

Does ambushing pay off?

Comparing the effectiveness of event sponsorship, team sponsorship, and ambush marketing

Does
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Received 8 March 2018
Revised 24 August 2019
Accepted 7 September 2019

Abstract

Purpose – Little is known about the comparative effectiveness of official sports event sponsorship, sports team sponsorship and ambush marketing (AM). The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine and compare the effectiveness of those three types of sports event-related marketing.

Design/methodology/approach – This research draws on a field experiment analyzing the effects the three types of sports event-related marketing during the FIFA Soccer World Cup 2014. To test the proposed main effects, the authors conducted a field experiment in two product categories (airlines and beer) testing for differences in brand attitude, customer-based brand equity and word-of-mouth (WOM), and testing moderating effects of advertisement creativity and sponsorship recognition.

Findings – Drawing on a field-experimental study on the occasion of the FIFA World Cup 2014, this research shows that team sponsorship has a stronger positive effect on consumers' attitudes than AM and event sponsorship. Brand attitude emerges as a central mediator of the sponsorship effect on WOM and customer-based brand equity. The authors find, surprisingly, that sponsorship recognition does not significantly moderate the relationship between sponsorship and customer attitudes, whereas advertisement creativity even weakens the positive effect of sponsorship on brand attitude, WOM and customer-based brand equity.

Research limitations/implications – Consumers do not seem to form their brand attitude on the fact whether they recognize the particular brand as a sponsor or ambushing brand. This can be attributed to the theory of moralistic fallacy, which describes the phenomenon that makes individuals ignore the existence of something they perceive immoral, explaining the similar effectiveness of both.

Originality/value – This research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it tests a causal model that examines brand attitude, customer-based brand equity and WOM intentions as outcome variables of AM effectiveness. This goes far beyond the proxy-measure of "sponsorship awareness," which previous studies used in order to quantify AM effectiveness. Second, taking into account and comparing the specific effects of event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM, the study broadens the knowledge about the effectiveness of alternative sports event-related marketing approaches. Third, previous studies advised event sponsors to design humorous and creative advertisements to defend themselves against ambush marketers and beat them at their own game, which is tested by including ad creativity as a moderating variable.

Keywords Advertising, Sports sponsorship, Ambush marketing, Marketing effectiveness, Sports events

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Sponsorship constitutes the backbone of most sports events, contributing the majority of income to facilitate the necessary infrastructure. Simultaneously, it yields media coverage and exposure of the brands for the sponsors (Cornwell, Weeks and Roy, 2005). A large body of literature on sports sponsorship exists already, underlining the marketing impact of sponsorship for companies (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Clark *et al.*, 2009; Olson and Thjøemøe, 2009).



The majority of this sponsorship research focused on brand awareness and recollection (Cornwell *et al.*, 2006; Johar and Pham, 1999; Pham and Johar, 2001), as well as corporate reputation and brand image (Cornwell, Pruitt and Clark, 2005; Humphreys *et al.*, 2010).

With rising investments in sports sponsorship, interest in ambush marketing (AM) has grown. AM refers to “the incursive, obtrusive, or associative activities of a brand intended to yield a range of benefits similar or comparable to those typically achieved by brands that have a formal, contractual sponsorship agreement with an event” (Burton and Chadwick, 2018, p. 289). Since AM is an elusive subject to study, research has been scarce so far (e.g. Burton and Chadwick, 2018; Meenaghan, 1998; Portlock and Rose, 2009; Séguin *et al.*, 2005). The extant literature follows four different research streams regarding AM: understanding AM and establishing a common understanding of the term in the literature (Burton and Chadwick, 2018; Nufer, 2016; Payne, 1998); discussing the legal aspects and questions that arise from AM (James and Osborn, 2016; McKelvey and Longley, 2015; Meenaghan, 1994); analyzing consumers’ and the broad public’s perceptions and evaluations of the practice of AM including the ethical discourse accompanied (Burton and Chadwick, 2019; Burton *et al.*, 2018; Dickson *et al.*, 2015); and examining the effects of AM on consumers’ attitude toward the ambushing brand including the success of AM campaigns and the comparison of the effectiveness of sponsorship and AM (Dickson *et al.*, 2018; Portlock and Rose, 2009; Schmidt *et al.*, 2018; Wolfsteiner *et al.*, 2015). Regarding the comparative marketing effectiveness of sponsorship and AM, literature on it is especially scant (Portlock and Rose, 2009; Schmidt *et al.*, 2018). Most empirical studies on the subject aimed at understanding consumers’ ability to make a correct attribution of sponsorship and AM. AM was labeled successful if respondents mistakenly deemed ambush marketers for official sponsors (Meenaghan, 1998; Séguin *et al.*, 2005; Wolfsteiner *et al.*, 2015). We address a gap in the sponsorship literature by comparing sponsorship and AM effectiveness. In the setting of a major sports event, we use a mass media setting (print advertising) and test behavior-linked measures.

Sponsorship is a multi-faceted construct. In the case of most big sporting events, event sponsors are featured most prominently, but the single athletes or national teams are additionally sponsored (Cornwell, Pruitt and Clark, 2005; Portlock and Rose, 2009). In these cases, event sponsors and team sponsors compete for consumers’ awareness (Dickson *et al.*, 2018). While event sponsors might be featured more prominently, national team sponsors might perform similarly well or even better than event sponsors in terms of sponsorship awareness due to national pride effects and longer-term sponsorship contracts. In some cases, team sponsors might even be mistaken for an official event sponsor (Dickson *et al.*, 2018).

With event sponsorship typically being the steepest priced sponsorship option, marketing managers might wonder about effectiveness and return on investment of event sponsorship. Do event sponsors in fact perform better in terms of marketing outcomes? Does event sponsorship outperform companies engaging in AM, and does it outperform team sponsorship? This research is especially relevant for companies deciding between team and event sponsorship, as it is a constitutive decision to make, which will determine the return on sponsorship investments.

Our research aims at investigating three new aspects within the literature of sponsorship and AM. First, it compares different levels of sponsorship in regards to their marketing effectiveness. We include event and team sponsors as well as ambush marketers in order to find empirical evidence whether or not sponsorship outcomes are worth their investment. Second, going beyond the simple proxy-measure of sponsorship awareness as used in previous studies, we determine marketing effectiveness by brand attitude, word-of-mouth (WOM) intentions and customer-based brand equity. This allows us to derive specific managerial implications as to how the three sponsorship/ AM forms compare.

Third, as AM has gained a reputation of “witty,” “humorous” and “surprising,” we included consumers’ perceived advertisement creativity as a moderating variable.

This helps marketing decision makers when designing communication campaigns in striking the right tone for their commercials or ads. We additionally control for the correct attribution of sponsorship or AM by including sponsorship recognition as a moderator.

2. Background

Sponsorship is big business. The sponsorship expenditures of the FIFA (2015) commercial affiliates add up to about \$1.6bn and the annual sponsorship fees of each of the 20 official event sponsors in FIFA Soccer World Championships are believed to amount to \$30–\$40m per year. This adds up to \$176m for each FIFA-Partner in four years (the highest ranked FIFA sponsors) (IEG, 2010; ISPO, 2018). Team sponsorship, in contrast, is only licensed for single national teams and is less expensive. Volkswagen, the official partner of the German national soccer team, for example, pays about \$27m per year (Handelsblatt, 2017). However, over the past ten years, the fees for sponsoring a top national team in football have grown significantly, while simultaneously the sponsorship fees for being a FIFA-Partner remained fairly stable. We suspect this might be due to the bad press the FIFA has had in the past years. Despite the steep increases in team sponsorship costs, team sponsors still pay less than FIFA event sponsors.

AM, in contrast, is free of license fees. “The term ‘ambush’ has been applied to the phenomenon owing to the tendency for those marketing activities to be devised by [ambushing companies] either undermining the ‘official’ competitor’s exposure and/or to boost the ambusher’s own brand awareness” (Townley, 1992, p. 3). In recent studies, scholars have called for a more nuanced approach toward the AM term. Several authors have stressed that AM should not necessarily be seen negative, but instead could be framed as an imaginative and creative marketing practice (Burton and Chadwick, 2018; Dickson *et al.*, 2015). Typical AM activities include phrases and images associated with the event or the respective venues (Humphreys *et al.* 2010). As a result, consumers often have difficulty distinguishing between official event sponsors and AM (Humphreys *et al.*, 2010; Portlock and Rose, 2009; Wolfsteiner *et al.*, 2015)). Stotlar (1993) relates consumer confusion to the increasing variety of official sponsor designations and levels, whereas Graham (1997) argues that the growing number of companies attempting AM is contributing to consumer confusion about official sponsorship. Newer studies claim that consumers are not confused but rather do not recall all of their sponsorship knowledge in tests (Wolfsteiner *et al.*, 2015).

In most countries, AM is considered illegal if official logos, symbols or claims are used (Meenaghan 1994, 1998). As a result, some companies seek out alternative strategies in an attempt to reap sponsorship-related marketing outcomes without actual infringement (Burton and Chadwick, 2018).

Independent of the ethical judgment of AM, it is necessary to understand how AM and different types of sponsorship compare in their effectiveness, both from an academic and practical perspective. We therefore analyze the effectiveness of event sponsors, team sponsors and AMs, observing their respective effects on brand attitude, customer-based brand equity and WOM.

3. Hypotheses development

In order to compare the event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM in terms of effectiveness, we operationalize effectiveness in three distinct latent variables: brand attitudes, WOM intentions and customer-based brand equity.

3.1 Sponsorship and brand attitude

Attitude toward the brand is defined as “consumers’ overall evaluations of a brand” (Keller, 1993, p. 4) and represents an important antecedent for brand choice (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Brand attitude is commonly used to evaluate sponsorship effectiveness (Dens *et al.*, 2018;

Grohs, 2016). McDaniel and Kinney (1998) investigated differences in brand attitude for groups that were exposed to sponsorship advertisements or commercials of ambush marketers during the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. As a result, attitudes toward the sponsorship brand were more positive than toward the ambushing brand.

Team sponsors directly support consumers' favorite teams, which may lead to an even stronger emerging perceived link between sponsors and consumers due to pride effects and strong emotional identification. Pride is conceptualized as the consequence of a favorable comparison of the self to others or to socially valued standards implicating social status on the one hand (Tracy and Robins, 2007), and a decreased sense of similarity to the weaker team (Oveis *et al.*, 2010). In the context of sponsorship, this implies that consumers identify with their favorite team strongly and exhibit pride if the supported team plays as a result of a social comparison with weaker opponents. As a result of McDaniel and Kinney's findings as well as the social comparison theory, we suggest that team sponsors will have the strongest positive effect on brand attitude, followed by event sponsors and ambush marketers:

- H1.* Team sponsorship will have the strongest positive effect on brand attitude, followed by event sponsorship and AM.

3.2 Brand attitude and WOM

WOM refers to informal communication between consumers in terms of opinions and evaluations of products or services (Anderson, 1998). Positive WOM includes recommendations and sharing positive experiences. Consumers' positive WOM intentions are defined as an individual attitude toward giving favorable WOM referrals to others (Anderson, 1998).

WOM has become an essential construct in marketing. However, in sponsorship literature, WOM has not received much attention. Very few recent studies on sponsorship effectiveness employed WOM as an indicator of sponsorship effectiveness (Mazodier *et al.*, 2018) or found evidence for a positive effect of sponsorship on WOM (Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009). While sponsorship might not necessarily have a direct effect on WOM, it might be indirectly affected through brand attitude. If sponsorship increases brand attitudes, consumers will be more likely to talk about sponsorship brands, and, as a result, create buzz. We therefore suggest that the positive effect of sponsorship on WOM will be mediated by brand attitude:

- H2.* Brand attitude will mediate the effect of event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM on WOM.

3.3 Brand attitude and customer-based brand equity

Customer-based brand equity represents "the difference in consumer choice between the focal branded product and an unbranded product given the same level of product features" (Yoo *et al.*, 2000, p. 196).

Customer-based brand equity is of special importance when studying sponsorship and AM effectiveness and recent studies employed it as a measure of sponsorship effectiveness (Tsordia *et al.*, 2017; Wang *et al.*, 2016). Simon and Sullivan (1993) showed that it lowers consumers' responsiveness to competitive marketing and also affects price sensitivity in a positive way. Cornwell *et al.* (2001) pointed out the necessity of future research on customer-based brand equity in the field of sponsorship. Henseler *et al.* (2011) presented initial findings on sport sponsorship and brand equity, raising the question as to which sponsorship types will affect customer-based brand equity most powerfully. While sponsorship might not

have a direct effect on customer-based brand equity, we suggest that with increased brand attitude, customer-based brand equity will probably grow indirectly through sponsorship:

H3. Brand attitude will mediate the effects of event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM on customer-based brand equity.

3.4 Moderation of advertisement creativity

Advertisement creativity is conceptualized as respondents' perception of the degree to which the advertisement presented is humorous, imaginative, and appealing. Creativity is included in the model because sponsorship addresses emotions and affective consumer responses (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy, 2005; Goldenberg *et al.*, 1999), and should therefore reinforce sponsorship effects.

Several empirical studies support the notion that creative advertisements lead to more favorable attitudes toward the brand (Ang *et al.*, 2007). While humor and creativity have been studied with great interest in the marketing and advertising literature (Eisend, 2009), the sponsorship and AM literature has largely neglected advertisement creativity (Meenaghan, 1998). Although several studies called for a nuanced approach when investigating AM (Burton and Chadwick, 2018; Dickson *et al.*, 2015), only few studies analyzed creative and imaginative aspects of AM (Burton and Chadwick, 2019; Chanavat *et al.*, 2016).

While humorous advertisements have been shown to lead to higher brand attitude (Ang *et al.*, 2007), humor often interacts with other constructs. In terms of sponsorship, creative advertisements will likely evoke positive feelings, which consumers link to the sponsoring brand, reinforcing the positive effect of sponsorship on brand attitude:

H4. Advertisement creativity enhances the effects of event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM on brand attitude.

3.5 Moderation of sponsorship recognition

Sponsorship recognition refers to consumers' judgement whether or not a certain brand is an official sponsor of a given event. In earlier studies, sponsorship recognition was used as a measurement proxy for determining sponsorship or ambush-marketing success, often termed as sponsorship awareness (Johar and Pham, 1999; Portlock and Rose, 2009). Several studies found evidence for ambush marketers being incorrectly identified as sponsors (McDaniel and Kinney, 1998; Sandler and Shani, 1989). To control for false identification of sponsorship, sponsorship recognition is included as a moderating variable in the research framework.

Consumers often have problems identifying sponsorship correctly (Dickson *et al.*, 2018; Johar and Pham, 1999; Pham and Johar, 2001). Several studies suggest that event sponsors are more often correctly identified as sponsors than ambush marketers incorrectly identifies as sponsors (Meenaghan, 1998; Portlock and Rose, 2009; Sandler and Shani, 1989), yet consumers are often wrong in their judgment (Dickson *et al.*, 2018; McDaniel and Kinney, 1998). If event sponsors do not tap the full potential of their sponsorship status which they paid for, they give way for ambush marketers to exploit the event and media coverage at basically no cost (Meenaghan, 1998). If consumers identify event sponsors and AMs correctly, the positive effect of sponsorship will be reinforced, and the effect of AM should be weakened:

H5. Sponsorship recognition enhances the effect of sponsorship on brand attitude.

4. Method and results

Our research draws on a field experiment analyzing the effects of event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM on the basis of print advertisements during the FIFA Soccer World Cup 2014. In order to test the proposed main effects, a stimulus was given in the form of a

printed ad of either an event sponsor, team sponsor or AM. Each test subject was presented with an ad from the two product categories (beer or airline) which was either an event sponsor, a team sponsor or an AM, creating a true between-subjects design. We carefully selected the product categories in order to make event sponsor, team sponsor and AM as comparable as possible. In the beer category, we included brands that all were among the top ten brands in terms of sales in the preceding year in Germany (rank 3–7), while we relied on customer reviews in the airline sample in order to make sure the brands were similar in terms of consumer perceptions. Brand attitude, customer-based brand equity and WOM were surveyed after giving test subjects some time to study the ad. Ad creativity and sponsorship recognition were additionally measured and included as moderating variables.

Data were collected using mall intercept techniques in a shopping street in Germany during the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Mall intercept techniques are commonly used in studies with a sport sponsorship setting (Dickson *et al.*, 2015). Interviewers approached the passersby (i.e. shoppers, people on their way home, people out for drinks, people meeting with friends, etc.) in the evening to ensure a sample with appropriate variance. We yielded a total of 320 valid responses with a mean age of 27.8 and 52.5 percent male respondents. On average, respondents had watched 7.9 (SD = 7.2, minimum = 0, maximum = 36) of 36 possible matches of the FIFA World Cup so far. Respondents were presented with one of six Soccer World Cup-themed ads (three sponsorship types \times two product categories). Test subjects were presented with either an event sponsor, team sponsor or AM ad. In the airline category, an Emirates advertisement represented the event sponsor, Lufthansa, the German team sponsor, and Turkish Airlines, an AM. The Turkish Airlines ambush ad featured Kobe Bryant, a famous basketball player, and Lionel Messi, a popular Argentinian soccer player, each playing ball on a Turkish Airline plane. In the beer category, advertisements by Hasseroeder (event sponsor), Bitburger (German team sponsor) and Warsteiner (AM) were used. Warsteiner presented a beer bottle and common fan items they would raffle during the time of the Championship. After presenting the advertisement, respondents were surveyed. All measures appear in Table A1. Attitude toward the brand was measured with a scale adapted from Lafferty *et al.* (2004) with four items; customer-based brand equity was measured by a scale adapted from Yoo *et al.* (2000) with four items; and positive WOM on a four-item scale adapted from Price and Arnould (1999). A self-developed and pre-tested five-item scale was used for measuring advertisement creativity.

Eliminating those participants who failed to match brands and sponsorship type, i.e. event sponsor, team sponsor and AM, would mean eliminating the ambushing effect from the sample (Meenaghan, 1996, 1998). Therefore, a moderating effect of sponsorship recognition on the effect of sponsorship on brand attitude was calculated instead of a manipulation check as outlined in *H5* and discussed below. Additionally, we controlled for brand-event fit with a four-item scale based on Simonin and Ruth (1998) to avoid confounding effects with brand attitude (Olson and Thjømøe, 2009). All constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert scale indicating the degree of agreement or disagreement. All multi-item constructs exhibited convergent validity, according to the factor loadings. Cronbach's α , composite reliability and average variance extracted transcended the common thresholds (see Table I). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the model constructs exhibit sufficient discriminant validity, meaning they were indeed distinct constructs.

The ambush-marketing group was defined as a comparison group for the dummy regression, so the effects of event sponsorship and team sponsorship are interpreted in relation to AM. With 0.08, SRMR was below the threshold of 0.1 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), indicating a good fit of the data for the hypothesized model.

Our results show a significant and negative effect for event sponsorship on brand attitude ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$, see Figure 1), indicating that ambush marketers in fact perform better in terms of brand attitude than event sponsors. The path coefficient of team

sponsorship was significant and positive compared to ambush marketers ($\beta=0.18, p < 0.01$), reflecting a superior performance in terms of brand attitude to both event sponsors and ambush marketers, partially supporting *H1*. While we suggested that team sponsors will perform best, followed by event sponsors and AM, we find that team sponsors perform best, yet AM perform surprisingly better than event sponsors.

Comparing the means of brand attitude across team sponsors, event sponsors and ambushing brand, the results in the airline category fully support *H1* (team sponsor = 5.69; event sponsor = 4.12; ambushing brand = 3.99, $F(2,144) = 21.32$). In the beer category, the ambushing brand performed better than the event sponsor (team sponsor = 4.26; event sponsor = 2.82; ambushing brand = 4.10, $F(2,170) = 15.45$), providing only partial support for *H1*.

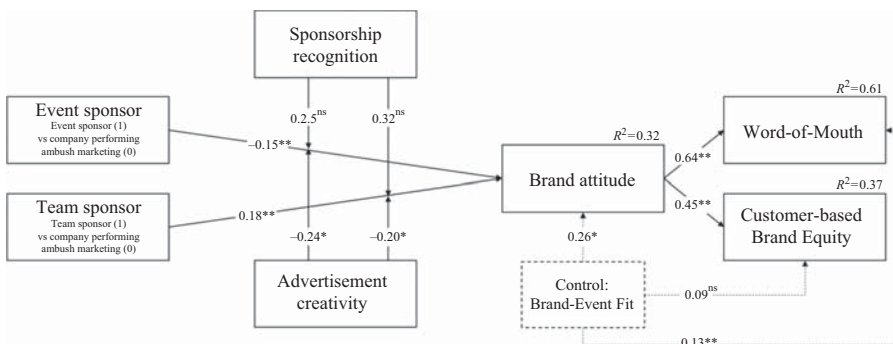
Brand attitude fully mediates the effects of event sponsorship and team sponsorship on customer-based brand equity (indirect effect event sponsorship: $\beta = -0.07, p < 0.01$; indirect effect team sponsorship: $\beta = 0.08, p < 0.01$) and WOM (indirect effect event sponsorship: $\beta = -0.09, p < 0.01$; indirect effect team sponsorship: $\beta = 0.12, p < 0.01$), providing support for both *H2* and *H3*. The fully mediated effects imply that if WOM or customer-based brand equity are targeted by sponsorship, it can only be achieved by first enhancing brand attitude.

Surprisingly, creativity negatively moderates the effect of event sponsorship on brand attitude ($\beta = -0.24, p < 0.05$) and of team sponsorship ($\beta = -0.20, p < 0.05$) on brand attitude. This implies that the more creative an advertisement of event sponsors or team sponsors is, the less positive the effect of event sponsorship and team sponsorship on brand attitude is perceived. Therefore, *H4* is rejected. We will discuss this surprising finding in the discussion section.

Construct	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1 Brand attitude	0.936	0.954	0.839	0.916				
2 Customer-based brand equity	0.943	0.959	0.853	0.575	0.924			
3 Advertisement creativity	0.907	0.930	0.728	0.386	0.385	0.853		
4 Brand-event fit (control variable)	0.910	0.936	0.786	0.401	0.343	0.344	0.886	
5 Word-of-mouth	0.948	0.963	0.866	0.756	0.701	0.408	0.435	0.931

Notes: α , Cronbach's α ; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted. Values along the diagonal represent the square root of the constructs average variance extracted

Table I. Correlates and reliability information of the multi-item constructs



Notes: ns, not significant. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Figure 1. Path coefficients and model results

H5 proposed a moderating effect of sponsorship recognition on the relationship between sponsorship type and brand attitude. If event sponsors are identified correctly as such, the effect of sponsorship should be reinforced. This effect was not significant (event sponsorship: $\beta = 0.25$, $p > 0.1$; team sponsorship: $\beta = 0.32$, $p > 0.1$) revealing that neither right nor wrong guesses on the type of sponsorship had any effect on brand attitude.

5. Discussion and implications

Results presented in this manuscript suggest that event sponsorship, team sponsorship and AM have distinct effects on consumer attitudes, and that the most expensive sponsorship alternative is not always the best. While earlier studies have mostly researched sponsorship awareness and recognition as the relevant outcome variable (Johar and Pham, 1999; McDaniel and Kinney, 1998), the different types of sponsorship and AM are relevant to take into consideration (Cornwell, Pruitt and Clark, 2005; Humphreys *et al.*, 2010). This study shows that team sponsors perform superior to event sponsors and AM. Turning to the results more specifically, three key findings are particularly worth discussion.

First, the results of our work provide empirical evidence that sponsorship effectiveness was highest for team sponsors, followed by ambush-marketing brands and, finally, event sponsors. Team sponsors exhibit the highest mean values in brand attitude, WOM and customer-based brand equity. The superior performance of team sponsors in contrast to event sponsors might be caused by lower cognitive distance to team sponsors than event sponsors and pride effects. In other words, consumers appear to make more positive attributions to sponsors of their home team as compared to event sponsors and ambush marketers. Team sponsors exclusively support consumers' favorite teams, creating both a strong cognitive link and an emotional attachment to the respective brand, whereas event sponsors provide support to all participating teams. Team sponsors often feature popular players in their ads, making the message more personal and relatable, contributing eventually to a stronger emotional consumer reaction. In contrast, event sponsors tend to emphasize the location and the sports discipline, which may evoke less emotional reactions and therefore lower brand attitudes.

Second, this study aimed at understanding moderating variables that reinforce or mitigate the effect of sponsorship on brand attitude. Advertisement creativity was analyzed across six print ads in two product categories. A significant moderating effect, opposite of the hypothesis, was found. A possible explanation for this negative moderation could be that positive brand attitudes derive from sponsorship and the notion of proud support. A highly creative or humorous ad might distract consumers from sponsorship and the message of pride, suggesting that creative advertisements shall be avoided for delivering the sponsorship message. Instead, information-based advertisements (e.g. brand *X* is proud sponsor of team *Y* or event *Z*) or grandiose, pride-laden themed ads might be more effective.

Third, this research tested the hypothesis that the effect of sponsorship on brand attitude for correctly identified event or team sponsors should be stronger. This idea builds on research by Humphreys *et al.* (2010) and extends the early work in sponsorship, in which sponsorship awareness and identification were frequently used as effectiveness proxies (Pham and Johar, 2001; Séguin *et al.*, 2005). Sponsorship recognition did not moderate the effect of sponsorship on brand attitude, suggesting that consumers do not form their brand attitudes based on whether they recognize the particular brand as a sponsor or ambushing brand. This finding can be explained by the theory of moralistic fallacy. Davis (1978) describes the phenomenon as making individuals ignore the existence of something they perceive immoral. Individuals might reject cognitive ambiguity, and refuse to acknowledge immoral or "bad" things, such as AM, leading to identifying ambush marketers mistakenly as sponsors. In other words, the default cognitive pattern appears to accept marketing approaches related to sponsorship without doubting their legitimacy, which leads to consumers perceiving most any advertisement related to sponsorship as official sponsorship.

5.1 Managerial implications

Our study offers valuable insights for marketing managers who are faced with the decision whether and how to engage in sports related marketing and advertising.

First, we found evidence that team sponsors perform better in terms of customer-based brand equity than ambush marketers and event sponsors, which makes team sponsorship the most viable option for marketing managers aiming at presenting their brand in a sports event setting. Given the lower cost of team sponsorship compared to event sponsorship as discussed above, this option seems especially viable. Event sponsorship, however, has a bigger scope and will be broadcasted on a more global level, which is why event sponsorship should be considered if a broad and international scope of branding is the goal.

Second, our results suggest that humorous or creative advertising does not yield better brand attitude for sponsors, but only for AMs. That is, a humorous ad might distract consumers from the sponsorship message, resulting in a lower attitude toward the sponsors' brand. Further analysis of this implication suggests the decision whether to engage in AM should be made depending on a brand's values in order to avoid negative side effects, since only brands that are known for being witty or creative might be successful with an AM strategy. Those implications go in line with findings of Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig (2018), who stated that sponsorship is only effective if the message is congruent with the consumers' expectations (brand knowledge).

Third, we found that consumers do not form their brand attitudes based on whether they recognize the particular brand as a sponsor or ambushing brand. This finding is relevant for sponsors because the mere presence and association with the respective event is equally, if not more important than the sponsorship message itself. On the one hand, this puts companies engaging in sponsorship in the difficult situation of differentiating themselves from ambushing brands and reinforces the need for outlawing AM. On the other hand, this invites companies to engage in AM because, so far, no detrimental effects on brand attitude could be identified even if AM was unveiled.

5.2 Limitations and avenues for future research

A number of limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting our results, which present avenues for further investigations into AM and sponsorship. First, the advertisements considered in our study, were taken from only two industries, airlines and alcoholic beverages. Burton and Chadwick (2019) suggest that consumers might react differently to AM practices depending on the industry of the firm. Thus, it is possible that results vary when researching advertisements of brands from other industries such as banks, car manufacturers, sporting goods manufacturers or even B2B-companies. We therefore encourage scholars to replicate our research, using ads from a broader variety of industries.

Second, we conducted our research in only one country (Germany). Thus, our findings may be biased in terms of the popularity of the team sponsor and should, therefore, be applied mainly in national settings. Dickson *et al.* (2018) showed how easily the home team's sponsor was confused with the event sponsor. This shifts focus from the event sponsor to the sponsor of the home team. Similar effects could emerge in an international setting for the national team's sponsor. Further research is required to understand the effectiveness of event sponsorship in relation to team sponsorship across multiple countries.

Third, we found that witty and humorous ads only seem to yield positive effects for AMs. These findings contradicted our theory and call for further investigations into the underlying processes, because the airline and beer companies selected may have had pre-existing brand perceptions that confounded the effects of witty or humorous ads. Other possible research avenues may include the role of different consumer expectations for sponsorship advertisements, or how cognitive distance influences the effectiveness of the sponsorship message.

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Constructs and scale items	Standardized loadings
<i>Attitude toward the brand (adapted from Lafferty et al., 2004)</i>	
1. I like brand X	0.90
2. I think X is a good brand	0.91
3. I associate positive things with brand X	0.92
4. I find brand X favorable	0.93
<i>Customer-based brand equity (adapted from Yoo et al., 2000)</i>	
1. If there is another brand as good as X, I prefer to buy X	0.90
2. It makes sense to buy X instead of any other brand, even if they are the same	0.93
3. Even if I cannot distinguish the products of X from the products of another brand, I still favor the product of X	0.95
4. Even if another brand has the same features as X, I would prefer to buy X	0.92
<i>Positive word-of-mouth (adapted from Price and Arnould, 1999)</i>	
1. I would recommend X to someone who seeks my advice	0.92
2. I say positive things about X to other people	0.93
3. I would recommend X to others	0.96
4. I like it when I can recommend X in conversations	0.92
<i>Advertisement creativity (self-developed and pre-tested)</i>	
1. I think this ad is funny	0.83
2. I think the creators of this ad really have a sense of humor	0.87
3. I find the advertisement imaginative	0.84
4. The advertisement appeals to me	0.88
5. I find this ad creative	0.84
<i>Brand-event fit (based on Simonin and Ruth, 1998)</i>	
1. I think X and the world championship are a good fit	0.92
2. I think X and the world cup complement each other	0.92
3. In my opinion the cooperation between X and the world championship is consistent	0.89
4. In my opinion the cooperation between X and the world championship makes sense	0.81

Table A1.
Scales

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