Inferring Corporate Motives: How Deal Characteristics Shape Sponsorship Perceptions

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Abstract

Sponsoring joins brands with sports, the arts, and events in mutually beneficial partnerships. In the context of sports, the authors examine how sponsorship deal characteristics affect consumer inferences, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward a sponsor and a sport property in a partnership. The authors develop a conceptual framework that links a holistic set of sponsorship deal characteristics (i.e., contract length, regional proximity of the sponsor, sponsorship fee, and sponsorship type) to individual consumer perceptions. Study 1 tests the framework in a field study of 2,787 consumers across 44 different sponsorships. Study 2 largely confirms the findings of the field study in an experimental field study. Overall, the results show that regionally proximate and long-term partnerships benefit as consumers make positive inferences about partnership fit and sponsor motives. In contrast, consumers associate high sponsorship fees, international sponsors, and naming-rights relationships with calculative motives and perceive these factors negatively. For managers, finding that sponsorship deal characteristics matter is important, not only for sponsor–property relationships but also for relationships between the sponsoring brands and consumers.

Keywords: sponsorship, sports marketing, motives, multilevel field study, field experiment

In 2012, Chevrolet began a seven-year sponsorship of Manchester United. The deal caused a stir because of the price ($600 million) and because the Chevy brand, as American as baseball and hotdogs (Baxter 2014), was sponsoring a soccer team from the English Premier League. With the $85 million per year "quid-pro-quo" connotations of the international deal, it is not surprising that some viewed the partnership as a fiasco even after the deal-signing dust settled (Rechtin 2014).

The overarching nature of a sponsorship deal negotiated by management includes characteristics such as duration, contract fee, and relationship type. While setting the stage for the sponsorship relationship, these managerial deal-making characteristics tend to be overlooked as contributing to perceptions at the consumer level. Against this background, the research objective is to understand the role of deal-level partnership characteristics in shaping consumer inferences, attitudes, and behaviors toward both a sponsor and the sponsored club.

Sponsorship is a cash or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property (IEG 2017). It has become a mainstay of strategic marketing communications, as evidenced by expenditures that reached US$60 billion worldwide in 2016 (IEG 2017). Brands are eager to connect with the passion of sports, their media coverage, and their audiences through sponsorship. Consequently, sport dominates the growing global sponsorship market: In North America, where 37% of worldwide sponsorship spending occurs, 70% of all sponsorship expenditures pertain to sports (IEG 2017). Sponsorship has expanded through growth of both sporting events and sponsored properties. For example, most major sporting venues around the world now have a corporate sponsor name compared with two decades ago (Cornwell 2014). According to IEG (2016), sponsorship right fees account for a substantial share of the total worldwide marketing spending (between 16 and 25% over the last 15 years). Despite this extensive use of sponsorship in marketing, managers still rely on "gut feeling" when entering

sponsorship agreements (DeGaris, Dodds, and Reese 2016) rather than marketing research.

Drawing on arguments from attribution and identity theories (Heider 1958; Stryker and Burke 2000), we propose that deal characteristics initially set by sponsor and sponsee determine consumer inferences about sponsorship fit and sponsor motives, which in turn shape attitudes toward the sponsor and also the sponsee. We examine the proposed effects of sponsorship deal-level characteristics (i.e., contract length, regional proximity, sponsorship fee, and sponsorship type) on consumer-level outcomes as well as the mediating effects in a field study and an experimental field study. The field study (Study 1) focuses on outcomes for sponsors of 44 sponsorships of the German Football League, using representative field data from 2,787 consumers. Here, we consider the perceptions of people familiar with particular partnerships and use their broad-based knowledge and exposure to the partnership as a foundation for attributions and inference making. Soccer is a high-profile sport that comprises 71% of the sport sponsorship market in Germany. The context of Study 2 is handball, a comparatively low-profile professional sport with a sponsorship share smaller than 2% (Nielsen Sports 2015). Here, holding sponsorship type constant, we manipulate the remaining partnership characteristics and also examine effects on the sponsored property. Study 2 largely confirms the results obtained in Study 1 using a between-subjects experimental field study design.

This research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we conceptually link the level of sponsorship decision making with the consumer view. Although research has made substantial progress in advancing understanding of consumer-level determinants of sponsorship outcomes (e.g., Cornwell 2008) and also of managerial decision making in sponsorship (e.g., Farrelly and Quester 2005), these two streams have developed independently. By linking sponsorship deal characteristics to consumer inference making, the current work sheds light on the interplay between deal characteristics and consumer-level outcomes. Second, we show empirically that

perceptions of sponsorship fit and attributions of sponsor motives are associated with sponsor partnership characteristics. Third, illustrating that consumer responses to sponsorship deal characteristics are not limited to the sponsor, this work is the first to consider the influential link between deal characteristics and sponsored properties by finding that decisions in the sponsorship deal affect consumer loyalty toward the sponsored property. Further, the research design responds to calls for studies conducted outside laboratories or venues and based on broad experience (Cornwell and Humphreys 2013), and it extends existing field study approaches by allowing for a comparative evaluation of managerial-level aspects with individual-level response.

Theory Development

Conditions and Outcomes of Inference Making: The Multiple Inference Model

Inference making refers to any construction of meaning beyond information that is readily available (Dick, Chakravarti, and Biehal 1990; Harris 1981). In attribution theory, inference making is a common strategy used to make sense of observed behaviors (Heider 1958). The multiple inference model (MIM) of attribution (Reeder et al. 2004) explains how perceivers integrate several inference traits and motives. In particular, the MIM considers three content conditions that determine attribution outcomes: free choice, no choice, and ulterior motives. The MIM suggests that a generally positive behavior results in positive trait evaluations under both free-choice and no-choice conditions whereas the ulterior motive condition leads to a negative trait attribution (Reeder et al. 2004). The mechanisms through which the three conditions affect trait attributions are explained by three motive-relevant traits: unselfishness in the free-choice condition, obedience in the no-choice condition, and selfishness in the ulterior motive condition (Reeder et al. 2004). Because sponsorship is an intentional behavior and thus subject to attributions of intent (Maselli and Altrocchi 1969), consumers are likely to infer sponsor motives from available information, whereby the three motivational conditions of the MIM correspond to

three possible sponsor motives.

First, people might infer that a sponsorship forms from "free choice" or good intentions directed at the sponsored property. For example, in sponsoring the development league of the National Basketball Association (NBA), Gatorade, a company already with high-profile NBA sponsorships, may communicate its passion for the game (Barca 2017), thereby expressing affective motives.

Second, people might assume that by engaging as sponsors, firms are doing their civic duty in supporting properties. In particular, people might expect local companies with high economic relevance for a city or region to act as sponsors of local events or teams, such as Michigan-based Little Caesars' sponsorship of the Detroit Red Wings' arena. Similarly, Travelers Insurance sponsored a PGA tournament in New England when there was discussion of losing the event if a sponsor was not found. Here, the sponsorship can be interpreted as a response to a normative call. In keeping with the MIM, sponsorship is a volitional act. Therefore, no-choice better reflects "limited choice," in which stakeholder pressure or expectations may be a motivation to engage in a sponsorship.

Third, firms engage in sponsorship to reach markets and sell products and services. Here, people might view a sponsorship relationship (e.g., between Chevrolet and Manchester United) as largely commercial or calculative, intended to work like advertising in reaching worldwide markets. Given the nature of sponsorship as a marketing communication instrument, a certain calculative motivation seems natural. In summary, this study proposes that people infer a mix of motives, with the types of motive attributions (affective, normative, and calculative) mapping well with attribution theory discussions.

Antecedents to Inference Making: Deal Characteristics as Identity Signals

Although the MIM helps explain how different motives influence subsequent trait attributions,

little is known about why perceivers might assume that an observed action is the result of free choice, no choice (or limited choice), or ulterior motives. Here, a key notion of attribution theory is that various types of information act as antecedents to the attribution-making process (Kelley and Michela 1980). Inferences may stem from facts, such as the annual amount of the sponsorship support a team receives, or may be determined by subtle cues, such as local situational referencing to communicate geographic proximity. For example, consumers are regularly exposed explicitly to sponsorship information (e.g., a news announcement of a new shirt sponsorship deal) or implicitly when attending or watching a match on television. Notably, people need not know all the details about individual aspects or characteristics of an object to make inferences (Dick, Chakravarti, and Biehal 1990).

Identity theory suggests that a person can adopt multiple identities or self-concepts, which become salient depending on the particular situation (Arnett, German, and Hunt 2003; Stryker and Burke 2000). Likewise, organizations can be considered social actors, assuming multiple roles associated with particular role expectations and behaviors (Whetten and Mackey 2002). Sponsoring firms have two specific role identities, one as a business entity and one as a sponsor, implying collaboration with and support of the sport partner. In turn, the sport partner holds the role as a sports club and has a business-related role identity. Against this background, the concept of role-identity salience (Callero 1985) suggests that the extent to which a sponsor's or a club's role identities are expressed can vary between them. Importantly, increased commitment of the organization to a role identity makes that role more salient both for itself in its actions and for others in their observations (Callero 1985; Stryker and Burke 2000). Specifically, identity theory suggests that the nature of the sponsorship deal provides information about the roles each partner is committed to and expressing. This communication is framed by the perceptions of other sponsor–club relationships because they help form the basis of role-based expectations (Stryker

and Burke 2000).

This study considers deal characteristics the cues antecedent to consumer-level attributions, though research on these characteristics as signals is rather limited (Table 1). Focusing on *contract duration*, Walraven et al. (2016) investigate 72 sport sponsorships, revealing a small positive effect of contract duration on relative efficiency, assessed from a consumer-based perspective. Gwinner (1997) also recognizes the importance of sponsorship specifics (e.g., domain, size, history) in the transfer of event image to a brand and, thus, as relevant to consumers. Gwinner does not, however, explicate the importance of sponsorship *type* in terms of the nature of the deal made (e.g., stadium naming rights, team sponsorship). The role of *geographic location* as an antecedent to consumer responses to sponsorship appears mainly in studies on social sponsorship (e.g., Grau and Folse 2007; Russell and Russell 2010). Here, while some studies show positive effects of locally focused campaigns, others suggest that geographically splitting donations or even exclusively allocating donations to foreign beneficiaries is more effective than supporting causes at home (Schons, Cadogan, and Tsakona 2015). Finally, while theory suggests that *contract fee* is a signal relevant to consumers, studies in the adjacent social sponsorship domain provide mixed evidence of the effect of donation amount on consumer perceptions (e.g., Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, and Hoyer 2012). Considering these various characteristics, an expected sponsor role may be more readily perceived for a company engaged in a long-term relationship with a geographically nearby team, as cues of longevity and proximity help promote salience of the firm's sponsor role identity. Alternatively, a geographically distant sponsor paying a great deal, such as Chevrolet in the Manchester United example, may raise suspicions.

[Table 1 here]

Conceptualization and Research Model

Figure 1 depicts our conceptual model. Referring to the top box, and following from identity theory, the sponsor partnership characteristics signal the commitment of the sponsorship partners to their role identities as sponsor and club. Also depicted in the top box are control variables such as sponsor firm size and team sport success, allowing isolation of the effects of deal characteristics from other sponsor and property variance. The *consumer inference making* box shows deal characteristics and characteristics of both the sponsor and sponsored as input to the inference-making process. Our model treats sponsorship fit as particularly relevant to inference making because the perception of a sponsor fitting well with a property influences downstream processes such as attitudes and behavioral intentions (e.g., Pappu and Cornwell 2014; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Speed and Thompson 2000).

Because audiences are arm's-length from partnering organizations, they must "reason … back from an effect to its underlying cause" (Pizarro, Tannenbaum, and Uhlmann 2012, p. 186) in their judgment of sponsor motives. Consumers observe the characteristics of the relationship, consider the fit between the partners, and attribute *affective*, *normative*, and *calculative* motives to the sponsor in the inference-making process. This process, in turn, influences outcomes for sponsors and sponsored properties (see middle right box of Figure 1). The inferred motives are input to attitudes toward the sponsor (subsequently *sponsor attitude*) and attitudes toward the club *(club attitude),* which are antecedents to loyalty to the sponsor (*sponsor loyalty*) and loyalty to the club (*club loyalty*), respectively. The model also acknowledges that the motive, attitude, and loyalty dimensions are not independent of one another.

[Figure 1 about here]

Construct Relationships and Hypotheses Development

Consumer-Level Effects of Fit and Motive Inferences on Sponsorship Outcomes

A central objective of the research is to determine whether consumer-inferred motives of the

sponsor affect sponsorship outcomes. Consumers who perceive a sponsor as engaging in a sponsorship out of an emotional attachment to the property evaluate the sponsoring brand more favorably (Deitz, Myers, and Stafford 2012; Rifon et al. 2004). Theoretically, this is consistent with the MIM (Reeder et al. 2004), which states that a positive behavior perceived as occurring under free choice, rather than acting for ulterior motives, results in positive trait attitudes toward the subject. This link between a behavior perceived as resulting from free choice and attribution of a positive character trait is mediated by unselfishness. In the sponsorship context, we expect the attribution that a sponsor is affectively motivated to lead to positive attitudes toward the sponsor and greater loyalty. The attribution of affective motives is likely to strengthen the perceived relationship between the partners, resulting in an improved evaluation of the property with regard to brand attitude and loyalty. In line with prior research (e.g., Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006), we differentiate between attitudinal (i.e., sponsor attitude and club attitude) and behavioral (i.e., sponsor loyalty and club loyalty) sponsorship outcomes. Thus:

H_1: Inference of affective motives is positively related to (a) sponsor attitude, (b) club attitude, (c) sponsor loyalty, and (d) club loyalty.

When firms engage in sponsorship, external expectations may result in normative motives that are easily visible to audiences. Consumers who are aware of a team in a community usually view a sponsor of local sports as a good corporate citizen. In support of this, the MIM proposes that positive behaviors occurring in response to external conditions (no choice) result in the attribution of positive traits by perceivers. Normative commitment is also communicated through the supply of financial support. When an individual athlete, team, or event struggles to find financial footing, companies that step forward are perceived as responding to need. Dispositional obedience helps explain this seemingly contradictory positive outcome of the no-choice motivational condition: Sponsors that engage out of normative motives obediently fulfill

stakeholders' expectations. In this case, the motive-related trait of obedience is generally associated with positive outcomes (Reeder et al. 2004). Thus:

H_2: Inference of normative motives is positively related to (a) sponsor attitude, (b) club attitude, (c) sponsor loyalty, and (d) club loyalty.

When attributing calculative motives, consumers are suspicious of the partnership intent, and this response to the relationship may negatively influence brand perceptions (Pappu and Cornwell 2014; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Investigations into cause-related sponsorship and corporate social responsibility have extensively discussed inferences of calculative motives (e.g., Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006), in which the disconnect between firm- and public-centered reasons for engagement is readily apparent in high-profile cases. Theoretically, the inference of an ulterior motive, of which selfishness is the mediating motive-related trait, is likely to result in negative outcomes (Reeder et al. 2004). In such cases, the reasons for engagement come into question, as in the case with Chevrolet and Manchester United, and thus we expect inference of calculative motives to influence downstream attitudes and behaviors:

H_3: Inference of calculative motives is negatively related to (a) sponsor attitude, (b) club attitude, (c) sponsor loyalty, and (d) club loyalty.

Sponsorship fit refers to the perceived congruence between sponsor and property on key dimensions, such as product category (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006) and image (Gwinner and Eaton 1999), and is often critical to outcomes such as brand image, brand attitude, behavioral intentions, and brand meaning clarity (e.g., Mazodier and Merunka 2012; Pappu and Cornwell 2014; Speed and Thompson 2000). Theory suggests that information regarding fit is available to consumers as a result of deal making and triggers sense making. Sense making following a trigger event, in which individuals in an organization must consider managerial decisions (e.g.,

Weick 1995), is well established in organizational literature, but it also applies to the individual assessing organizations at a distance. In sense making, a consumer may wonder why certain partners have come together. The basis of fit for sponsorship success is commonly explained by people's need for congruence (Heider 1958); if consumers perceive a sponsorship as incongruent, they will seek alignment, as incongruent sponsorships cause psychological tension and affect sponsorship outcomes negatively (e.g., Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). In contrast, congruence fosters a positive attitude toward the sponsor.

While the sponsorship and corporate social responsibility literature generally agrees on the importance of perceived fit in explaining relevant outcomes (for a review, see Peloza and Shang 2011), the interrelationship between perceived fit and inferred motives is less clear. Several studies conceptualize perceived fit as an antecedent to perceived motives (e.g., Rifon et al. 2004; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Alternatively, motives may act as a moderator on the fit–outcome link (e.g., Barone, Norman, and Miyazaki 2007). Here, in line with attribution research and research in social psychology (Molden 2009), the nature of both the sponsor and the property (e.g., a running shoe brand and running event vs. a bank and running event) and their engagement in a partnership (i.e., traits and social circumstances) provide the social context for judging motives and developing attitudes. Under high-fit conditions, consumers will perceive a partnership in terms of affective motives. Conversely, unless reasons for the relationship are clearly articulated, fans of the team or customers of the brand may attribute ulterior motives to the partnership. This argumentation is also in line with Kelley's (1973) discounting principle, according to which consumers discount an explanation if an alternative explanation exists (Rifon et al. 2004). Thus:

H_4: Sponsorship fit is positively related to (a) sponsor attitude, (b) affective motives, (c) normative motives, (d) club attitude, (e) sponsor loyalty, and (f) club loyalty and negatively

related to (g) calculative motives.

Effects of Sponsor Partnership Characteristics on Sponsorship Perceptions

Because a broad range of sponsorship characteristics may exert an influence on individual consumer perceptions, we sought empirical confirmation for our candidate variables. To obtain information on sponsor partnership characteristics, we analyzed a sample of 92 newspaper and trade journal articles published between 2002 and 2012 that dealt with sponsorship partnerships. The results showed that the most frequently communicated characteristics are past or future contract length (appearing in 83% and 100% of the analyzed cases, respectively), regional proximity (78%), sponsorship fees (90%), and sponsorship type (100%).

Contract length. Long-term sponsorships require a high level of mutual commitment and trust between the involved parties (Farrelly and Quester 2005). The longer partners have been together, the more they seem to go together, because they develop an overlapping set of brand associations over time. These shared associations support the perception of fit. According to identity theory, firms deciding for a long-term relationship evince genuine commitment (Stryker and Burke 2000). In sports, a long-term sponsor has likely been with a team through winning and losing seasons, when recruitment of players has gone well and not gone well. Thus, consumers are less likely to infer that the firm's motivation for sponsoring is predominantly commercial, as attributions of "real" commitment increase with duration (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). Walraven, Bijmolt, and Konig (2014) provide empirical evidence of such long-term sponsorship effects in their five-year study of 25,000 consumers, in which awareness was most notably elevated in the second year. Thus:

H_5: Contract length is positively related to (a) sponsorship fit, (b) affective motives, and (c) normative motives and negatively related to (d) calculative motives.

Regional proximity. The role of place is fundamental in identity formation (Stedman 2002).

On this basis, identity theory suggests that being in a club's region raises the extent to which a firm's sponsor role identity becomes salient. Owing to the natural connection from being in the same region, geographically proximate sponsorships are particularly effective in signaling high levels of commitment to the sponsor role, which in turn should contribute positively to attributions of high sponsorship fit and affective motives. With regard to normative motives, Close et al. (2006) show that a sponsor's close connection not only with the sponsee but also with the community is crucial for an effective sponsorship. Ceteris paribus, consumers should therefore view geographically close sponsors as acting in line with expectations of community involvement. Similarly, sponsor stakeholders such as employees and partners are likely to perceive sponsoring sports close to home particularly favorably (Yang and Goldfarb 2015).

In contrast, sponsorship of a team with no regional linkages to the sponsor might arouse consumer suspicion, leading to a shift in attributional reasoning (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Inferences about the sponsor's motives are likely to rest on more complex reasoning, increasing the likelihood of attributing calculative motives. Consequently, consumers will evaluate sponsors not regionally connected with sponsored properties less positively in terms of sponsorship fit and affective and normative motives and more negatively in terms of calculative motives than sponsors with a strong connection with the region.

H_6: Regional proximity is positively related to (a) sponsorship fit, (b) affective motives, and (c) normative motives and negatively related to (d) calculative motives.

Sponsorship fee. High sponsorship fees are often a highly visible form of firm spending. For example, during the economic crisis of 2009, Bank of America, having received U.S. government bailout funds, was sharply criticized for sponsoring the NFL Experience, an event surrounding the Super Bowl (Chuchmach et al. 2009). High sponsorship fees are typically associated with high media exposure and large audience attendance (Wishart, Lee, and Cornwell

2012). Firms' decision for a large- rather than small-scale sponsorship communicates the commercial nature of the sponsorship in terms of brand exposure. From an identity theory perspective, and because sponsorship is generally perceived as less commercial than advertising (Olson 2010), high sponsorship fees may reflect less commitment to a company's role as a sponsor. That is, such fees may communicate that the sponsor is simply buying media coverage. While high sponsorship fees can lead to feelings of gratitude in grassroots contexts, costly contracts in high-profile sports may conflict with expectations of a sponsor role. Signaling intentions to market through sponsorship, high fees thus may be perceived as less congruent with the sponsored properties' identity and subsequently elevate attributions of predominantly calculative motives. Alternatively, low sponsorship fees may communicate support without expectations of high marketing value. Thus, low fees should make it easier for a firm to meet role expectations as a sponsor.

H_7: Sponsorship fee is negatively related to (a) sponsorship fit, (b) affective motives, and (c) normative motives and positively related to (d) calculative motives.

Sponsorship type. Gwinner (1997) argues that the *type* of sponsorship can affect outcomes for sponsors and properties. In sports, the nature of sponsor engagement with a property is typically venue naming, apparel or "shirt sponsorships" (in Europe), and in-venue or perimeter logo presentation. Analogous to the argument for sponsorship fee, identity theory suggests that a higher level of prominence in sponsorship type will increase the likelihood that consumers will perceive a firm as less committed to its sponsor role identity. Grohs and Reisinger (2014) find a negative relationship between sponsorship exposure and perceptions of the sponsoring brand. This implies that especially prominent sponsorship types (e.g., naming rights, shirt sponsorships) may be perceived negatively because they highlight the business role identity of sponsors. Thus:

H_8: High-prominence sponsorship types are negatively related to (a) sponsorship fit, (b)

affective motives, and (c) normative motives and positively related to (d) calculative motives.

Control Variables

In addition to the proposed effects of the conceptual framework, other variables might offer alternative explanations for any effects observed. Differences in the sponsored property, sponsor characteristics, and consumer characteristics may all play an important role. For example, the prominence of the property (e.g., measurable by the number of fans), differences in sport success, and the club image may be directly related to inferred sponsor motives, sponsorship fit, and attitude toward the sponsor. In examining the role of sponsorship partnership characteristics in Study 1, we control for variance in the sponsored properties' characteristics. We also include firm size to rule out the potential explanation that inferred motives are more negative for larger firms, whose motives may be discounted because of their relatively higher power (Kelley 1973). At the consumer level, we include a control for existing customer relationships with the sponsor. Customers might infer more favorable motives as a result of higher commitment to the firm and better product knowledge (Lacey, Close, and Finney 2010), which provides the basis for assumptions of similarity (Kelley 1973) between the sponsor and the property. This aspect is particularly important because sponsorship research often does not control for consumer experience with a brand (Cornwell 2008). Finally, we control for fan status and sociodemographic variables of age and gender. Prior research has found that these variables are related to sponsorship or cause-related marketing perceptions (e.g., Roy and Cornwell 2004; Schons, Cadogan, and Tsakona 2015).

Study 1

Data Collection and Measures

Study 1 data comprise a survey-based representative consumer field study and descriptive

information from a professional sponsorship database that includes contract length, the sponsor headquarters, and sponsorship fees. Surveys were collected by Respondi, a leading online panel provider in Germany. Criteria for representativeness of the German population were age (18–65 years), gender, and region of residence. People were invited to participate on a continuous basis within a time frame of two weeks. Because of the rolling enrollment to obtain a quota sample, calculating nonresponse bias was not possible. In total, 2,787 respondents filled out the survey and received a monetary incentive of €.70 for participation. Average response time was seven minutes and 36 seconds. The average age of the respondents was 43.3 years (SD = 13.9), and 51.7% were women. After answering introductory questions about involvement and identification (i.e., fan status), respondents indicated their familiarity with each of the 25 sport properties (i.e., teams such as FC Bayern Munich, Borussia Dortmund, and 1. FC Köln) using dichotomous recognition measures. As clubs were preselected on the basis of size and familiarity in Germany, small second-division clubs with small regionally limited audiences were not considered. Thus, our sample reflects the characteristics of highly visible professional sports clubs and their sponsors and represents the lion's share of the sponsorship market of soccer in Germany. Next, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the clubs they had marked as familiar to them. Random assignment helped avoid bias from social identification with a particular club. For each of the 25 clubs, two sponsors were preselected on the basis of their relevance to respondents in their consumer role. Therefore, business-to-business sponsors were not included in the survey.

Respondents were asked to sequentially evaluate up to two sponsors of the particular assigned club, based on the following approach: First, respondents were provided with an industry cue and asked to recall a sponsor of the club from the particular industry. Brand attitudes of respondents who did not recall any sponsor were significantly lower (M = 3.00, SD = 1.02) than those of respondents who recalled a sponsorship relationship (M = 3.49, SD = 1.02, *p* =

.000). Second, the respondents evaluated brand attitude and sponsorship fit (items taken from Simmons and Becker-Olsen [2006]). Third, respondents indicated their familiarity with the sponsorship using sponsorship recognition and a single item on familiarity. Fourth, we measured perceived motives with scales adapted from Allen and Meyer (1990), Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006), and Ellen, Webb, and Mohr (2006). Because motive inferences without awareness of the sponsorship are likely to depend on other brand- or club-related associations, familiarity serves as a prerequisite for sponsorship-induced motive inferences. Therefore, respondents were only asked about sponsor motives if they were at least somewhat familiar with the sponsorship (i.e., a value of 2 on the five-point scale). Respondents not at least somewhat familiar with the sponsor brand were routed to a new loop to evaluate the second sponsor of the club. The procedure was repeated for the second preselected sponsor for the particular club. Finally, sociodemographics (age and gender) and place of residence (postal code) were collected. Figure 2 outlines the overall consumer-level data collection process and the enhancement of the data set with the managerial-level data. We retained only sponsor partnerships with at least 20 observations in the analysis, which resulted in 2,997 evaluations of 44 sponsors.

[Figure 2 about here]

For the sponsorship-level analysis, we drew objective data characterizing the 44 sponsorships from a professional sponsorship database (Sponsors.de) and other secondary data sources (e.g., press releases) covering 2002–2012. Searches for announcements and renewal notices produced specific numbers that we then cross-checked with publicly available data to ensure accuracy and consumer-level visibility of the sponsorship characteristics. Sponsors represented a variety of industry sectors: automotive (four), banking (five), beverage (six), consumer goods (seven), energy (three), fashion (two), gambling/lottery (two), insurance (five), pharmaceuticals (two), retailing (three), telecommunications (one), tourism (one), and transport

(three).

Sponsorship partnership characteristics. We calculated contract length as the number of years a sponsor had been committed to the club (M = 7.45, SD = 9.99) and measured sponsorship fee on a yearly basis (M = €3.43 million, SD = 4.74). Because the distribution of the data was skewed, we conducted a logarithmic transformation to test whether contract length affected inference making and fit at a diminishing rate. We coded sponsorship type with two dummy variables (for 19 shirt sponsorships such as Emirates Airlines, shirt sponsor of the Hamburger SV, and nine naming-rights sponsorships such as brewery Veltins at Schalke 04), with perimeter advertising, such as outdoor fashion brand Jack Wolfskin at Mainz 05 (16 cases), as the reference category. We coded regional proximity of the sponsor with two dummy variables differentiating international (headquarters outside Germany) and local (same city or less than 30 km in distance) sponsors, with national sponsors as the reference category.

Sponsor characteristics. We measured size of the sponsoring companies by the number of employees (M = 43,192, SD = 98,704). Again, we used a logarithmic transformation because of data skewness. We did not use differences in sales or firm value because appropriately weighting the values of sponsors coming from different industries is difficult.

Characteristics of the sponsored property. The model controls for the club's prominence, likability, differences in success, and other differences at the level of the sponsored property by adding dummy variables. These variables control for variance attributable to the clubs.

Analysis Overview

This study uses multilevel structural equation modeling to test the relationships of the two levels of data in a single analysis, accounting for the variability associated with each level of hierarchy. The two "nested" data files represent consumer-level (n = 2,997) and sponsorship-level (n = 44) data, resulting in an average cluster size of 68. Notably, the group-level sample size (44

sponsorships) is higher than the minimum sample size of 20 typically suggested in the literature (e.g., Preacher, Zhang, and Zyphur 2011). Even so this is still a small sample size, therefore we interpret significant findings at the .1 level for group-effects only. A further basic premise for multilevel modeling is a sufficient variation between the groups of observations. Intraclass correlations can serve as indicators because they measure the degree of similarity within the same cluster and are recommended to be above .05 (Preacher, Zyphur, and Zhang 2010). The correlations calculated for the dependent variables at the consumer level are substantial for the majority of the examined variables: .03 (calculative motives), .07 (sponsorship fit), .07 (normative motives), .08 (affective motives), and .15 (brand attitude). These are sufficient to justify use of multilevel modeling. We examine the measurement reliability of the reflective constructs at the consumer level through multilevel confirmatory factor analysis using Mplus 7.4 (Muthén and Muthén 2015). Table 2 shows the results.

[Table 2 here]

Composite reliabilities for the reflective constructs exceed .6, the recommended threshold (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Moreover, findings show discriminant validity between the constructs, as none of the squared correlation coefficients between any of the constructs exceed the average variance extracted for a construct (Fornell and Larcker 1981; see Web Appendix A). We tested for common method bias following Podsakoff et al.'s (2003) recommended procedure and modeled an unmeasured latent method factor to estimate attenuated scores for composite reliability and average variance extracted (Table 2). The attenuated scores are above the required levels, leading us to conclude that common method bias is not a significant issue in the study. On the sponsorship level, correlations of the indicators are low to moderate (Web Appendix B).

Results

Consumer-level effects. The results (presented in Table 3) show that affective motives are

significantly and positively related to sponsor attitude (β = .310, *p* = .000). Findings show no relationship between normative motives and sponsor attitude (β = –.013, *p* = .568). As the positive correlation indicates (Web Appendix A), the hypothesized positive effect of normative motives on brand attitude is displaced by affective motives. Attributions of calculative motives are significantly and negatively related to sponsor attitude (β = –.049, *p* = .018). Sponsorship fit is positively related to sponsor attitude (β = .188, *p* = .000). These results provide support for H_{1a}, H_{3a}, and H_{4a} but not for H_{2a}. In line with H_{4b}, H_{4c}, and H_{4g}, sponsorship fit is positively related to the attribution of affective (β = .609, *p* = .000) and normative (β = .303, *p* = .000) motives but negatively related to calculative motives (β = –.091, *p* = .004). Furthermore, the effects of sponsorship fit on sponsor attitude are partially mediated by affective (β = .189, *p* = .000) and calculative (β = .004, *p* = .018) motives (Web Appendix C).

[Table 3 here]

Cross-level effects. H_{5a}–H_{8d} examine the effects of variables characterizing the sponsor partnership on consumer perceptions of sponsor motives and sponsorship fit. A central finding is that *contract length* is significant and positively related to the intercepts (level differences) of affective motives (β = .440, *p* = .000), normative motives (β = .683, *p* = .000), and sponsorship fit (β = .625, *p* = .012), while attributions of calculative motives (β = –.199, *p* = .371) are not directly affected. The model controls for a potentially distorting effect caused by the relationship between contract length and brand attitude (i.e., that long-term sponsors differ systematically from short-term sponsors in brand attitude), but this effect is nonsignificant (β = .120, *p* = .552). Assessment of multilevel mediation reveals that the effect of contract length on brand attitude is fully mediated by affective motives (β = .136, *p* = .000) and sponsorship fit (β = .118, *p* = .014). In addition, the analysis finds partial mediation for contract length through sponsorship fit on affective (β = .381, *p* = .006), normative (β = .189, *p* = .008), and calculative (β = –.057, *p* =

.043) motives. The results confirm H_{5a}–H_{5c} and provide evidence of an indirect effect of contract length through sponsorship fit on the perception of calculative motives (H_{5d}).

Regarding *regional proximity*, the full model suggests that respondents perceive international sponsors as less fitting than national sponsors, but this finding is not significant at the .05 level (H_{6a}, β = –.276, p = .067), and findings show no effect for local sponsors (H_{6a}, β = –.158, p = .673). In support of H_{6b}, respondents perceive international sponsors as having fewer affective motives (β = –.388, p = .000) than national sponsors, while they attribute more affective motives to local sponsors (β = .254, p = .018) than national sponsors. Multilevel mediation reveals that affective motives fully mediate the negative effect of international sponsor origin on brand attitude (β = –.120, p = .000). In a similar vein, affective motives fully mediate the positive effect of local origin on brand attitude (β = .079, p = .012). The results indicate no significant differences for normative motives of local (β = –.116, p = .289) or international (β = .062, p = .349) sponsors. The indirect negative effect of international sponsor origin through sponsorship fit on normative motives trends in the expected direction (H_{6c}, β = –.084, p = .069) but is only significant at the .1 level. Related to H_{6d}, respondents tend to perceive international sponsors as more (β = .402, p = .054) and local sponsors as less calculative (β = –.399, p = .048) than national sponsors.

For *sponsorship fee*, the results indicate a positive effect on calculative motives (β = .356, p = .009), lending support to H_{7d}. Calculative motives fully mediate the effect of sponsorship fee on brand attitude (β = –.017, p = .047). Findings show that sponsorship fees tend to affect normative motives negatively (β = –.235, p = .060) but provide only limited support for H_{7c}. Similarly, we do not observe significant effects of sponsorship fee on sponsorship fit (β = –.354, p = .166) and affective motives (β = .009, p = .915), leading to the rejection of H_{7a} and H_{7b}. All other mediating links are nonsignificant as well.

Finally, the analysis shows that *sponsorship type* (naming right) tends to increase the attribution of calculative motives (β = .196, p = .053) but provides only limited support for H_{8d}. All other effects of sponsorship type on the perceptions of sponsor motives and sponsorship fit and all other mediation relationships are not significant. Therefore, H_{8a}–H_{8c} are rejected.

Other Effects

Consumer-level effects. Fan status is positively related to the evaluations of sponsorship fit (β = .064, p = .003) and normative motives (β = .035, p = .012), while its effect on affective motives (β = .024, p = .053) and calculative motives (β = .014, p = .517) is nonsignificant. These findings suggest that consumers perceive greater congruence between sponsors and teams when they are fans of that team. In addition, respondents who were customers of the sponsor at the time of the survey show significantly higher evaluations of sponsorship fit (β = .108, p = .000) and the sponsor's affective (β = .096, p = .000) and normative (β = .058, p = .005) motives, while findings indicate no significant differences for calculative motives (β = .019, p = .322). These findings imply that existing relationships with firms result in more favorable evaluations of firm intent and obligation in sponsorship. Female respondents evaluate affective (β = .066, p = .000) and normative (β = .042, p = .042) motives more positively. Conversely, male respondents show high values for calculative motives (β = –.106, p = .000). The results show no significant gender difference in terms of sponsorship fit (β = –.001, p = .954). These results indicate that men view sponsor motives more critically. Findings also show significant age effects on all dependent constructs. Sponsorship fit shows lower values with increasing age (β = –.042, p = .032), and agreement on all sponsor motives is higher with increasing age (affective: β = .077, p = .000; normative: β = .067, p = .001; calculative: β = .073, p = .000).

Sponsor characteristics. Size of the sponsor is negatively related to the attribution of affective (β = –.220, p = .000) and normative (β = –.282, p = .002) motives and significantly

affects brand attitude (β = .416, p = .071) at the .1 level. Relationships to sponsorship fit (β = –.013, p = .937) and calculative motives (β = .255, p = .126) are not significant. These findings suggest that consumers consider motives of large firms less positively because they view these firms as less affectively and normatively motivated than smaller firms.

Discussion

Study 1 shows that consumers differentially assess the motives for corporate sponsorship and that important outcomes are largely determined by their assessment of those motives. Finding a positive relationship between affective motives and sponsor brand attitude reflects the notion that consumers receive sponsorship "in a halo of goodwill" (Meenaghan 2001, p. 101). In contrast, calculative motives are negatively related to sponsor brand attitude. On the individual level, while the effect of calculative motives is weaker than the effect of affective motives, consumers do perceive variance with regard to a commercial or selfish intent of a sponsorship. In the data, inference of normative motives does not beget a positive attitude toward the brand. This finding may be explained by research on the relationship between the NBA and its child-supporting beneficiary sponsorship "NBA cares." Research has found that consumers (i.e., ticket purchasers) expect a professional sports team to engage in community social responsibility. Thus, a firm doing things an audience already thinks it should be doing may not yield positive affect (Lacey, Kennett-Hensel, and Manolis 2015).

At the sponsor partnership level, the results shed light on why motives are inferred. In particular, the objective characteristics of sponsorship deals are reflected in terms of significantly different evaluations of affective, normative, and calculative motives and sponsorship fit. Importantly, consumers value sponsors that commit to long-term relationships. Short-term sponsorships trigger an inference of calculative motives through sponsorship fit. The effects for regional proximity suggest that consumers appreciate regionally related brands but view national

and international sponsors as less affectively motivated. Sponsorship fees are also negatively related to the attribution of a sponsor's normative motives and positively related to calculative motives. Apparently, consumers question the motives of firms associated with high sponsorship spending. This finding is important because the analysis controls for the alternative explanation that large firms may be automatically associated with negative motives. The analysis provides compelling evidence that people perceive large firms as being less affectively and normatively committed. Sponsorship type does not play a major role in the attribution of sponsor motives, with one exception—respondents perceive naming-rights sponsors as more calculative.

Study 1 was a field study in which motives were inferred from respondents' memory about the partners in the sponsorship. The strength of the field study is that all information available to a person when assessing the partners serves as input to the motive inference. As with any field study, however, alternative explanations stemming from unmeasured variables (e.g., preexisting attitudes toward sponsors) or other sponsorship-related aspects might account for the effects observed. Therefore, we aim to replicate the results in an experimental field study with a fictitious sponsor. This study also uses a different sport and considers the sport property's characteristics as well as sponsor and club loyalty.

Study 2

Empirical Approach

Study 2 is a between-subjects experimental field study, in which we manipulated key partnership characteristics (i.e., contract length, regional proximity, and sponsorship fee) and also examined effects on the sponsored property. We held sponsorship type constant, because we observed no strong differences in Study 1. To account for potential industry sector differences and sport success of the sponsored property, we also manipulated sponsorship fit and sport success. To control for noise related to sponsor brand equity, we employed a fictitious brand and chose

handball as the context of the study for three reasons. First, sponsorship is a relevant revenue stream for handball clubs which are professional clubs that pay their players. Second, handball is less popular than soccer, and therefore knowledge about sponsorship deals is weaker, allowing us to credibly manipulate sponsor partnership characteristics. Third, this lower-profile sports enables us to examine whether the findings of Study 1 hold in a different environment and also whether important differences can be identified. We collected survey-based data via the online panel provider Respondi with separate samples for each of the two pretests and the main study. Sampling requirements and incentives were comparable to Study 1. All items were measured on seven-point scales (Likert-type or semantic differentials). Two pretests identified two handball clubs that differed in sport success, two industry sectors with high and low sponsorship fit, distance perceptions of different regions, and a fictitious brand; the pretests also served to test manipulations for the main study. Web Appendix D reports the results.

Scenarios. Study 2 is a 2 × 2 × 3 × 2 × 2 between-subjects factorial experimental field study, with manipulated levels of contract length, regional proximity, and sponsorship fee, as well as sponsorship fit and sport success of the club. We designed this study primarily as a main-effects study, with the central goal being to replicate the field study findings under controlled conditions. From the fictitious press release used in the second pretest, the manipulations resulted in 48 different press releases (for a full description of the design, see Web Appendix E).

Procedure and respondents. The main study comprised 576 respondents (average age 43.19 years, SD = 13.91; 44.6% female). They were first asked to indicate their involvement with handball and then randomly assigned to one of the 48 scenarios. After exposure to a scenario, respondents evaluated the dependent variables of attitude and behavioral intentions toward the handball club and sponsor. Next, they assessed the affective, normative, and calculative motives of the sponsor and sponsorship fit. In both sections, we randomized construct order to avoid any

order effects and conducted manipulation checks. Finally, we collected control variables (e.g., fan status), demographics, and postal code. The questionnaire concluded with the disclosure of the hypothetical nature of the scenarios.

Manipulation checks were successful, given the significance of the mean value differences of contract length ($M_{long\text{-}short}$ = 2.72; p = .000), regional proximity ($M_{reg\text{-}nat}$ = 2.15; $M_{reg\text{-}int}$ = 2.42; $M_{nat\text{-}int}$ = .26; p = .000), sponsorship fee ($M_{high\text{-}low}$ = 3.04; p = .000), sponsorship fit ($M_{high\text{-}low}$ = .58; p = .000), and success in sports ($M_{more\text{-}less}$ = .63; p = .000). We used the same constructs as in Study 1 but measured them on seven-point Likert-type scales. In addition, we included measures for loyalty intention related to the sponsor and the sponsored property. We measured sponsor loyalty with two items ("It is very likely that I will buy products of [sponsor] in the future" and "It is very likely that I will recommend [sponsor] to my friends and colleagues in the future") in accordance with Vogel, Evanschitzky, and Ramaseshan's (2008) scale. We adapted the measure from Biscaia et al. (2013) and extended it to our context to measure club loyalty. Respondents were asked to answer the following questions: "It is very likely that I will visit a match of club X in the future," "It is very likely that I will recommend club X to my friends and colleagues," "It is very likely that I will purchase tickets of club X in the future," "It is very likely that I will purchase merchandise (e.g., a scarf, a jersey) of club X in the future," "It is very likely that I will watch games of club X on the television in the next season," and "It is very likely that I will follow club X on its social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)." The scales are reliable for sponsorship fit (Cronbach's α = .81); affective (α = .96), normative (α = .87), and calculative motives (α = .84); club (α = .95) and brand (α = .94) attitude; loyalty toward the club (.93); and loyalty toward the brand (.93). Descriptive statistics and correlations appear in Web Appendix F.

Results

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) results show significant multivariate effects for the

interaction between length and regional proximity (Wilks's λ = .944, F = 1.896, *p* = .018). No other interactions are significant. The results show significant main effects for contract length (Wilks's λ = .906, F = 6.737, *p* = .000), regional proximity (Wilks's λ = .898, F = 3.593, *p* = .000), sponsorship fee (Wilks's λ = .951, F = 3.338, *p* = .001), sponsorship fit (Wilks's λ = .943, F = 3.902, *p* = .000), and sport success (Wilks's λ = .930, F = 4.894, *p* = .000).

Follow-up analyses of variance revealed that the interaction between length and regional proximity is significant for affective motives (*p* = .036), sponsor attitude (*p* = .007), club attitude (*p* = .013), sponsor loyalty (*p* = .012), club loyalty (*p* = .031), and sponsorship fit (*p* = .001). Moreover, main effects of sponsorship fee on calculative motives (*p* = .024) and sponsorship fit (*p* = .003) are significant. Contract length has significant main effects on affective motives (*p* = .000), calculative motives (*p* = .000), sponsor attitude (*p* = .007), and sponsorship fit (*p* = .011). Regional proximity is significantly related to affective motives (*p* = .000), calculative motives (*p* = .026), and sponsorship fit (*p* = .000). Sport success shows significant effects on club attitude (*p* = .000) and club loyalty (*p* = .015), while sponsorship fit is significantly related to normative motives (*p* = .043) and is successfully manipulated by its relationship to the perception of sponsorship fit (*p* = .000). Web Appendix G gives descriptive statistics.

For regional (*p* = .045) and international (*p* = .023) sponsors, sponsorship fit is higher when contract length is high, lending support to H_{5a}. Contract length is unrelated to sponsorship fit for the national sponsor (*p* = .245). Contract length also leads to attribution of affective motives—this effect is stable for the regional (*p* = .032) and national (*p* = .019) sponsors and is especially pronounced for the international sponsor (*p* = .000). These findings provide support for H_{5b}. The results show no effect of contract length on normative motives (H_{5c}). However, calculative motives are inferred for short sponsorships (*p* = .000), lending support to H_{5d}. In addition, findings establish positive effects of contract length on sponsor attitude (*p* = .007).

For regional proximity, the results indicate four interaction effects of contract length on sponsorship fit, affective motives, sponsor attitude, and club attitude. Respondents perceive short-term partnerships of regional sponsors as congruent as short-term partnerships of national sponsors and long-term partnerships of international sponsors. Sponsorship fit is highest for regional and long-term partnerships, in support of H_{6a}. Affective motives and fit of national sponsors are better for national than international sponsors when contract length is short. This effect is reversed for long-term sponsorships. Apart from contract length, affective motives of regional sponsors are higher than those of national and international sponsors. These results provide mixed support for H_{6a} and H_{6b}. The results show no significant effects of regional proximity on normative motives (H_{6c}). The effect on calculative motives indicates that the more distant sponsors are from the sponsored property, the more they are perceived as calculative (H_{6d}, $p = .026$). Sponsor attitude generally increases with contract length but remains the same for national sponsors. While the interaction between contract length and regional proximity of regional and international sponsors does not directly influence club attitude, we find a negative effect for national sponsors.

In line with our theoretical reasoning, consumers perceive higher sponsor spending as more calculative (H_{7d}). Contrary to H_{7a} and Study 1's results, findings show a positive effect of sponsorship fee on sponsorship fit for the professional, yet lower-tier sport of handball. The results show no direct significant effects of sponsor spending on affective (H_{7b}) and normative (H_{7c}) motives. Sport success shows a positive effect on club attitude, meaning that loyalty toward a club is indirectly influenced by the success of a team.

As in Study 1, we estimated a structural equation model in which we modeled all significant main effects reported in the MANOVA on the conceptual model (Table 4). The results show that sponsor loyalty is positively affected by affective motives (H_{1c}), sponsorship fit (H_{4e}),

and contract length, and the effects are mediated by sponsor attitude. In contrast with Study 1, normative (H_{2a}) and calculative motives (H_{3a}) are not significantly related to sponsor attitude, which is influenced by sponsorship fit (H_{4a}), affective motives (H_{1a}), and contract length. Findings show a direct and significant negative effect of calculative motives on club loyalty (H_{3d}). Club loyalty is also indirectly influenced by affective motives (H_{1d}), sponsorship fit (H_{4f}), and sport success, through club attitude (Web Appendix H). Sponsorship fit and the three motive dimensions are affected by the manipulations, as shown in the MANOVA.

[Table 4 here]

General Discussion

This research establishes a linkage between sponsor partnership characteristics and consumer evaluations of sponsorships and sheds light on the mediating roles of perceived fit and motive attributions. Table 5 summarizes findings of the two studies. In general, the results of the experimental field study provide support for the effects observed in the field study.

[Table 5 here]

The first important finding is that consumer inference making about sponsor motives affects sponsorship outcomes both directly and indirectly. Both studies show that sponsorship fit and the attribution of affective motives result in positive attitudes toward the sponsor. We find that affective motives matter more for sponsorship outcomes in high-profile sports such as soccer than in less prominent sports such as handball. Affective motives are potentially more appreciated in a high-profile sport in which commercialization is ever present. In contrasting findings, sponsorship fit plays a major role in handball but matters less in soccer. This is likely due to the narrow draw of handball. Though popular in Germany, it is not a universal sport and has limited universal sponsor appeal. These findings may also be due to the use of a fictitious sponsor for which inference making relies heavily on the product category when brand

information is unfamiliar. In Study 1, calculative motive attributions show negative effects on attitude, thus confirming the importance of calculative motives in high-profile sport contexts. In Study 2, the finding that calculative motives negatively affect loyalty toward the sponsored property may relate to consumers blaming clubs for "selling out" to the highest bidder. Study 2 provides further evidence that affective motive attributions affect sponsored properties. In both contexts, normative perceptions seem to be displaced by affective motives in their role as antecedents of sponsorship outcomes. As a theoretical explanation, the MIM suggests that the no-choice condition of normative motives leads to positive trait attributions as well.

Second, this research shows that deal-making characteristics significantly influence consumer inference making about sponsor partnerships. Both studies find that managerial deal-making decisions contribute to sponsorship fit perceptions and motive attributions. With regard to duration, both studies show positive effects of contract length on sponsorship fit. In addition, sponsors are more affectively motivated when sponsorship contracts are longer and the consumer perceives the sponsor as a better-fitting relationship partner. Study 1 finds that consumers infer normative motives when sponsors commit themselves over a longer period. Notably, the results imply that long-term partnerships are not per se perceived as more favorable. Rather, the findings suggest that sponsorship fit and the inferred affective motives act as mediators in the improvement of sponsorship outcomes. Furthermore, both studies show that longer contract length helps reduce the attribution of calculative motives.

Both studies find evidence that regional proximity contributes to higher sponsorship fit and attribution of affective motives and dampens inference of calculative motives. Study 1 shows that sponsorship fit perceptions are higher if the sponsor is not international, and Study 2 finds that local sponsors fit better. Consumers appear to view regional and national brands as acting responsibly in their role as sponsor and perceive international sponsors as more calculative.

Following an indirect path, sponsorship fit and brand attitude (Study 1) are more negative for international sponsors, whereas local and national sponsors (Study 1) are more favorably perceived in terms of affective motives, which in turn positively influence brand attitude and sponsorship fit (Study 2). These findings are in line with prior work reporting significant, positive effects of perceived geographic similarity on sponsorship fit (Olson and Thjømøe 2011). Study 2 offers a more differentiated view of the role of regional proximity in relation to contract length, in that international and regional sponsors profit from a long-term commitment differently than national sponsors. A potential explanation is that by committing for a longer time, an international sponsor raises perceptions, bringing them closer to those typical for a national sponsor. The results suggest that contract length can effectively counterbalance adverse origin effects. Nevertheless, both national and international sponsors may face a ceiling on perceptions that can be bettered by regional sponsors.

Studies 1 and 2 also show that higher sponsorship fees are associated with the attribution of calculative motives. Expensive engagements are clearly more prominent and visible; therefore, consumers might perceive more costly sponsorships as being linked to higher sponsor expectations of return on investment. Subtle persuasion attempts common with smaller fees are less likely to generate resistance to communication (Carrillat and d'Astous 2012), particularly with lower profile professional sports. Important differences emerge for the effects of sponsorship fee on other variables. Study 1 finds a negative effect of high sponsorship fees on normative motives. In contrast, Study 2 finds positive effects of higher sponsorship fee on affective and normative motives mediated by sponsorship fit. Both effects are readily interpreted through a contextual lens. Sponsorship fees in the soccer context are notorious for their excess, whereas consumers view handball fees as keeping the sport alive.

The finding in Study 1 of an effect of naming-rights sponsorships on calculative motives is

in line with research reporting negative fan reactions to stadium renaming, which can be perceived as commercially oriented and threatening to fan identity (Woisetschläger, Haselhoff, and Backhaus 2014). This finding suggests that differences in sponsorship types can be more relevant when leveraging strategies are deployed, in that spending more to secure the sponsorship may amplify possible negative perceptions. Despite important differences observed, the conceptual model works well in high-level and less prominent sports.

Managerial Implications

The key implication for sponsorship management is that managers of sponsors and sponsored properties should think about deal characteristics from a broad-based communications perspective. By establishing linkages between the fundamentals of the relationship and consumer perceived fit and inferred motives, this research shows that the importance of sponsorship deal characteristics stretches beyond the relationship of the sponsor and the sponsored property to affect consumers. Managers who regard sponsorship relationship announcements in popular press and trade publications as simply communicating facts should instead think of them as communicating about sponsor motives. This might lead to differently crafted communications.

As sponsorships are typically renewed intermittently and sponsorship relationships change over time, communications of long-term sponsorships should emphasize the ongoing nature and commitment of the relationship. Furthermore, managers might emphasize the objective of sponsorship longevity in both sponsorship selection and decisions regarding possible terminations. For partnerships in both studies, short-term strategies significantly and negatively affected brand attitudes, behavioral intentions, and the perception of sponsorship fit. This finding does not mean that short-term sponsorship contracts are negative per se. Rather, managers should trade off not only between short-term flexibility and long-term stability (and perhaps annual savings) but also between other losses of short-term relationships and other advantages of long-

term relationships, such as avoidance of potentially negative motive inferences. As such, more could be done to actively mitigate any negative impressions. For example, attitudes are negatively influenced when consumers perceive sponsors as engaging in a partnership out of self-serving motives, as suggested by short-term commitments.

The results also reveal that sponsorship characteristics affect the sponsored property. Overall, these findings suggest that club managers should not treat sponsorships as purely revenue-generating activities. Instead, clubs need to be aware that sponsorship decision making conveys messages to fans and other stakeholders. Similar to sponsors, sponsored properties should prefer long-term commitments to short-term sponsorship deals and weight the value of regional partnerships differently than (inter)national sponsors. Short-term contracts can harm the brand of the property (Campbell 2010). Additional benefits of long-term sponsorships include overall lower search, setup, and learning costs for new partners, as well as better working relationships with existing partners. Therefore, both sides of the partnership should seek long-term relationships.

This research suggests that sponsors of high-profile sports properties should strategically address any negative effects of high sponsorship fees. Sponsorship fees will differ depending on the size and prominence of sponsored teams and their media coverage. Sponsorship fees may also allow properties to invest in players, coaches, facilities, training, or injury prevention. Sponsorship partners could clearly explain and emphasize to their audiences the benefits from sponsorship spending. Storytelling around the sponsorship spend may provide additional information for inference making. Fees could also be mentioned in the context of expenditures for other marketing investments to relativize their absolute level. The implications from the low-profile sports handball are twofold—while sponsors can benefit from a positive perception of high sponsorship fees, loyalty toward the club is affected negatively. Club managers should

therefore actively try to avoid perceptions of sponsor investments being overly dominant.

Another important implication for sponsorship management is that consumers perceive sponsor motives more positively when the sponsor is near a sponsored property. Local sponsors also benefit from consumer beliefs that regionally active sponsors are less selfish. Our data show that being an international sponsor indirectly harms the perceptions of sponsorship fit and, in turn, brand attitude, which is a key performance indicator of sponsorship success. One strategy for an international firm might be to emphasize local or regional operations and employees or even employees originally from the region. Furthermore, our results suggest that national and international sponsors should be able to mitigate origin-induced challenges by seeking long-term partners and designing agreements in a financially sensible way. Finally, sponsorship type exerts only limited influence on the attribution of sponsor motives and sponsorship outcomes. Venue naming-rights partners need to be careful about their presentation, as this sponsorship type tends to be associated more with calculative motives than conventional perimeter advertising. Given that inference of affective motives seems to matter particularly in high-profile sports, sponsorship management should pay special attention to deal-making decisions, with contract length as the most effective lever of sponsor outcomes.

Limitations and Further Research

As with all empirical studies, the research has some limitations that offer avenues for further research. The results are cross-sectional, and biases due to pooling of data are possible. Thus, further research could analyze the effects of sponsorship deal characteristics on sponsorship outcomes over time to better explain the dynamic interplay of strategic actions and perceptions. In addition, the study focuses on sport sponsorships in one country and two sports.

While there are advantages in the different designs used in the two studies, limitations

should also be considered. Because the respondents in Study 1 reacted to actual sponsorship partnerships with all the concomitant communications surrounding sponsorship, they may have been influenced by a negativity bias (Rozin and Royzman 2001), in which negative information weighs more heavily than positive information in mental assessments. Study 2 addresses this concern in part by using a fictitious sponsor.

Further work in contexts such as cultural or cause-related sponsorships would be helpful in judging the generalizability and boundary conditions of the current findings. Our model is limited to a few fundamental variables that describe the partnership deal. We suggest including other managerial aspects of sponsor partnerships, such as sponsorship leveraging and activation and potential interdependencies between a firm's multiple sponsoring activities.

This research focuses on motives attributed to sponsors, but it is also possible that motives attributed to the sport property could influence overall perceptions, perhaps negatively, if, for example, the sport team or club owner is judged as having calculative motives. Furthermore, aspects such as sports enthusiasm, perceived sports attractiveness, the perception of a sponsor's community involvement, and attitude toward media and advertising (Burnett, Menon and Smart 1993; Close et al. 2006; Cornwell and Relyea 2000) warrant further investigation as constructs that may influence motive attributions. With regard to the mechanisms through which sponsorship characteristics shape inferred motives, an inclusion of trust and commitment as key characteristics of the quality of the relationship between sponsor and club (Farrelly and Quester 2005) could provide additional insights. In particular, research could test whether a strong commitment by the partners to their respective roles also results in consumer perceptions of a high-quality relationship. We also suggest adding dependent variables such as word of mouth and purchase behavior, because deal level characteristics could affect these outcomes as well.

In addition, for reasons of model complexity, this study rules out differences in the level of

the sponsored property by including dummy variables. A substantial amount of variance in sponsor motives and sponsorship fit can be attributed to the characteristics of the sponsored property. Numerous factors, such as differences in sport property identities, could contribute to the observed effects. Thus, research could go beyond the factors examined herein to consider how individual factors, such as differences in prominence, likability, coverage in the press, and the presence of charismatic players, coaches, owners, and representatives of teams, might influence inferred motives. Greater understanding of the role of the sponsored property would allow managers to draw conclusions about the selection and management of sponsor partnerships. Sponsoring and the aspects of a sponsorship relationship examined in this research are the defining characteristics, but they are only part of a firm's sponsorship-linked communications platform. Perceptions could be shifted by other marketing communications. Thus, research could consider how collateral communications beyond sponsorship characteristics and fit could influence motive inferences.

Overall, the findings suggest the need for research to address the mitigation or emphasis of deal-level inferences that influence individual-level outcomes of sponsorship. The results of both the field study and the experimental field study clearly indicate that consumers infer motives from sponsor-partnership characteristics. Sponsorship management should therefore take seriously any decisions about contract duration, sponsorship fees, and the regional focus of their sponsorships, as well as the communication about these characteristics.

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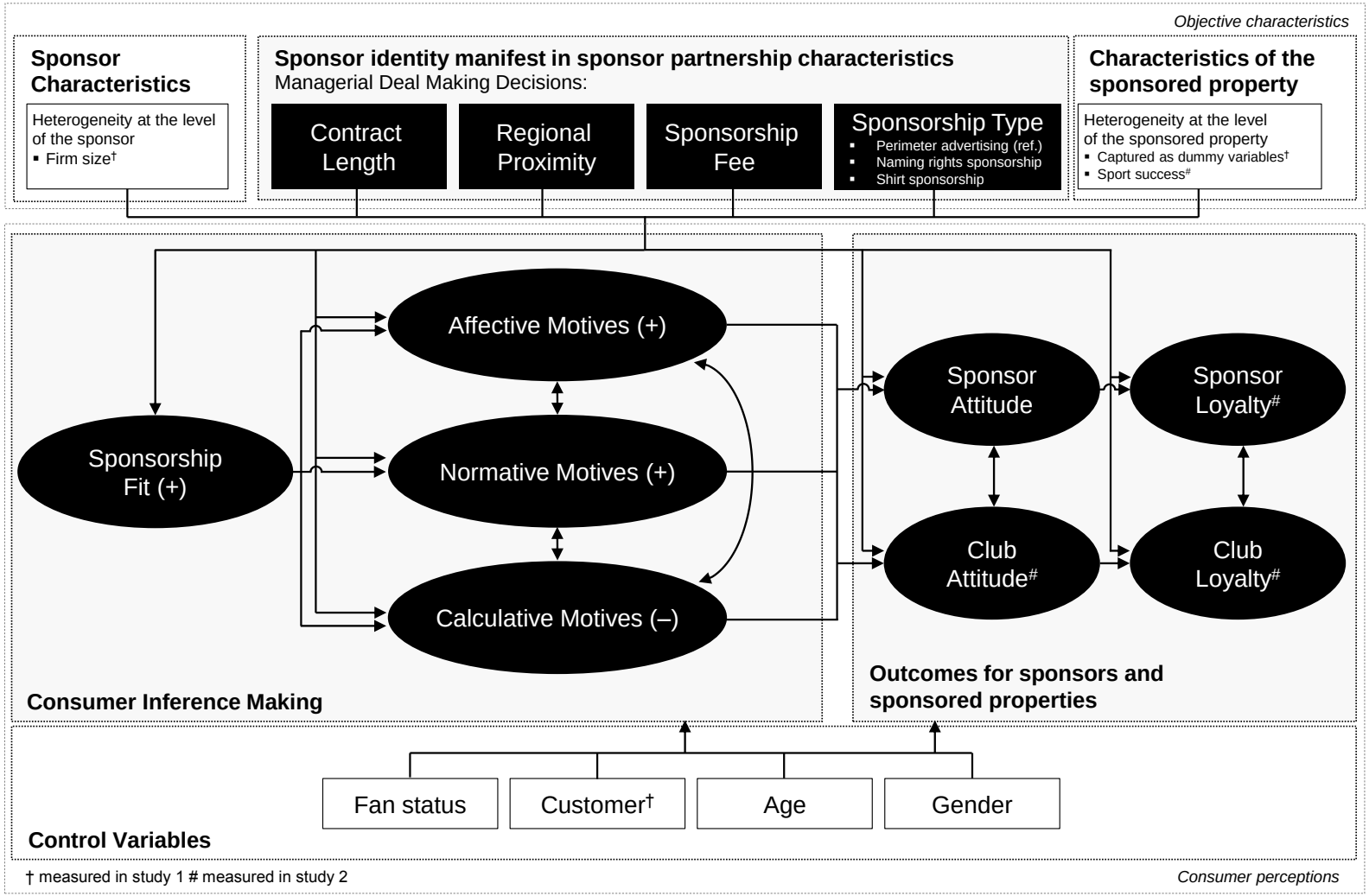
FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model: Sponsorship Deal Characteristics and Consumer Perceptions



Notes: Control variables are modeled to affect all endogenous constructs at the individual-level model (gray boxes).

FIGURE 2
Study 1: Data Collection Procedure

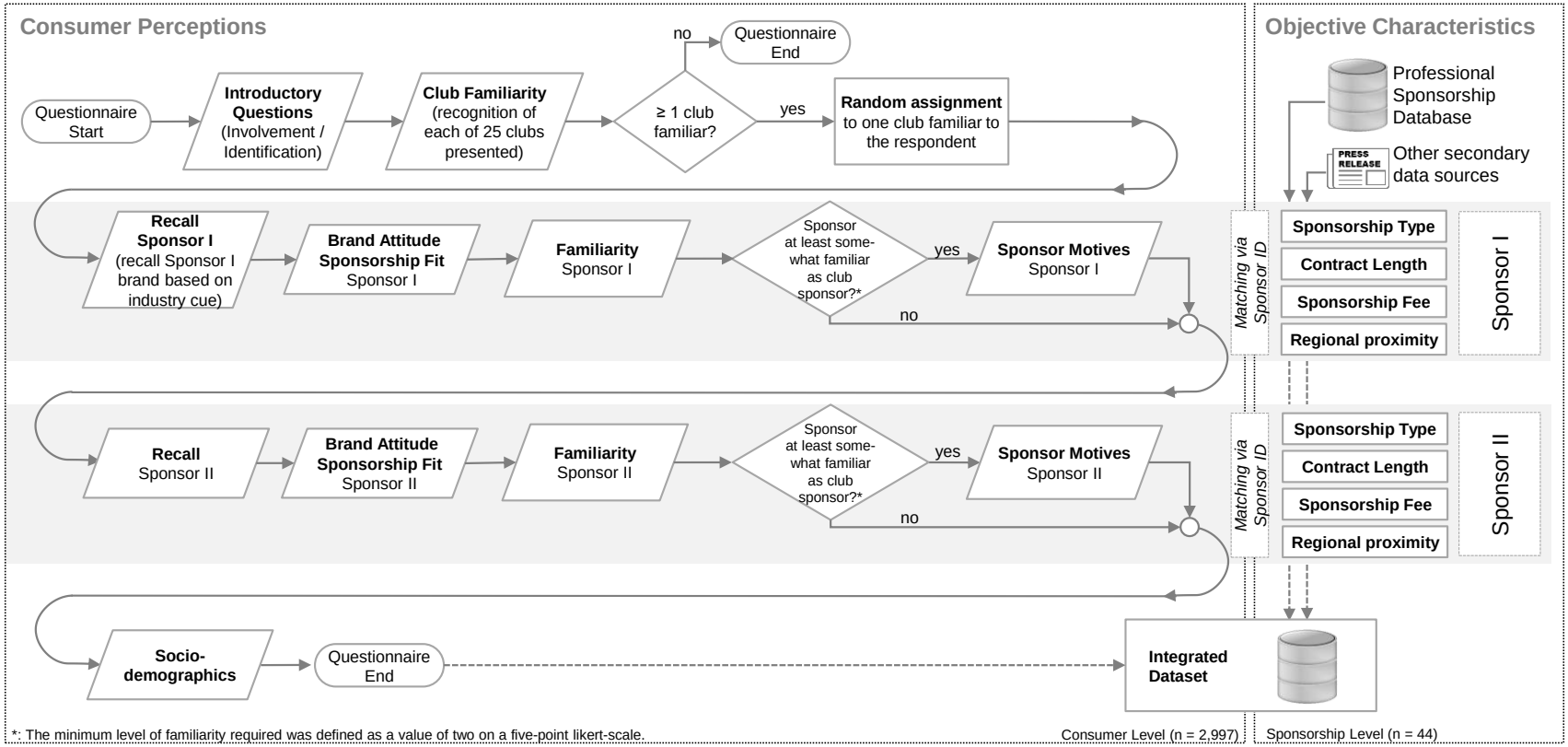


TABLE 1

Selective Research Considering Managerial-Level Antecedents and Consumer-Level Outcomes

Authors (Year)	Context	Study Design	Management Level Antecedents	Main Consumer Level Variables	Integration of More Than One Managerial Level Aspect?	Multilevel Mediating Effects Assessed?	Outcomes for Property Measured?	External Validity
Becker-Olsen et al. (2006)	CrM	Experimental	Created fit Message source	Clarity of positioning, attitude toward the sponsorship, firm equity	Yes	No	No	Moderate
Cornwell et al. (2006)	Cultural event sponsorship	Experimental	Congruity Articulation of reason	Sponsor recall	Yes	No	No	Low
Koschate-Fischer et al. (2012)	CrM	Experimental	Donation amount	Willingness to pay Company–cause fit div. moderators	No	No	No	Low
Olson and Thjømøe (2011)	Sport Sponsorship	Experimental	Audience similarity Geographic similarity Attitude similarity Time	Motivation Product use Overall fit Effect on sponsor	Yes	No	No	Moderate
Pappu and Cornwell (2014)	Sport Sponsorship	Experimental	Sponsorship relationship fit Sponsor–nonprofit similarity	Attitude toward sponsorship, sponsor, and nonprofit Clarity of positioning Sponsor–nonprofit similarity	Yes	No	Yes	Moderate
Rifon et al. (2004)	Health Sponsorship	Experimental	Congruence Brand- vs corporate level sponsorship	Altruism attribution Sponsor credibility Sponsor attitudes	Yes	No	No	Moderate
Schons et al. (2015)	CrM	Experimental	Geographic allocation of donation budget Size of donation budget Company's reach of operations	Purchase intention Perceived morality of favoring in-group Justice restoration potential	Yes	No	No	Moderate
This research	Sport Sponsorship	Comparative field study of 44 different sponsorships	Contract length Regional proximity Sponsorship fee Sponsorship type	Sponsor attitude Sponsor loyalty Club attitude Club loyalty Affective motives Calculative motives Normative motives Sponsorship fit	Yes	Yes (Study 1)	No (Study 1) Yes (Study 2)	High (Study 1) Moderate (Study 2)
		Experimental	Contract length Regional proximity Sponsorship fee Sports success Sponsorship fit					

Notes: CrM = Cause-related marketing.

TABLE 2

Study 1: Measurement of Latent Constructs and Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Construct	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability (CMF attenuated results)	Average Variance Extracted (CMF attenuated results)
Sponsor attitude (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006)		**.947 (.927)**	**.857 (.810)**
Please evaluate [Brand] on the basis of the following attributes:			
[Brand] is very likable.	.918		
[Brand] is a very good brand.	.927		
[Brand] is a very attractive brand.	.932		
Sponsorship fit (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006)		**.928 (.880)**	**.812 (.710)**
Please evaluate the connection between [brand] and [club]:			
Dissimilar … similar	.885		
Not complementary … complementary	.921		
Low fit … high fit	.897		
Affective motives (adapted from Allen and Meyer 1990)		**.954 (.827)**	**.873 (.616)**
Please evaluate the following statements about the relationship between [brand] and [club]:			
[Brand] feels emotionally attached to this club.	.904		
This club has a great deal of meaning for [brand].	.943		
[Brand] feels a strong sense of belonging to this club.	.955		
Normative motives (adapted from Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006)		**.861 (.858)**	**.674 (.669)**
Please evaluate the following statements about the relationship between [brand] and [club]:			
A reason for [brand] to get involved as a sponsor is that they feel a moral obligation of their environment.	.809		
[Brand] is principally engaged in the sponsorship, because they feel that it is expected from a company this size.	.805		
[Brand] is a loyal sponsor, primarily because customers, employees or other important target groups expect it.	.849		
Calculative motives (adapted from Allen and Meyer 1990; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill 2006; Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006)		**.928 (.925)**	**.866 (.860)**
Please evaluate the following statements about the relationship between [brand] and [club]:			
The major motive of [brand]'s sponsorship is self-interest.	.970		
[Brand] sponsors [club] mainly to take advantage of it.	.889		
A reason for [brand] to sponsor [club] is that it would be too costly to terminate this partnership [eliminated as a result of low factor loading].			
Fan status (coded 1 = fan)	---	---	---
Customer (coded 1 = customer)	---	---	---
Age	---	---	---
Gender (coded 1 = female)	---	---	---

N = 2,997; goodness-of-fit statistics: CFI (.987); TLI (.982); RMSEA (.032); SRMR (within: .027; between: .082).

TABLE 3

Study 1: Relationship Between Sponsorship Deal Characteristics and Consumer Perceptions

	Full Model		**Mediated-Effects Model**	
	Std. Coefficient	R^2	Std. Coefficient	R^2
Individual-level effects				
Sponsor attitude		**33.0%**		**32.8%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.188*** **		**.188*** **	
Affective motives (+)	**.310*** **		**.302*** **	
Calculative motives (–)	**-.049** **		**-.054*** **	
Normative motives (+)	-.013$^{n.s.}$			
Control variables:				
Fan status; customer; age, gender	.023$^{n.s.}$; **.277*** **; **.034** **; .014$^{n.s.}$		.023$^{n.s.}$; **.277*** **; **.033** **; .013$^{n.s.}$	
Sponsorship fit		**1.8%**		**1.8%**
Control variables:				
Fan status; customer; age, gender	**.064*** **; **.108*** **; **-.042** **; -.001$^{n.s.}$		**.065*** **; **.106*** **; **-.042** **; -.002$^{n.s.}$	
Affective motives		**40.3%**		**40.2%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.609*** **		**.609*** **	
Control variables:				
Fan status; customer; age, gender	*.024**; **.096*** **; **.077*** **; **.066*** **		*.025**; **.094*** **; **.077*** **; **.066*** **	
Normative motives		**10.6%**		**10.6%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.303*** **		**.302*** **	
Control variables:				
Fan status; customer; age, gender	**.035** **; **.058*** **; **.067*** **; **.042** **		**.035** **; **.058*** **; **.068*** **; **.043** **	
Calculative motives		**2.7%**		**2.7%**
Sponsorship fit (–)	**-.091*** **		**-.092*** **	
Control variables:				
Fan status; customer; age, gender	.014$^{n.s.}$; .019$^{n.s.}$; **.073*** **; **-.106*** **		.014$^{n.s.}$; .018$^{n.s.}$; **.075*** **; **-.105*** **	
Sponsor-partnership level effects				
Sponsor attitude[#]				
Sponsorship fee	-.340$^{n.s.}$			
International sponsor	.144$^{n.s.}$			
Local sponsor	.261$^{n.s.}$			
Contract length	.120$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsorship type (naming rights)	-.185$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsorship type (shirt)	-.118$^{n.s.}$			
Control variables:				
Firm size	*.416**		*.235**	
Sponsorship fit[#]				
Sponsorship fee	-.354$^{n.s.}$			
International sponsor	-*.276**		**-.464*** **	
Local sponsor	-.158$^{n.s.}$			
Contract length	**.625** **		**.481*** **	
Sponsorship type (naming rights)	-.013$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsorship type (shirt)	.073$^{n.s.}$			
Firm size	-.013$^{n.s.}$			

Affective motives[#]		
Sponsorship fee	.009[n.s.]	
International sponsor	**-.388*** **	**-.360*** **
Local sponsor	**.254** **	.164[n.s.]
Contract length	**.440*** **	**.416*** **
Sponsorship type (naming rights)	.151[n.s.]	
Sponsorship type (shirt)	.002[n.s.]	
Firm size	**-.220*** **	**-.209** **
Normative motives[#]		
Sponsorship fee	-*.235**	**-.344*** **
International sponsor	.062[n.s.]	
Local sponsor	-.116[n.s.]	
Contract length	**.683*** **	**.805*** **
Sponsorship type (naming rights)	-.034[n.s.]	
Sponsorship type (shirt)	-.102[n.s.]	
Control variables:		
Firm size	**-.282*** **	**-.342*** **
Calculative motives[#]		
Sponsorship fee	**.356*** **	**.476*** **
International sponsor	*.402**	**.499*** **
Local sponsor	**-.399** **	-*.370**
Contract length	-.199[n.s.]	
Sponsorship type (naming rights)	*.196**	**.223** **
Sponsorship type (shirt)	.171[n.s.]	
Control variables:		
Firm size	.255[n.s.]	
Global fit indices	CFI .990; TLI .986; RMSEA .015; SRMR (within) .023; SRMR (between) .043	CFI .989; TLI .984; RMSEA .016; SRMR (within) .022; SRMR (between) .045

N = 2,997 (consumer level); 44 (sponsorship level). # Club fixed effects included at the sponsor-partnership level.
Significant results (two-tailed) at $p < .01$ (***) and $p < .05$ (**) are in bold, marginally significant results ($p < .10$, *) are in italics, nonsignificant effects (n.s.) are in normal font.

TABLE 4

Study 2: Relationship Between Sponsorship Deal Characteristics and Consumer Perceptions

	Full Model		**Mediated-Effects Model**	
	Std. Coefficient	R^2	Std. Coefficient	R^2
Sponsor loyalty		**31.7%**		**29.6%**
Sponsor attitude (+)	**.482*** **		**.544*** **	
Sponsorship fit (+)	.077$^{n.s.}$			
Affective motives (+)	.040$^{n.s.}$			
Calculative motives (–)	-.039$^{n.s.}$			
Normative motives (+)	.054$^{n.s.}$			
Club loyalty		**18.5%**		**16.4%**
Club attitude (+)	**.334*** **		**.352*** **	
Sponsorship fit (+)	.049$^{n.s.}$			
Affective motives (+)	*.096**		**.095** **	
Calculative motives (–)	**-.089** **		**-.061*** **	
Normative motives (+)	.052$^{n.s.}$			
Sport success (+)	.002$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsor attitude		**28.0%**		**27.6%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.341*** **		**.357*** **	
Affective motives (+)	**.224*** **		**.208*** **	
Calculative motives (–)	.048$^{n.s.}$			
Normative motives (+)	.065$^{n.s.}$			
Contract length (+)	**.085** **		**.081** **	
Local (+) | international (–)	-.030$^{n.s.}$ | -.028$^{n.s.}$			
Club attitude		**19.3%**		**18.9%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.251*** **		**.262*** **	
Affective motives (+)	**.143** **		**.128** **	
Calculative motives (–)	.043$^{n.s.}$			
Normative motives (+)	.042$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsorship fit (man.) (+)	.008$^{n.s.}$			
Sport success (+)	**.226*** **		**.226*** **	
Sponsorship fit		**11.0%**		**11.2%**
Contract length (+)	**.086** **		**.088** **	
Local (+) | international (–)	**.146*** ** | -.074$^{n.s.}$		**.147*** ** | -.077$^{n.s.}$	
Sponsorship fee (–)	**.126*** **		**.128*** **	
Sponsorship fit (man.) (+)	**.201*** **		**.202*** **	
Sport success (+)	*.079**		*.079**	
Affective motives		**39.2%**		**39.0%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.542*** **		**.552*** **	
Contract length (+)	**.153*** **		**.151*** **	
Local (+) | International (–)	**.159*** ** | -.015$^{n.s.}$		**.149*** ** | -.001$^{n.s.}$	
Normative motives		**3.5%**		**3.4%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**.165*** **		**.183*** **	
Sponsorship fit (man.) (+)	.061$^{n.s.}$			
Calculative motives		**6.2%**		**5.7%**
Sponsorship fit (+)	**-.141*** **		**-.151*** **	
Contract length (–)	**-.152*** **		**-.149*** **	
Local (+) | international (–)	-.033$^{n.s.}$ | .044$^{n.s.}$			
Sponsorship fee (+)	**.102*** **		**.105*** **	
Global fit indices	CFI .933; TLI .918; RMSEA .067; SRMR .059		CFI .932; TLI .922; RMSEA .066; SRMR .066	

N = 576; Significant results (two-tailed) at $p < .01$ (**) and $p < .05$ (*) are in bold, results ($p < .10$, *) are in italics, nonsignificant effects (n.s.) are in normal font.

TABLE 5
Overview of Hypotheses and Findings

	Dependent variables (Study 1 = S1/Study 2 = S2)												
	Affective Motives		Normative Motives		Calculative Motives		Sponsorship Fit		Sponsor Attitude		Sponsor Loyalty[#]	Club Attitude[#]	Club Loyalty[#]
Hypothesized Relationship													
Individual-level effects	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S2	S2	S2
H_{1a}–H_{1d}: Affective motives									(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
H_{2a}–H_{2d}: Normative motives									X	X	X	X	X
H_{3a}–H_{3d}: Calculative motives									(–)	X	X	X	(–)
H_{4a}–H_{4g}: Sponsorship fit	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(–)	(–)			(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
Sponsor-partnership level effects													
H_{5a}–H_{5d}: Contract length	(+)	(+)	(+)	X	(–)	(–)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
H_{6a}–H_{6d}: Reg. proximity: local	(+)	(+)	X	X	(–)	X	X	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+)
H_{6a}–H_{6d}: Reg. proximity: international	(–)	X	(–)	X	(+)	X	(–)	X	(–)	X	X	X	X
H_{7a}–H_{7d}: Sponsorship fee	X	(+)	(–)	(+)	(+)	(+/–)	X	(+)	(–)	(+)	(+)	(+)	(+/–)
H_{8a}–H_{8d}: Sponsorship type: shirt[†]	X		X		X		X		X				
H_{8a}–H_{8d}: Sponsorship type: naming rights[†]	X		X		(+)		X		X				

Results (Study 1/Study 2): (+)/(–) significant positive/negative (mediated) effect; X = no relationship; †(#) measured in Study 1 (2).