corporation).

Forming hometown alliances. A predominant sub-theme for "winning where you live" was identified in the data; namely, "forming hometown alliances." This sub-theme represented a strategy for achieving this thematic hometown objective that corporations' non-local competitors were unable to perfectly imitate (i.e., imperfect imitability) or adopt (i.e. imperfect mobility).

Prominent hometown corporations, particularly B2C companies, regularly sought to partner with prominent hometown sport properties. This sub-theme/strategy often allowed these corporations to form alliances with both the hometown sport properties they sponsored and the other hometown sponsors of those properties. Theo and Bobby acknowledged possible sponsor portfolio effect from these alliances:

There's definitely value to that. I think there's more value to the mid-tier company than there is to the large fortune 500 company. So, yes. *Companies spend money with us, because not only do they want that association with the team, but they also know and want to see themselves in the same lights of a [Hometown Sponsor 1], a [Hometown Sponsor 2], a [Hometown Sponsor 3], and those types of companies.* And yes, we have people that spend money with us, because they want to be in that same neighborhood, if you will.

(Bobby, Property)

Pertinent to this thematic strategy, Mark referred to the "natural" associative benefits among hometown sport properties and prominent hometown corporations. He spoke about his property's community activism, and how they often partnered with their sponsors. During his interview, he mentioned that while many sponsors — including non-local sponsors — have partnered with his property on community initiatives, hometown partners were preferred; resonating better with the local community:

We're finding ways to, really, what does community mean to us, and what does it mean to the community? — to link all those together, and find the right partners that would integrate with that naturally and want to be a part of it . . . *The natural fit is going to be a hometown company.* If we took one of their competitors and we went to market with [a community initiative], it probably isn't going to feel as good for the community, or the client, or us . . . *You're going to get a better [sponsorship effects] amplification if you're a hometown corporation doing something for the community with the right sports team that has the right fit and the right idea for your brand, than*

taking a competitor and putting it in that same campaign. If you looked at those two campaigns, I guarantee you that the value amplification that the hometown company is getting is more than the competitor.

(Mark, Property)

These preferences were regularly alluded to by interview participants, and they suggested that hometown community members (i.e. a central social group) generally preferred hometown sponsorships, and conversely, the sponsorships between hometown properties and the competitors of those local corporations were discouraged. In some situations, interview participants expressed the belief that sponsorships among some of the more prominent hometown corporations and sport properties were almost mandatory – for both the corporations and sport properties. Bobby admitted that there were a few hometown sponsors that were almost required in their sponsor portfolio:

[Hometown Sponsor] is a great example of one that would be almost impossible not to do a deal with them. And it would almost be impossible for them not to do a deal with us. So, do we want to be offering anything but [Hometown Sponsor] in our venue? No. Our fans would not be happy if we were offering [Hometown Sponsor's Competitor]. Would [Hometown Sponsor] want to have a property of our magnitude in Rivendell with [large numbers of] people coming through, that was offering a product other than theirs? They wouldn't.

(Bobby, Property)

When the alternative to the "mandatory" hometown sponsorship mentioned above was brought to the attention of Theo, he found it unthinkable:

I was thinking, what if [Non-Local Competitor] sponsored something here in Rivendell – like, unheard of. Me as a consumer and working in the industry – that's my perception. So, you could imagine that people out there would probably be shocked if you went to the [Hometown Football Team's] game and they only had [Non-Local Competitor]? I'm trying to think if there's anybody that's every really done that.

(Theo, Agency)

Clint possessed a slightly different perspective than Bobby. He suggested that properties were regularly entering sponsorship conversations with multiple prospects simultaneously. In such scenarios, he believed that properties were proactive in communicating with hometown corporations when they were engaged in conversations with their competitors; reaching out to them as a local (i.e. in-group) courtesy:

I've seen companies strategically do team deals where they don't have corporate presence, whether it be national, regional, international – but lo-and-behold, one of their competitors does. And so, I do think that happens. And I think in the negotiation process too, properties are well aware of who the primary competitors are, and even maybe not primary competitors, but maybe those brands that really irritate the other brands. And they certainly, if they're talking to both, they let them know that. And I would too, if I were in their shoes.

(Clint, Agency)

Hometown sponsorship: An effective testing ground. While the evidence was not substantial enough to treat this observation as a thematic objective of hometown sponsorship, an important insight was offered by one of the corporate managers that warranted inclusion. He noted that hometown sponsorship can serve as a safe environment and testing ground for new sponsorship leveraging and activation practices:

[Hometowns are] a great testing ground and it's easy for you to be there and see that without having to jump on a plane to see it. So yes. You tend to see more of that . . . testing control and best practices developed with things you do at the local level. Plus, usually those partnerships are big enough for you to actually get a little bit more creative with them . . . I think it's also an opportunity – particularly if you're trying to recruit B2B customers – for you to use that as a local tool to entertain them with your executive audience in attendance. So, it's capable of showcasing your brand in a positive light within a safe environment . . . so, I think it's a great opportunity.

(Nick, Corporation)

This insight, when considering the greater financial investments made towards individual sponsorships; the alliances and strong relationships forged through in-group associations; and the heightened emphasis towards secondary functions of sponsorship, provided support for the possibility of both a sustainable and dominant competitive advantage within corporations' hometown communities.

Overarching objectives

Building brand ambassadors. From an analysis of the four thematic sponsorship objectives, and how they collectively functioned together, an overarching marketing-level, thematic objective emerged: "building brand ambassadors for life." The term "brand ambassadors for life" collectively referred to all individuals who strongly identified with their brands;

possessed brand love; resisted negative criticisms of their brands from others; and had integrated their brands into their lifestyles. The relationship these individuals maintained with their brands was anthropomorphic and possessed a strong degree of centrality in their self-identities. This thematic marketing objective was perceived to be the sponsorship outcome sought by interview respondents from a relationship management context, with Clint referring specifically to this objective as a desired end outcome:

and that's *how you make a brand ambassador for life*. That's *what everyone does nowadays* . . . They (consumers) can't tell the story about going to the game that they weren't going to go to [because] they got tickets last minute, without saying that a brand is the one that reached out to them and said, "Hey, I see that you're a fan of this team and you don't have tickets. We're going to hook you up because we love the same team that you do."
(Clint, Agency)

This marketing level objective, while not generally able to be directly measured in terms of ROI, is believed to indirectly encourage behaviors that generate revenues and profits for companies:

I would say sales [is a sponsorship objective], but it's funny. Out of so many clients that say, "Well, sponsorships have to sell." You know, you have to be able to show me that I sold more widgets because I sponsored this team or league. It's really hard to do. It's really hard to quantify. And, I'm not so sure that's what sponsorship – my personal opinion is that's not why you do sponsorship. You can – *I think you can sell more products because of sponsorship, but it's not a direct*, "I sponsored this; therefore, I sold ten percent more widgets." I think there's more to it than that.
(Clint, Agency)

Generating a positive ROI. Furthermore, through analysis procedures, it was determined that the managerial objective "generate a positive ROI" was not a sponsorship objective, but rather a company-level objective. Throughout interviews, participants took relational elements and regularly discussed the challenges into converting those measures to ROI.

Well, here's the thing. My ROO is that I want to reach 200,000 Instagram users, and have at least 50 people attend my event – and those were my objectives. I can measure that – versus, a ROI that is quantified with dollar signs: What I spent versus what I got back. ROOs are much easier to measure than ROI. So, if you *don't actually have the math to get your ROI, you could fluff it and argue*, "We got a return on our investment!" – based on whatever your objectives were.
(Penelope, Agency)

These measurement practices were questioned by several interview participants in property or agency roles. While they often acknowledged the internal pressures placed upon corporate managers to provide sponsorship ROI metrics, these participants questioned the accuracy and general validity of these practices. The below quote from Bobby shared a common sentiment:

When companies are spending based upon specific metrics, it's to help them justify spends internally. And, I'm not from a client perspective. I understand that analytics and all that should play a part in all that. But if that's your end all, be all . . . *it's probably not going to do you a lot of good. Because you're going to be looking at something in a very specific, isolated case – when, it's probably a much bigger conversation . . . than what you're trying to evaluate.*
(Bobby, Property)

Corporate managers also acknowledged the challenges associated with measuring many of sponsorships' relationship-oriented functions through a financial prism. Herman referred to the process as being both "an art and a science":

What are property metrics? Are they trending up? Trending down? Are they flat? So we consider all those different methodologies to evaluate whether or not we renew. And then there's also the art behind the exercise too. *It's an art and a science, as you probably know. There are a lot of gray areas and emotions and other factors that influence your decisions.*
(Herman, Corporation)

Nick, who acknowledged the need for corporations to more accurately measure sponsorship ROI, was hopeful that emergent technology would eventually allow for better information capture and measurement of their sponsorships' financial values:

I think we're bad as an industry at [measurement]. To me, *I've always looked to measurement as a microcosm of the broader marketing organization. We should be following in line with what the broader organizational goals are, and trying to measure against those, as opposed to creating our own thing*. I think, you know, this movement towards getting more digital and more targeted will allow us to kind of do that, and do it in real-time too. And make real-time decisions.
(Nick, Corporation)

A structural hierarchy based on authority-level. The functions associated with these two higher-level objectives – "building brand ambassadors for life," and "generating a positive ROI" – were regularly stated as prioritized

managerial objectives during conversations with interview participants. Some participants mentioned the marketing-level function ahead of the company-level function, while others adopted a top-down approach in stating objectives. The ordering of these objectives was often delineated by interview participants' managerial roles: "Definitely, *advertising has got to be number one. And then, number two is sales.* And then depending on the company, both client entertainment and employee engagement" (Bobby, Property). "I think overall they are. They focus on the main buckets of what you should get out of sponsorship . . . *revenue, consumer engagement, and growing your base* . . . Obviously, every person should put those down for you" (Theo, Agency). "Our two main ones [objectives] at our broadest level are *driving consumer awareness and sentiment - 'brand love'* as it's referred to. And driving sales of our product. I mean, those are the two core objectives . . ." (Herman, Corporation).

The conceptual model that emerged from this study's analysis recognized this stated structural hierarchy containing sponsorship-level objectives, marketing-level objectives, and company-level objectives within its framework, applying the objectives into these hierarchical levels. Further, given the relationship management orientation of the phenomenon, the conceptual framework that emerged from this study focused on the integration of the sponsorship-level and marketing-level thematic objectives, with "generating a positive ROI" included in the model as an overall, end outcome.

Conceptualizing a highly-integrated social framework

Thematic sponsorship objectives were integrated within a conceptual framework that provided an explanation for how they functioned together to (a) achieve the overarching marketing thematic objective (building brand ambassadors) and (b) support the overarching company objective (generating a positive ROI). Analysis procedures revealed that the functions associated with these objectives were highly-integrated with one another. These levels of integrated functionality were evidenced during interviews with the two corporate managers - both of whom stated that their roles regularly involved the coordination and management of cross-functional teams. Consequently, a visualized representation of the conceptual framework that emerged from the data was developed. This conceptual framework represents a theoretical interpretation, by using a social identity approach, of how sponsorship generally functions from a relationship management perspective. From analysis procedures, the thematic sponsorship objectives of "committing to communities" and "empowering employees," while important, were determined to be secondary thematic objectives, while "joining people where their passions live" and "fostering brand love" served as the model's more emphasized

thematic objectives. "Committing to communities" and "empowering employees" were deemed secondary sponsorship thematic objectives given their generally smaller scale and leveraging scope. Moreover, their contributions towards "generating a positive ROI" for their corporations were more difficult to quantify than the other two thematic sponsorship objectives (Figure 14.3).

"Joining people where their passions live" and "fostering brand love" were found to function as primary thematic sponsorship objectives; directly reaching their brands' specific target audiences. Their leveraging and activation elements were the primary drivers for "building brand ambassadors for life." Consequently, these thematic objectives were more regularly implemented to establish ROI justifications that supported their sponsorships. Once a conceptual framework was developed for explaining how sponsorships generally functioned in support of marketing-level and corporate-level objectives, thematic objectives more focused on hometown sponsorships were sought. A secondary data analysis that solely focused on interview discourse pertaining to hometown sponsorship contexts was conducted.

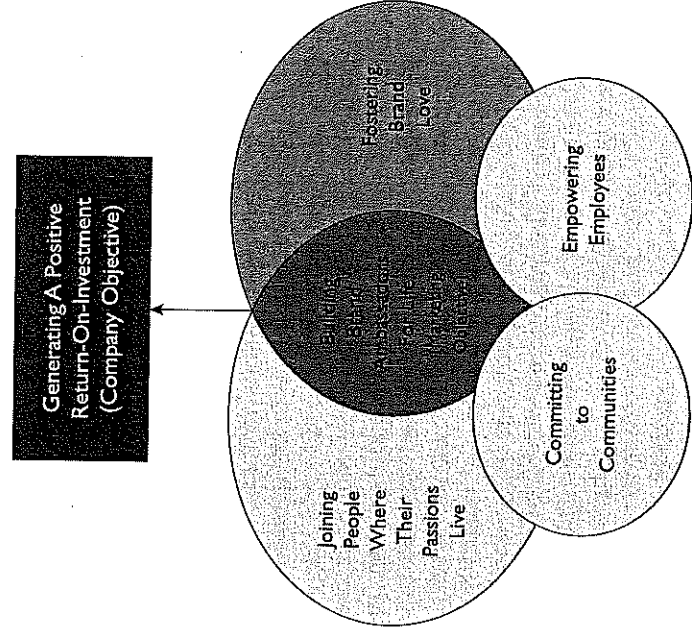


Figure 14.3 Hypothesized sponsorship conceptual framework in general context

Discussion

The following research questions guided the current study: (a) what do sponsorship managers perceive to be common sponsorship objectives and how do these objectives function with one another when applying a social identity approach? And (b) when asking sponsorship managers to narrow their focus to consider hometown sponsorship objectives and effects, what are distinctive or nuanced differences in sponsorship strategy that emerge?

Building brand ambassadors through sponsorships

The first research question sought to identify common sponsorship objectives and construct a framework using a social identity approach that explained how these common objectives functioned together. From data analysis procedures, four inter-related thematic sponsorship objectives were revealed: (a) joining people where their passions live, (b) fostering brand love, (c) committing to communities, and (d) empowering employees as brand ambassadors. When applied into a social identity framework, particularly self-categorization theory, these thematic objectives provided a general explanation for how corporate sponsorship functioned relationally to influence social groups and its members.

Interview participants spoke to the importance of corporations identifying their brands' target audiences, and through sponsorship placing their brands in those environments, "joining people where their passions lived." These environments were strategically chosen to reinforce consistent perceptions of their brands' personalities within their target audiences' social groups. This also entailed corporations leveraging these sponsorships in a manner than promoted their target audiences to positively stereotype their brands as anthropomorphic members of their social groups. This was often accomplished through the application of social media as a sponsorship activation element. Social media communications allowed for organic interaction with target audiences that engaged them on a human level; creating brand narratives and call-to-actions that were positioned more like friendly conversations than sales pitches. Another important sponsorship function identified through analysis of participant interviews was "fostering brand love," where corporations sought to increase the brands' centrality within the self-identities of individuals in their target audiences. Where social media activations were generally used to establish anthropomorphic social relationships, corporations also created experiential activations for target audience members to emotionally connect with their brands on a deeper level; engaging these individuals through unique and exclusive experiences. In other words, from a relationship context, corporations first established a friendship (i.e. anthropomorphic in-group association), then they pursued romance (i.e. brand love). As secondary objectives, corporations both leveraged their

sponsorships with community/charity extensions (i.e. "committing to the community"), and regularly used their sponsorship resources on employees to encourage their emotional commitment towards them and their brands (i.e. empowering employees as ambassadors). These practices encouraged cognitive consistency in their brands' personalities with target audiences; presenting them as both authentic and credible.

From this study's findings, corporations generally used sponsorship as an integrated, relationship management platform, with its mechanisms intended to encourage target audiences (and employees) to develop anthropomorphic personality associations with their brands; ultimately motivating them to self-categorize themselves into what this study termed as brand ambassadors for life. "Building brand ambassadors for life" represented the logical culmination of the thematic sponsorship objectives that were identified through data analysis. For these individuals, their brands were expected to exhibit strong degrees of centrality in their self-identities, and influence their normative behaviors. Consequently, brand ambassadors for life were defined in this study as consumers who strongly identified with their brands; possessed brand love; resisted negative criticisms of their brands from others (i.e. demonstrated in-group favoritism); and highly integrated their brands into their lifestyles.

Furthermore, findings that emerged from this study aligned within a social identity approach framework, suggesting that corporations were using their sponsorships to create beneficial social group associations by manipulating target audiences' perceptions. In addition, many of the framework's proposed mechanisms agreed with extant sponsorship and brand literature. A key foundational element of the conceptual framework for determining sponsorship effectiveness involved establishing a good sponsor-property fit in the minds of target audiences, which has been noted by scholars in numerous operationalization articles on sponsorship fit (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, Weeks, & Tellegen, 2006; Johar & Pham, 1999; Olson & Thjømøe, 2011; Ruth & Simonin, 2003). Further, the importance ascribed to developing sponsorship portfolios strategically positioned to present consistent brand images/personalities (i.e. good sponsorship-sponsorship fit) supported findings from Chien, Cornwell, and Pappu (2011). These high-fit associations are likely to encourage local consumers to include sponsoring hometown brands of their hometown teams as members of their in-group.

Corporations were found to encourage consumers anthropomorphizing (Levy, 1985; Plummer, 1985) with their brands through activation strategies allowing for social interactions and meaningful consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). With the proliferation of social media (Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszk, 2013) and emergent, interactive technologies, opportunities for greater reciprocity between consumers and brands were possible—a key element of human relationships (Giddens, 1991).

Additionally, Kim and McGill (2011) found that products were more likely to be anthropomorphized by consumers in situations where the products' behaviors aligned with the normative behaviors they sought. Their findings supported the conceptual framework's functionalism that involved aligning intended brand personalities towards specific, target audiences. Lastly, brand relationship and brand product attributes were found capable of influencing brand love and behaviors similar to those expected from this study's "Brand ambassadors for life" (Albert & Merunka, 2013).

Hometown sponsorships: Amplifying a natural advantage

When the data was examined from a hometown context, interview participants shared perspectives that suggested that corporations focused significant attention towards reinforcing their "hometown" social identities and corresponding in-group associations (i.e. local business-city, local employer-employee, and hometown sponsor-property). These associations were reinforced both within commercial and non-commercial contexts. Corporations "weaved themselves into the local fabric" by creating non-commercial philanthropic and grassroots extensions around their larger sponsorship properties. Employees were actively incorporated into their sponsorships, with these employee-oriented leveraging elements actively reinforcing quadratic hometown employer-employee-team-community associations. From a direct, commercial perspective, corporations allocated additional resources towards "winning where they lived," and established visible alliances with other local corporations and properties (in-group favoritism).

While findings from this analysis failed to support that hometown sport property representatives exhibited behaviors of out-group derogation towards direct competitors of their city's prominent hometown corporations, there was evidence of normalized in-group favoritism by managers of both hometown sport properties and hometown corporations. Based upon interview participant discourse and feedback, however, members of the local community may be prone to exhibit *both* positive distinctiveness strategies of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. Sponsorships (in general) have been proposed as being capable of providing corporations a sustainable competitive advantage (Amis et al., 1997). While in agreement with their position, findings from this study would expand upon theirs, suggesting that hometown sponsorships provide optimal associative conditions for local corporations to establish sustainable competitive advantages within their home markets (Figure 14.4).

Managerial implications

The major implication from this study is that sponsorship managers must first know their target audiences to effectively manage their sponsorships.

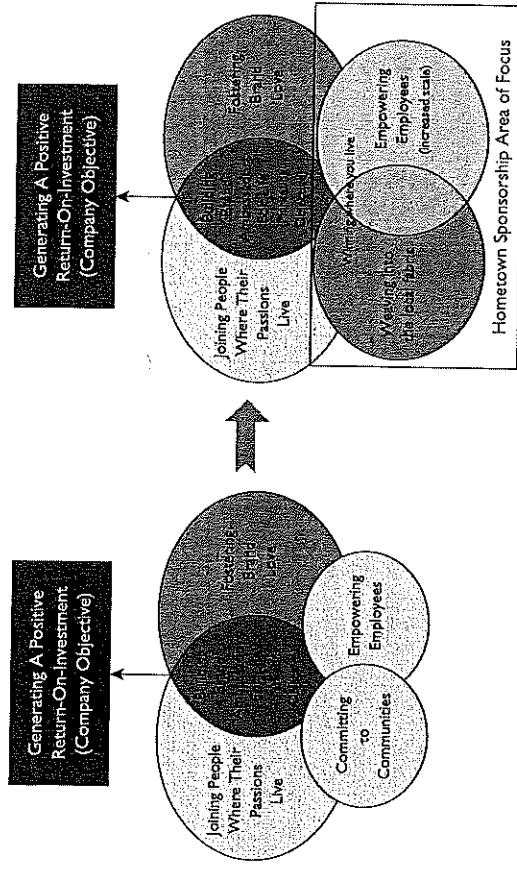


Figure 14.4 Summarization of hometown sponsorship's natural competitive advantage

This target audience understanding should be based on more than demographics, but include a meaningful understanding of their passions, preferences, and behaviors – especially communication behaviors. When selecting properties to sponsor – and when leveraging and activating upon these sponsorships – managers should attempt to create brand personalities that resonate closely to their target audiences to promote social group identification and encourage behaviors of brand favoritism. A related implication for managers is to focus on sponsorship's ability to create brand relationships with consumers and their social groups, and be cautious when linking direct revenue generation initiatives to sponsorships. Rather, as managers attempt to create connections with communities where they sponsor, they may want to consider leveraging their sponsored sport properties with CSR-linked sponsorship initiatives (Walker & Kent, 2009); particularly if their brands do not have an inherently high associative fit with the community (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer, & Groeppel-Klein, 2014).

For managers, whose corporations have only recently begun using sponsorship as a strategic resource, findings from this study suggest that the creation of a formal, hometown sponsorship strategy may serve as a safe, initial entry point and foundation for developing their corporate sponsorship portfolio. Formation of a strong hometown sponsorship portfolio is expected to 1) protect what is likely an already advantageous product/service market; 2) develop strong in-group associations with the community;

3) instill a sense of pride in employees, encouraging emotional investment and commitment; 4) create networking opportunities and brand alliances with other hometown sponsors; and 5) provide a testing ground for developing sponsorship best practices.

During interviews with participants, a managerial pattern emerged that provided some explanation for sponsorship's oft-noted measurement challenges. Corporations generally establish sponsorship objectives and develop their strategies for achieving them internally. Then, agencies are often empowered by their clients to manage the sponsorship leveraging and activation of these sponsorships. Measurement is regularly a shared responsibility between agencies and corporations, applying *ad hoc* reporting practices. Final sponsorship evaluation, however, is conducted by corporate leadership. Consequently, agencies develop leveraging and activation practices based on corporate objectives provided to them. For these leveraging and activation practices to occur, they must receive approval from corporate managers. From this study's analysis, considering the leveraging and activation practices discussed within the data, these sponsorship objectives are focused on developing meaningful brand relationships with consumers; whereas, the corporations' evaluation processes consistently prioritize the quantification of direct, financial returns (Figure 14.5).

When sponsorship measurement directly focuses on ROI measures, corporations are likely conflating their overarching corporate (ROI-focused) objectives into their overarching marketing (i.e. brand-focused) objectives. Little evidence was found in the data to suggest sponsorship leveraging and activation generates substantial and direct financial returns. Rather, from managers' perceptions, sponsorship effects appear to establish meaningful consumer relationships that *indirectly* generate significant financial returns over prolonged time periods. Therefore, when trying to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness with financial measures (i.e. ROI), corporations may be performing their evaluations with an inappropriate unit of measure. Findings from this study suggest that companies should focus on measuring sponsorship effectiveness by improving consumer behavior measurement practices that tie directly into sponsorship's relationship-oriented objectives.

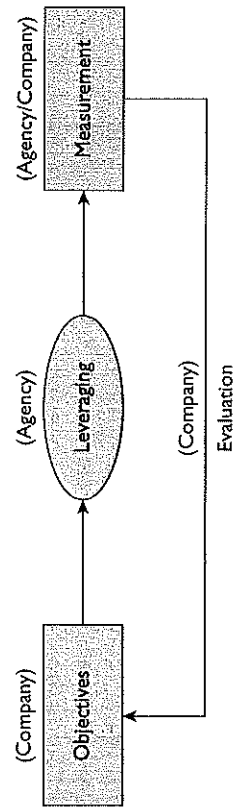


Figure 14.5 Common management responsibilities in both general and local contexts

Such an approach would be expected to capture sponsorship effects better. For instance, being able to track normative behavior changes throughout sponsorship exchanges – and comparing these metrics with overall corporate financial performance – may be a more accurate indicator of sponsorship's overall impact on corporations' financial health over time.

Theoretical implications

Using a social identity approach, findings from this study suggest the possibility for corporations to exploit their community associations to establish sustainable competitive advantages through sponsorship; thereby, extending the theoretical contributions of social identity theory and self-categorization theory into competitive advantage research. Previous research that examined competitive advantage and sponsorship (Amis et al., 1997; Amis et al., 1999; Fahy et al., 2004) used a resource-based view (RBV) of the firm as an inquisitive lens. Further, this study is the first known to specifically examine how sponsorship works from a hometown sponsorship context; explicitly incorporating sponsorship manager data from corporation, property, and agency roles. Therefore, findings from this study can serve as a conceptual starting point for model development and testing of hometown effects in subsequent studies.

Based on their inherent associative relationships, hometown sponsorships may be able to provide both a sustainable *and* dominant competitive advantage in corporations' local communities. Future studies should attempt to identify hometown market share and profitability for large (i.e. regional, national, and multi-national) corporations in relation to their hometown sponsorship investments; examining these sponsorships longitudinally. Findings from this study also suggest that hometown companies invest more into community initiatives than they would otherwise. One property representative who participated in this study went so far as to suggest that hometown sponsors saw more benefits from their community initiatives than non-local sponsors. Future studies should examine CSR-linked sport sponsorship benefits among these two contexts. Lastly, during interviews, patterns in managerial perspectives were noticeable based on sponsorship's managerial roles. Greater investigation should be conducted on how this triadic (i.e. corporation–agency–property) sponsorship management structure functions, and its influence on sponsorship leveraging and activation.

Research limitations

While this study's sample included sponsorship managers in corporate, agency, and property roles – and possessed interview participant representation from every major property in the researched area – there were two

factors that limited corporate sponsorship manager interview participation: (1) Existing policies regarding research participation, and (2) the inability to secure in-person interviews due to their managerial time-constraints. For instance, multiple corporate managers were unable to participate in the study due to corporate policies prohibiting research collaboration outside of approved vendors. Additionally, to allow for the inclusion of the second corporate sponsorship manager and a fourth agency consultant, two phone interviews were included in the sample; reducing the interviewer's access to participant social cues and environment. The two corporate sponsorship managers that served as interview participants, however, managed large sponsorship portfolios for two Fortune 500 corporations; offering valuable insight into hometown sponsorship. Another limitation in this study included the sole interviewer's subjectivities, which previously worked as an agency consultant and was already experienced with many of the properties that were represented in the interview participant sample. It is believed that these interviewer subjectivities introduced bias during the study's data collection and analysis phases. Lastly, this study is not generalizable to other hometown contexts, as it solely employs qualitative methods of inquiry. Consequently, transferability of findings is limited to corporate hometown sponsorships within the United States that adhere to the hometown sponsorship definition applied by this study.

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