



To what extent do the inherent characteristics of a sport influence the form of sport sponsorship adopted and popularized?

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Abstract

Marketing is important in all industries. The same stands true for the sports industry. In the sports industry, sports sponsorships, a type of marketing technique, hold particular value and come in three main forms; team sponsorship, event sponsorship and athlete sponsorship. This research paper argues how the type and popularity of sponsorship adopted in a sport will be greatly dependent on the inherent characteristics of the sport. The aforementioned is done through a thorough analysis and evaluation of the application of team sponsorships in Football, event sponsorships in Tennis and athlete sponsorships in Cricket. The paper is developed with support from popular theories and concepts from the fields of Business and Psychology including Brand association and Celebrity endorsement.

Key Words: Sports Marketing, Sports Sponsorships, Teams, Events, Athletes, Football, Tennis, Cricket

Introduction

When's the last time you saw a sports team, sporting event or athlete not wear, use or showcase a sponsor brand?

Marketing is an effective tool to create brand awareness and highlight the products a company sells hence increasing their consumer base and engagement. Sports marketing uses sports to promote goods and services through sporting events, athletes or teams (Marketing Schools, 2020). Within the field of sports marketing, sponsorships are recognised as a popular tool whereby sports sponsorship is defined as an agreement between two parties that have similar goals, values and visions and under which one of the parties, the sponsors, supplies either materials or finances events to benefit the sponsored party, that in return establishes their brand image through promotion, often

helps them target particular groups and successfully attract potential consumers/users through the association with various sports (Firica, 2008). That being said, sports sponsorships can take on different forms with the most common ones being team sponsorship, event sponsorship and athlete sponsorship.

However, all sports have distinct characteristics which is what makes them unique from other sports - for instance, some are more team-based (football), others may be played in a team but still are heavily focused on individual players (cricket) and some are structured to be played year long through several events (tennis). In light of the same, the form of sponsorship may also vary in accordance with the type of sport as sponsorships aim to use the power of the particular sport to connect and engage with the target audience (HP, 2022). The research question this paper hence aims to answer is **“To what extent do the inherent characteristics of a sport influence the form of sport sponsorship adopted and popularized?”**

This research paper argues that the form of sports sponsorship adopted and popularized by a sport will depend greatly on its inherent characteristics by taking the examples of football, tennis and cricket.

Sponsorship in sports

Companies often leverage the power of sports to endorse their products. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, sports sponsorship most commonly entails a financial agreement between 2 parties wherein the sponsors finance a sports team, tournament or an athlete in order to attain benefits such as greater brand awareness, brand visibility, stronger brand loyalty and also gain positive publicity (ESM, 2021). The three main types of sports sponsorships have been defined below.

Team sponsorship: Team sponsorship is when the entire team, participating in a sport or event, is sponsored. In most instances, the sponsor finances the jerseys and equipment of the team players in exchange for having the brand logo printed on the aforementioned. This successfully links the brand to the sports team they invest in - benefiting both parties involved. Team sponsorship increases brand visibility and awareness, for instance, behind a successful sports team, millions of fans support them whether they are succeeding or not hence, brands associating with a specific team can leverage the loyalty of the fans and extend it into their brand.

Event sponsorship: Event sponsorship is a form of sports sponsorship where sporting events such as international and regional tournaments and leagues can be sponsored by a brand. This type of sponsorship includes, for instance, events changing their name to incorporate brand names and using sponsor logos to endorse event merchandise in exchange for which the sponsor provides complimentary products to

participants and funds the running of the sporting event. Sports events such as the World Cup or the Olympics offer great opportunities for increasing brand awareness as they amass a large viewership, both offline and online. This may also be used by brands to associate with certain kinds of events that can completely change consumer perceptions of them. Events like Wimbledon and the Super Bowl have a level of prestige that surrounds them and any brand sponsoring them might be associated with the same (Vandeveldt, 2021). The biggest difference between team sponsorship and event sponsorship is that instead of financing certain elements or components of a game, the sponsor funds the entire or at least a large majority of the event. Funding an entire event that is adored by a million people results in brands gaining respectable reputations among fans.

Athlete Sponsorship: Athlete sponsorships are those where individual players are sponsored by a brand. This is entirely different from team and event sponsorships where brands finance an entire team or an event. Athlete Sponsorship works in a completely different manner, whereby the sponsored athlete might wear the branded apparel during the sport or even during commercial appearances such as press conferences. The athlete might also advertise the brand through television commercials, social media posts or other promotional events such as interviews, campaigns, fan meets etc. (Pitch, 2023). In return, sponsors offer them a set fee or cover costs for equipment, clothing and travel. Individual athletes can offer a brand a huge market for consumers as some are more marketable than the team they play for. Being associated with an athlete with a large fan base can immensely increase the popularity or the image of a brand (Pitch, 2023).

Team Sponsorship in Sports - Football

Team sponsorship is commonly used in football. Several characteristics of football, such as the fact that it highly focuses on a team as a whole rather than individual athletes and instead of supporting a singular player, fans are loyal to the entire team, enhance the effect of team sponsorship in this sport. Football is played across various nations and is cherished among people from all around the world - it's reported that football has the biggest fanbase, with over 3.5 billion fans around the globe. As a result, sponsorships of football teams help brands reach wider audiences across several nations as well as form personal connections with a humongous amount of people by leveraging the strong emotions fans have with football and their favourite teams (fcbusiness, 2022).

Emirates and Real Madrid

Can you imagine an airline company sponsoring a football sports team? Ironically, it is one of the longest-running deals in La Liga history/football history that stretches over 12 years - the sponsorship between Emirates and Real Madrid. This sponsorship started in 2011 and in 2023 they extended their contract until 2026. Real Madrid is a Spanish football club based in Madrid and competes in the La Liga, the prestigious event of Spanish football. The

Santiago Bernabéu Stadium in downtown Madrid has been a home to them since 1947, it is one the widely supported sports clubs having amassed a fan base of 500 million. Emirates, on the other hand, is a subsidiary of The Emirates Group, which is owned by the government of Dubai's Investment Corporation. It is one the most valuable airlines on the planet and it is reported they fly over 56 million passengers over 151 destinations across 80 countries (Saleh, 2023). The brands make a perfect pair as Emirates is the world's largest airline and Real Madrid is one of the world's most popular clubs (Souza, 2023).

It was reported in Spain that this sponsorship is worth 70 million. So, what makes this sponsorship succesful? Well, it boils down to the ability of both brands, the sponsor and the sponsored, to benefit from the deal. The Emirates logo has been engraved on the Real Madrid jersey since 2013 - jersey sponsorships are extremely beneficial as they expose the brand's logos to millions of people across the entire world (Jones, 2022). Moreover, the airline not only enjoys the benefits of branding across the team jerseys but also leverages the reach of the football team by using the players in their digital assets and advertisements. For instance, Toni Kroos featured in Emirates advertisements to promote travel, increasing brand popularity and this eventually made Emirates one of the most popular airlines in the football world. Real Madrid, on the other hand, primarily benefits from the funds made accessible to them by the Emirates group which contributes to the team's financial stability. Moreover, Emirates also usually covers the travel costs for the soccer club.

One of the most interesting instances wherein the strong association between the football club and the airline has been displayed was when in 2018 a new decal featuring action images of some of the club's top players on one of Emirates' A380 aircraft was unveiled (as seen in the image below). As per Emirates (2018), "The new decal was created to mark the occasion of Real Madrid's charter flight on an Emirates A380 from Madrid to Abu Dhabi, where the team in their capacity as the European champions were to compete with football club champions from other continents". The decal remained on the aircraft for six months and fans were able to catch a view of the aircraft as it traversed the globe with scheduled services to Washington, Nice, Mauritius, London Gatwick and Sao Paulo.



Qualcomm and Manchester United

Another football team sponsorship worth mentioning involves a leading football club and a brand recognised as the global leader in technology - Qualcomm and Manchester United (Manchester United FC Ltd, 2023). Manchester United is one of the most successful sports teams in the world with about 1.1 billion supporters globally. Their heritage of 144 years has enabled them to win 66 trophies establishing them as a superior football team. Qualcomm, on the other hand, through its creative innovations such as the development, launch and expansion of 5G, etc., has completely transformed how the world connects. Qualcomm has an extensive product profile and within that is Snapdragon - a product of Qualcomm Technologies that specializes in the creation of system-on-chip (SoC) processors which are commonly used in devices such as smartphones, PCs, and tables (Ayub, 2023).

In August 2022, a sponsorship deal between Snapdragon and Manchester United was announced. Reports suggest that the value of the deal is around 74.8 million US dollars per year and every athletic advertisement will run for 3 years (Sim, 2023). The contract involves certain features that are beneficial to both parties. Firstly, similar to the example of Emirates and Real Madrid, in this instance too, Snapdragon's logo will be displayed on the United Jerseys and kits - this represents a large fee being paid to the football team but also highlights the ability of the technology company to increase their brand awareness. Furthermore, to ensure that the deal benefits more than just the football team, conversations have also taken place regarding how Qualcomm can improve the mobile connectivity at Old Trafford to enhance the fan experience while visiting the stadium (Crafton and Slater, 2023; Cronin, 2022).

Event Sponsorship in Sports - Tennis

Event sponsorships are mainly used in sports like tennis, where people often watch to not only support their favorite players but also the event. Tennis is a sport often known for its events, for example, the four grand slams that are played across a variety of courts - grass, clay and synthetic. The versatility of tennis as a sport is the main reason behind the popularity of its events. As a result, sponsors sponsor entire events as it leads to higher brand exposure and these brands are now often associated with the world's most popular events not only gaining positive publicity for themselves but also increasing the brands' reach across the entire world.

Rolex and Wimbledon

Have you imagined a watch brand sponsoring a tennis event? Well, one of the sponsorships that is the epitome of endurance and prestige stems from the relationship between Rolex and Wimbledon. This sponsorship has sustained through the tests of time and stretches over 45 years - it first began in 1978 when tennis had reached new heights in the sporting world (Rolex, 2023).

Wimbledon is the epitome of elegance and honour - it is the world's oldest tennis tournament and has been home to the grass court and its traditions since the inaugural of 1877 (Singh, 2023). It is not only a home to tennis, it's a place where history is made time and time again. Wimbledon's iconic centre court is where the marks of legendary tennis players are engraved. This a testament to sports legacy where never-seen battles have unfolded and a place where unforgettable champions have emerged. The tournament amasses a large viewership - just last year it was reported that the viewership of Wimbledon led to record-breaking streams for UK broadcasters i.e. 54.3 million across only 2 weeks (Ramachandran, 2023). On the other hand, Rolex is synonymous with luxury and class and has established itself as a global leader in watchmakers since 1905 (Singh, 2023). Rolex embodies sophistication and its timepieces are symbols of status, pride and elegance. The brand has completely transformed a simple watch through their innovations including waterproof oyster shell cases. These advancements have cemented their role as the lead in this industry.

Rolex first started by sponsoring Wimbledon but has gone on to sponsor the other three grand slams too. However, their relationship with Wimbledon is undoubtedly the most iconic. By sponsoring Wimbledon, Rolex has established the image of a brand that values heritage, precision and sportsmanship. Logo placements seen on and around the court and even etched on the Wimbledon trophy as well as the placement of the iconic Rolex watch on the top of the centre court is a symbol of the everlasting partnership.

This partnership is one full of synergies. Whilst a partnership with Rolex has elevated the prestige of Wimbledon, Rolex too has been able to benefit greatly by using Wimbledon as a platform to reach a global audience,

consequently increasing their visibility, exposure and recognition among tennis enthusiasts and luxury connoisseurs. The latter point can be further expanded using the concept of brand association wherein brand Association is a mental connection a consumer makes between a brand and an image, emotion, person, event etc. (Holmes, 2021). Rolex being linked to Wimbledon for over 4 decades has established an association with Wimbledon itself. These associations have formed over time and Rolex has cemented these further by also releasing an exclusive line dedicated to Wimbledon - The Rolex Wimbledon (as seen in the image to the left).



Lacoste and The French Open

Lacoste has been sponsoring the Roland-Garros tournament since 1971. The company Lacoste was founded in 1933 by Rene Lacoste and entrepreneur Ander Giller. The French company often recognized through its green crocodile logo is a luxury brand that sells clothes, sports apparel, leather goods, towels, caps etc. The French Open, held in Paris is one of the four grand slams, where famous players compete on clay to be declared as the next champion (Lacoste, 2020). This event holds a special significance in the tennis world making it one of the most celebrated events worldwide. Interestingly, the founder of Lacoste, Rene Lacoste was a top-notch tennis player who had also won the French Open three times. It, therefore, came to no one's surprise when Rene Lacoste tied ties with the French Open in 1971 when tennis crocodile dresses were becoming more popular (Guyot, 2018). Recently, Lacoste and the Roland-Garros tournament have further strengthened their ties and extended the agreement up to 2025 (Guyot, 2018).

As in the case of most brands sponsoring sporting events, the French courts are often decorated with Lacoste banners and the matches themselves start with the flip of a Lacoste coin (Socha, 2023). However, what is it that truly makes this sponsorship beneficial for both parties involved? In essence, this sponsorship is between two brands that share great similarities. Both Lacoste and the Roland-Garros tournament are French and have strong connections to the sport of Tennis. Furthermore, the sponsorship, being the brainchild of Rene Lacoste (a name engraved in tennis history having won 7 grand slam titles) as a means to carry his legacy forward by creating a tennis wear line that combines style with inventiveness, solidifies that unique connection. Over the years, the mini green crocodile has painted the French Open, as everyone from the players and umpires to ball girls and boys are sporting their apparel. In line with the aforementioned, this sponsorship has also helped Lacoste further strengthen its ties with Individual athletes such as Novak Djokovic, who is its prime brand ambassador. In fact, they have an entire line dedicated to his collection. This increases Lacoste's hold over fans, who not only love the French Open but also love players who play in the event. Furthermore, clothing worn by players is also available for customers to buy - increasing the worth of the clothing as well as the desire to purchase Lactose products.

Athlete Sponsorship in Sports - Cricket

Are there any cricket fans who have not heard of the likes of Virat Kohli and KL Rahul?

These are common names in not only Indian households but internationally too. From breaking cricketing records to excelling in personal life, they have left no stone unturned making them fan favourites. Cricket is a sport where players are identified because of their skill more than the team they play for, hence a brand sponsoring an individual



athlete aims to capitalize on their popularity and value among fans. Brands often use the personal connections an athlete shares with a fan base in comparison to an entire team as a way to build their connection to market their product. Cricketers are often worshipped, and people often blindly follow what they do, changing their tastes and preferences in order to align with their idols. Cricketers or any sports celebrities can have a humongous effect on people and brands are often itching to get the biggest name out there to be the face of their brand.

MRF and Virat Kohli



The interesting connection between Virat Kohli and tyres dates long back - it first started when Virat Kohli and MRF Tyres signed a deal in 2015 (Acharya, 2023). In 2017, this deal was upgraded to a stunning figure of 100 crore till 2025. Virat Kohli gains around 12 crore a year and this is the largest bat sponsorship in the cricketing world. By signing a bat sponsorship with MRF, he has promised to use the MRF logo on his bat to advertise the brand (as can be seen in the image to the left). He also is the face of many advertisements and posters that promote MRF products such as tyres and bats (Scroll, 2017). However, one must wonder why MRF chose Virat Kohli

specifically and not team India. The answer lies in Virat Kohli's fan following, loyalty and success. Virat Kohli, often referred to as King Kohli, has already engraved his name as one of the best batters the cricketing world has ever seen. His consistency and habit of breaking records have always kept him in the limelight on and off the field. Virat Kohli has over the years formed a personal connection with all of his fans and is now the third most followed athlete with 265 million followers. He ranks 14th in the global Instagram earnings ranking, a testament to his worldwide popularity (Business Standard, 2023).

It is evident that Virat Kohli is nothing short of a celebrity. Brands over the years have started to recognize that consumers are often drawn to buy products either due to their characteristics or to imitate a personal figure. This phenomenon can be explained through the theory of Celebrity endorsement. Celebrities influence people's decisions excessively and if celebrities are endorsing the brand their names get linked to the name of the brand (Hani, Marwan and Andre, 2018). Virat, often seen promoting MRF products, has linked his name to that company itself and he has helped MRF convey an expected picture among consumers. Celebrity endorsements often increase sales for the product and increase the revenue of a brand but it largely depends on the right choice of a celebrity. By collaborating with Virat, MRF has successfully achieved their goal as Virat is often referred to as synonymous with class and respect overall building a positive image of the brand. Furthermore, MRF has also been able to leverage Virat's large following to extend the brand's reach to millions of people - both within and outside of India (Hani, Marwan and Andre, 2018).

KL Rahul and Red Bull

Ever heard of an energy drink sponsoring a cricket player? Well, Red Bull and KL Rahul's sponsorship is a blend of exactly that. Actually, for KL Rahul his gateway to an international cricketer began through Red Bull Campus Cricket, where he represented his university. His brilliant performance in the league led to him being selected for the Karnataka team and later on, being picked up by a great IPL team - Royal Challengers Bangalore (Naik, 2021). This was the start of their partnership, which has flourished over the years.

One must wonder, how does this association benefit Red Bull? KL Rahul, who is part of the Indian cricket team and contributes both with bat and wicket-keeping, is a vital asset to Team India. KL Rahul is never out of the limelight of the media, due to his tendency to break cricketing records. Furthermore, he is one of the most followed Indian cricketers of all time with over 18 million followers. Red Bull, by associating with this cricketer, by actively encouraging him to wear Red Bull merchandise for his interviews as well as releasing a KL Rahul Hero can in 2019 (as seen on the right) through which fans got a chance to play a quiz and potentially meet the national cricketer (exchange4media, 2019), has bound itself with his fans all across the world. To add a personal element to this athlete sponsorship, Red Bull has also dedicated an entire page on their website towards KL Rahul which allows fans a gateway to get to know him better.



Conclusion

Brands and companies largely use marketing as a way to highlight their products and brands. Sponsorships are one of the most effective ways of marketing. Sponsorships extend beyond the corporate world and play an equally vital role in the realm of sports with the most common types being athlete sponsorship, team sponsorship and event sponsorships. This paper argues that sponsorships are majorly dependent on the inherent characteristics of certain sports

As evidenced in this paper, football is a sport wherein fans support the entire team rather than an individual and therefore team sponsorships become a popular choice for this sport. The associations of brands with football teams date decades back such as with two popular examples being the association of Emirates-Real Madrid and Qualcomm-Manchester United. Such partnerships benefit both parties; brands often sponsor the kits, apparel, and travel costs for the team whilst in return they gain recognition by leveraging the fan loyalty of the football team as well as through including the football players in their marketing material.

Event sponsorship, on the other hand, is when a brand ties up with a prestigious sporting event. This is often seen in a sport like tennis, where events happen all through the year played on three different surfaces like the four grand slams. Some of the most iconic sponsorships are Wimbledon-Rolex and Lacoste-French Open. Such sponsorships work well when the sponsor and the sponsored have similar underlying values. For instance, Rolex and Wimbledon are both synonymous with elegance and prestige and have withstood a deal for over 45 years. Even the French Open and Lacoste share similar values such as both originating in France and the founder of the luxury brand having a long-standing association with the French Open himself. These sponsorships are examples of brand associations where brands foster a personal connection among fans by associating their brand with an event.

Lastly, athlete sponsorship is when an individual is sponsored by a brand in return for their featuring on social media platforms and advertisements often sporting the apparel of the sponsor brand. This form of sponsorship is particularly popular in cricket where the appeal of individual players may be deemed greater than the entire team. This can be seen through the example of Virat Kohli-MRF and KL Rahul-Red Bull. Virat Kohli and KL Rahul have both established their feet as two of the most successful players in cricketing history both on and off the field. The brands through the idea of celebrity endorsement theory increase their awareness and visibility because celebrities have an immense impact on the purchasing decisions of a consumer. People also often idolize cricketers/celebrities and would do anything to be like them and brands use this to their advantage by collaborating with a celebrity.

Taking all the above into consideration, this paper argued that to a great extent, the inherent characteristics of a sport often influence the form of sponsorship chosen.

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