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Configuring perceived fit to mitigate consumer animosity in the context of cross-border sport sponsorships

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Abstract

Research question: While cross-border sport sponsorships are widespread, such partnerships introduce a notable complication – consumers in one country may dislike the sponsor’s country of origin (COO). This raises the question as to whether animosity towards a sponsor’s COO negatively affects sponsorship outcomes, and if so, how it can be addressed. For the latter, we examine holistic sponsor-object fit as well as a set of its constituent elements.

Research methods: Data collection pertained to a brand engaged in a hypothetical sponsorship. Study 1 involves a Serbian brand sponsoring the Croatia national football team and for Study 2 German sponsors of the England national football team. Survey data are analyzed using a latent modeling approach.

Results and findings: Study 1 shows that animosity reduces consumers’ attitude towards the sponsorship. However, higher perceived sponsor-object fit weakens this effect. Study 2 replicates this finding, and on a more granular level establishes the moderating properties of several sub-dimensions of fit. Congruence in color, personality and status ameliorate animosity.

Implications: We outline implications for sponsors operating in environments where their COO invokes animosity and how sponsor-object fit may mitigate this.

Keywords: sponsorship, country of origin, animosity, perceived fit

Introduction

Sponsorship is increasingly an international business (Cornwell, 2014) and there are numerous examples of companies from one country sponsoring teams, players and events in another country. For instance, Russian energy company Gazprom sponsors the German Bundesliga team Schalke 04 and Serbian football club *Crvena Zvezda* (Red Star), while the German grocery retailer Lidl was until recently a sponsor of the England national football team. Such investments often facilitate market entry and penetration across countries and sometimes even continents (Cornwell, 2014). Whilst sponsorships frequently raise awareness, brand affect, loyalty and drive positive ROI (Cheong, Pyun, & Leng, 2018; Jensen & Cobbs, 2014; Parganas, Papadimitriou, Anagnostopoulos, & Theodoropoulos, 2017; Speed & Thompson, 2000), some cross-border sponsorships may introduce an unfamiliar and difficult to control complication: not *all* consumers in the new market may like or respond positively to the sponsor's country of origin (COO).

Animosity is “the remnants of antipathy related to previous or ongoing military, political or economic events” toward particular foreign countries (Klein, Ettenson, & Morris, 1998, p.90). Previous research demonstrates the harmful role animosity plays in consumer decision-making and buyer behavior processes (Fernández-Ferrín, Bande-Vilela, Klein, & del Río-Araújo, 2015; Gineikiene & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). At higher levels, animosity weakens consumers' willingness to purchase goods from countries that are the subject of their enmity (Gineikiene & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Huang, Phau, & Lin, 2010; Klein et al., 1998; Russell & Russell, 2010). This leads us to address whether such antipathy can transfer to a sponsor simply because of its COO? And, if so, to what extent animosity affects the effectiveness of a sponsorship involving a brand from an animosity evoking country. Moreover, we aim to establish, utilizing two studies if, and how, savvy

selection of a congruent partner can work to reduce the impact of animosity in cross-border situations.

In Study 1, Croatians respond to hypothetical news of a Serbian confectionary brand sponsoring their men's national football team. Although there are different types of animosity, national animosity originating from war is more likely to generate stable, long-term enmity (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). Specifically, we consider the effect of animosity on sponsorship favorability (Speed & Thompson, 2000), where the latter is measured as the degree of agreement that the sponsorship succeeded in improving a person's attitude towards the sponsor. The results confirm that animosity negatively influences this evaluation, with consumers higher on the construct reporting a lower level of sponsorship favorability.

To this problem, we seek a remedy, exploring if high perceived fit between sponsor and object mitigates animosity. Empirical evidence confirms that higher sponsor-object fit is a moderator. In Study 2, we replicate this in a different country setting, this time with the hypothetical context being a German brand sponsoring the England football team. We also investigate fit as a moderator but on a more granular level, unpacking it into several constituent dimensions of the construct. Building on the work of, in particular, Olson and Thjørmøe (2011) and Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley (2010), we test this as a practical typology of sponsor-object fit, to see whether some dimensions attenuate animosity better than others.

Consequently, the paper makes three contributions to the sports marketing and sponsorship literatures. Firstly, while recent research has investigated the dark side of sponsorship (Angell, Gorton, Bottomley, & White, 2016; Bergkvist, 2012; Olson, 2018), whereby some fans denigrate sponsors because of their partnership with a disliked rival, little

attention has been given to cross-border sponsorships, despite their prevalence, and the role of animosity. Secondly, we extend the first contribution by considering how cross-border partnerships may be arranged to minimize the harmful effects of animosity. Whilst sponsor-object fit is subject to considerable research (Mazodier & Merunka, 2012), this paper extends its application to a unique context. Thirdly, the research provides advice to brand managers regarding specific dimensions that need to be prioritized, particularly when animosity is likely to be high.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Sponsorship, defined as “a cash and/or in kind fee paid to a property [or object] (typically a sports, entertainment, non-profit event or organization) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated” (IEG, 2000), is used by marketers to enhance brand awareness and improve brand attitude / image (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Kwon, Ratneshwar, & Kim, 2016; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012). Through proximity to a popular event, team, or celebrity (referred to as “objects”), sponsors are able to appropriate or borrow equity (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; McCracken, 1989). Typically, the mechanics of this exchange is attributed to “transfer” theories such as meaning-transfer (McCracken, 1989), image-transfer (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999) and affect-transfer (Bergkvist & Taylor, 2016), all of which fall under the umbrella of evaluative conditioning theory (De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001). The underlying premise is that any positive affect held towards the sponsored object transfers to the sponsor by virtue of their pairing. In sports sponsorships, the degree of team or fan identification associated with the object matters; research shows a positive correlation between various “identification” measures and subsequent attitude / purchasing behaviors towards the sponsoring brand (Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015).

Nevertheless, there is a dark side to affect transfer in sponsorship. While the *in-group* actively endorses an in-group sponsor, the *out-group* (e.g. fans of a rival team) hold a different perspective, not only denigrating (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016; Bergkvist, 2012; Grohs et al., 2015; Olson, 2018), but sometimes taking pleasure in doing so (Angell et al., 2016). For instance, Bergkvist (2012) found that Swedish football fans' perceptions of, and purchase intentions for, the sponsor of their rival team was significantly lower than a control group comprised of fans and non-fans. In these studies, denigration occurred because the brand held a commercial relationship (i.e. sponsorship) with an object from an out-group (i.e. rival). Whilst we anticipate that animosity also fosters a dark side to sponsorship, the context differs because the foreign brand instead: (i) has a commercial relationship with the in-group but is (ii) seen as part of the out-group because of its COO.

Consumer animosity refers to enmity toward specific countries. Previous research tends to focus on war-related engagements, largely because it is more strongly associated with holistic evaluations of overall animosity than appraisals arising from economic rivalries (Klein, 2002; Klein et al., 1998; Shimp, Dunn, & Klein, 2004). For instance, following France's unwillingness to join the invasion of Iraq, its wine sales in the USA dropped by, at its peak, one quarter (Chavis & Leslie, 2009). Even sales of French sounding supermarket brands in the USA, which were not actually French, declined significantly (Pandya & Venkatesan, 2016). Animosity is distinct from *ethnocentrism*, because the latter represents a form of in-group bias, in which consumers judge *their* country against all others (Balabanis & Diamantopoulos, 2004). Unlike animosity, which entails discrimination against a specific out-group, ethnocentrism is motivated by a general concern for the in-group's domestic economy. Despite being correlated (Nijssen & Douglas, 2004), animosity tends to be a stronger determinant of consumer behavior (Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007).

Direct effect of animosity on favorability

Given the evidence of denigration for products (Klein et al., 1998) and brands (Gineikiene & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Russell & Russell, 2010), it is logical to assume that consumers reporting higher levels of animosity will also respond less positively to a sponsorship after learning about there being a relationship involving an in-group object. This expectation is consistent with a study of French energy company EDF and its sponsorship of the British team at the London 2012 Olympics (Lee & Mazodier, 2015). British respondents exhibiting higher levels of animosity towards the French reported lower levels of sponsor-brand affect compared with less hostile consumers. As such, we expect that animosity engenders denigration of the sponsor in a manner similar to what has been found in past research for products and brands (Klein, 2002; Klein et al., 1998; Riefler & Diamantopoulos, 2007). We draw upon cognitive-affective theories of emotion to explain this (Lazarus, 1991; Wilkowski & Robinson, 2010). From this perspective, news of the sponsorship would normally trigger agonistic emotion amongst consumers higher in animosity. Since, agonistic emotion is associated with anger and instinctive retribution, people in this state tend to focus attention towards the source of negative emotion (Schwarz, 2002; Sukhodolsky, Golub, & Cromwell, 2001), which, in this case, is the brand's COO. This procedure tends to inhibit thorough systematic processing concealing the bigger picture. It follows that, individuals exhibiting higher animosity are more likely to focus more on the sponsor's COO in their evaluation, as well as their own animosity, overlooking other properties, characteristics or virtues of the partnership. As such, in the context of a Serbian brand sponsoring the Croatian football team, in Study 1 we test whether:

H₁. Higher animosity towards the sponsor brand's COO has a negative effect on sponsorship favorability.

Moderating role of sponsor-object fit

Sponsor-object fit is the degree to which the sponsor and object (event, celebrity, team) are perceived as similar (Kuo & Rice, 2015; Mazodier & Quester, 2014). Fit is important because it influences how people evaluate relationships and the degree to which they cognitively elaborate on this information. As such, it has the ability to determine and focus the type of thoughts a person has about a sponsorship (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). Indeed, consumers typically regard partnerships with high degrees of fit as being more “appropriate”.

Researchers often draw on associative network theories when considering fit. Notably, this assumes that congruent objects stored as separate schemas in a person's memory are more easily scanned and retrieved than incongruent objects (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). When fit is low, individuals are required to allocate more cognitive resources to process and understand new information. Since it is more effortful to integrate incongruent information into existing memory structures (i.e. schema), a person will typically engage in higher levels of elaboration when information is ill-fitting (Rumelhart, 1980). Consequently, the motivations of involved parties (object and sponsor) are more deeply scrutinized and questioned (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004), with skepticism and suspicion predominating (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Ill-fitting sponsorships elicit more critical evaluation with greater attention given to negative aspects (Rifon et al., 2004). In the context studied here, we expect therefore that in the case of ill-fitting sponsorships, individuals focus and justify their attitude towards the sponsorship based predominately on their animosity, propagated with feelings of anger normally associated with the brand's COO. When the pairing is more fluently processed (i.e.

higher fit), such scrutiny will be comparably weaker and evaluations not as severe. As such, we expect to observe that:

H₂: The effect of animosity towards the sponsor brand's COO on sponsorship favorability will be weaker at higher levels of perceived sponsor-object fit.

If the detrimental role animosity plays in determining the success of the sponsorship is reduced when perceived sponsor-object fit is higher, a pertinent question remains: which specific dimension(s) of fit should brand managers prioritize? Although the literature acknowledges that sponsor-object fit is multi-dimensional, and that not all dimensions have an equal role in determining the holistic construct, until recently, little guidance about its manifestation was available (Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011). As Zdravkovic et al. (2010) noted: “although in some instances it may be easy for marketing managers to determine ‘good fit’, this may not always be the case, forcing managers to [instead] rely on their instincts” (p. 151). Study 2 seeks to reduce this uncertainty, focusing on how sponsor-object fit *might* be configured to mitigate against higher consumer animosity using a selection of dimensions.

Three studies in particular inform our work (Kuo & Rice, 2015; Olson & Thjømmøe, 2011; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Based on qualitative research, Olson and Thjømmøe (2011) identify seven bases of fit: participant use, size/prominence similarity, audience similarity, geographic similarity, attitude similarity, image similarity, time duration. However, they find only (i) participant use, (ii) audience, (iii) geographic and (iv) attitude similarity to be related to overall fit perceptions. In the domain of cause-related marketing, Zdravkovic et al. (2010) identified fit as a combination of *prominence* (relating to how the relationship is presented and explained to potential customers) and *marketing strategy* (partners' similarity in segmentation, targeting, and positioning). Support for both types was found with specific sub-dimensions of

color congruence (colors of brand and cause overlap), target market overlap, explicitness (degree of support spelled out), involvement (brand stimulates involvement with the cause) and localness (cause fits with local market) being significant predictors of brand attitude. Whilst several of these dimensions have an exclusively Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) flavor, that may not transfer to a sports sponsorship context, the importance of *similar* colors and a congruent target market for the brand and cause also resonate with the fit dimensions established by Olson and Thjømmøe (2011). Similarly Kuo and Rice (2015) highlight the importance of color congruence, a finding supported by Henderson, Mazodier, and Sundar (2019), as well as the degree to which the sponsor and sponsee share a similar conceptual image or personality. Taken altogether, we scrutinized each dimension from these studies and considered their face validity, with the goal of testing whether any could independently mitigate animosity, considering the broader fit construct. To this end, five dimensions were shortlisted for inclusion; namely *Color*, *Participant_use*, *Target_use*, *Personality* and *Status*. Table 1 presents conceptual definitions, examples and single-item measures for each dimension. We test each as a surrogate for the overarching sponsor-object fit construct in an exploratory manner, choosing to expand on possible explanations for observed differences in the results during the discussion section.

Table 1 about here

Overview of Studies

We conducted two studies to test the hypotheses outlined and to establish the relative importance of each dimension of perceived sponsor-object fit in moderating the animosity-sponsorship favorability relationship. Study 1 tests if the predicted negative relationship between animosity and sponsorship favorability is substantiated; that is, if consumers with

higher levels of animosity towards the brand's COO respond more negatively towards the sponsorship (i.e. less likely to agree that it has improved their attitude to the sponsoring brand). Secondly, we establish whether this relationship is attenuated by higher perceived sponsor-object fit. In Study 2, we aim to replicate the findings of Study 1, and also establish if the individual role of five sub-dimensions of sponsor-object fit is sufficient enough to also moderate the animosity-sponsorship favorability link.

In both studies, a questionnaire survey design was implemented. All items were captured using seven-point Likert (strongly disagree-strongly agree) scales unless stated otherwise. Measures were taken from established marketing and sports marketing studies. The dependent variable – *sponsorship favorability* – was originally designed by Speed and Thompson (2000) and, as previously mentioned, captures the extent to which the sponsorship improved an individual's attitude towards the sponsoring brand. It is thus a measure of sponsorship effectiveness. It is worth highlighting that the original scale was framed as *favorability* and as treated as more of a brand attitude measure. Nonetheless, we consider the content of the scale to reflect sponsorship favorability more effectively and continue in this way. We employed a five-item truncated version of Klein et al.'s (1998) animosity scale. Sample items included: (i) *I dislike [country]* and (ii) *I feel angry towards [country]*. We used the five-item measure proposed by Speed and Thompson (2000) to measure *sponsor-object fit*.

We included seven *control variables* to minimize the possibility of omitted variable bias (Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013). These included: (i) a two-item truncated measure of *fan identification* (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), representing longer-term commitment to the national team; (ii) *Prior attitude towards the brand* (Speed & Thompson, 2000) using a seven-point semantic differential scale (see Table 2); (iii) *Ethnocentrism* (Riefler &

Diamantopoulos, 2007) was captured with 10 items; (iv) *Country-of-origin fit* (Fang & Wang, 2018); (v) *Prior purchasing of the brand* (Davvetas & Diamantopoulos, 2016); (vi) *Prior visits to Serbia* (Steenkamp & de Jong, 2010); and (vii) if they *had a Serbian relative* (Steenkamp & de Jong, 2010).

Study 1: Serbian Brands Sponsor the Croatian National Football Team

Brand Selection

In finding appropriate brands as hypothetical sponsors of the Croatia football team we consulted two Serbian experts familiar with the local confectionary market. The expert team consisted of a leading academic expert in international marketing and a practitioner working in the market research sector. Confectionary was selected because it is a category for which there are multiple, well-known local and foreign brands (Brečić et al., 2013). Eight were shortlisted that fulfilled two criteria: (a) the brand had never sponsored an event, or team in Croatia before, and (b) Croatians should have some knowledge of the brand and its Serbian roots. Next, we recruited a sample of 50 Croatian students from the University of Zagreb and asked them to rate each brand in terms of perceived connectedness with Serbia (herein referred to as COO fit) [items were: Brand X is consistent with Serbian values, Brand X is complementary to Serbian culture and values]. We selected the two brands that fell either side of the median in terms of COO fit to ensure that: (i) the brand was neither under-identified nor synonymous entirely with Serbia, and (ii) that it was probable that prior attitude would be significantly different between the two cases. From this exploration, confectionary brands Plazma and Galeb were chosen.

Materials

The questionnaire comprised five sections. Section one confirmed that the respondent was Croatian and gauged their affinity with the national team (*fan identification*). In section two *animosity* and *ethnocentrism* was captured (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). Next (section three), respondents were exposed to a picture of one of the two confectionary brands and asked about their familiarity and previous usage. Only respondents who were familiar with the brand and able to identify its country-of-origin (Serbian) from a list of dummy options were included in the final dataset. In section four, a fictional newspaper article reported the brand as the “new” official sponsor of the Croatian national football team. Respondents read that:

“The sponsorship is a three-year financially rewarding deal and involves Plazma/Galeb’s logo being displayed on the team training kit, stadium perimeter boards, player endorsements and promotions via various forms of advertisement, such as television, radio and newspaper print.”

They then answered the *sponsorship favorability* questions. Relevant personal characteristics, several being control variables, were collected in section five.

Data Collection, Sampling & Preliminary Tests

A quota sample to approximate Zagreb’s adult population regarding age and gender was employed with 200 questionnaire responses pertaining to each brand collected using street-level intercepts in a busy city center location. No financial incentives were offered.

Those unaware of the brand or unable to identify its country-of-origin were removed leaving a total of 309 (77%) responses (Plazma = 78%; Galeb = 77%). In support for the choice of focal brands, 79.2% had purchased them previously. 48.1% were male, 67.7% had travelled to Serbia before, whilst 20% had Serbian relatives. The average age was 43.4 years old. All *animosity* items had a mean score below the scale’s midpoint, ranging from 3.05 to 3.69. *Prior attitude* ratings (collected before the announcement of the sponsorship to respondents) were all above the scale’s midpoint (i.e. 4.0). Table 2 provides item means and standard deviations for

all measures. Independent-samples t-tests showed Plazma and Galeb samples did not differ in terms of age, gender, fan identification, animosity, ethnocentrism and perceived COO fit (all t 's < 1.60), but did vary in prior attitude with Plazma ($\bar{x} = 4.65$) scoring slightly higher than Galeb ($\bar{x} = 4.13$) ($t = 3.04$, $df = 306$, $p < .01$).

Table 2 about here

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

A latent modeling approach was employed in Mplus 8.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The measurement model incorporated the study's dependent (*sponsorship favorability*), independent (*animosity*) and latent control variables (*fan identification*, *prior attitude*, *ethnocentrism*, *COO-fit*). We included sponsor-object fit in the measurement model, since it would later be included as a latent moderator. Standardized factor loadings were sufficiently high (see table 2), and the model exhibited a satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2 = 917.54$; $d.f. = 413$; $p < .01$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .04 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Since data concerned two Serbian brands, for completeness we tested the statistical suitability of aggregating the samples using a metric invariance protocol (Williams, Vandenberg, & Edwards, 2009). We firstly specified a baseline measurement model whereby no constraints were imposed on either the Galeb or Plazma samples ($\chi^2 = 1359.70$; $d.f. = 826$). The model fit for the first model was then compared to a second model in which factor loadings, variances and covariances were constrained to be equal ($\chi^2 = 1393.44$; $d.f. = 850$). A chi-squared difference test confirmed the reduction in fit between the models was marginal and nonsignificant ($\Delta \chi^2 = 33.74$; $\Delta d.f. = 24$; $p > .05$), and so we were confident in presenting the combined dataset.

Given that all measures were collected using the same research instrument, common method bias (CMB) may cause an inflation in the item factor loading estimates and structural parameters (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). To minimize the possibility of this we implemented several procedural remedies. First, we attempted to reduce the possibility of socially desirable responding by stressing anonymity and urging respondents to take care in supplying honest answers. Second, we carried out two post-hoc procedures: (i) specification of a single factor, and (ii) use of an unrelated marker variable (Podsakoff et al., 2003). At the beginning of the questionnaire, we asked respondents to rate their mood using the question: “to what extent would you say that you are happy today?” Since this should be unrelated to a person’s *fan identification* with the international football team, we chose it as a surrogate for CMB. Correlation analyses revealed a low shared variance ($r=.06$, $p=NS$), indicating that CMB is unlikely to be a concern. Taking this further, we followed the protocol of Musarra, Robson, and Katsikeas (2016) and calculated a marker-corrected correlation matrix partialling out this shared variance with all variables in the matrix. A Chi-squared difference test revealed that model fit was not affected to any great extent when compared to the original measurement model ($\Delta \chi^2 = 2.69$). CMB is unlikely to be detrimental in this study.

Construct Validity and Reliability

Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) method (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity exists when factor items load as theorized and AVE calculations are above .50 (i.e. 50% variance extracted). This was confirmed in all cases with AVE estimates ranging from .61 to .93 (Table 3). (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) recommend comparing the AVE score on each factor with the squared-correlation shared with all other constructs - if the AVE is higher, in all cases, this is sufficient

to conclude a construct possesses discriminant validity. This was confirmed. Likewise, all composite scale reliabilities exceeded the commonly accepted thresholds reported in the modelling literature (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012), ranging from .76 to .97 (Table 3).

Table 3 about here

Results

We first specified a latent regression model with animosity as an independent variable. Control variables were also included. As expected, animosity had a negative effect on favorability ($\beta = -.13, p < .05$). The higher a person's reported animosity towards Serbia, the less effective the sponsorship is rated in terms of being able to raise brand attitude (see Table 4, Model 1). H_1 is validated and, of the control variables, only prior attitude was significant.

Table 4 about here

The Moderating Role of Perceived Fit

Using the LMS algorithm in Mplus 8.1, a second model was estimated to include sponsor-object fit as a latent moderator between animosity and favorability (Table 4 – model 2). In this software, the LMS algorithm (see Klein and Moosbrugger, 2000) does not produce an estimate for Chi-square and its related fit statistics (RMSEA, CFI, TLI) and instead supplies alternative indices (e.g. Log-likelihood, AIC, BIC), which are reported in the tables for our research when the LMS approach is employed.

With all other controls, sponsor-object fit had the expected moderating effect ($\beta = .16, p < .01$) providing support for H_2 . We checked the conditional value of animosity on sponsor favorability at different levels of sponsor-object fit; namely at the mean and one standard deviation either side. When fit was low, the effect of animosity on sponsorship favorability was

amplified ($\beta = -.24, p < .01$), had little impact at the mean ($p = ns$), and was even positive at higher levels of fit ($\beta = .13, p < 0.05$). As the latter result is counterintuitive and difficult to explain theoretically, we consider it to be a statistical anomaly and use Study 2 as an opportunity to revisit the finding. In conclusion, however, higher sponsor-object fit appears to play a mitigating role in the transfer of animosity.

Having identified the importance of sponsor-object fit, our attention now turns to the specific dimensions that are most effective in ameliorating the negative effect of higher animosity, but this time in a different context.

Study 2: German Brands Sponsor the England Football Team

Brand Selection

The fieldwork followed a similar approach to Zdravkovic et al. (2010). A pre-test with 50 English respondents recruited via a Qualtrics online panel helped identify four brands from the Top 50 Interbrand list satisfying two criteria; i.e. (i) British consumers would have an awareness of the brand, and its German heritage, and (ii) would be rated as high / low in one or more of the dimensions outlined in Table 1. Respondents picked from the list the brand they felt was most likely to be used by players in the England football team (Audi = 16% of responses), most likely to be used by England supporters (Aldi = 24.0%), most congruent image / personality with the England team (Adidas = 26%; Lufthansa = 8%), a more congruent status (Audi = 10%) and the most compatible colors and logo (Media Markt = 14%; E.On and Bosch = 12%). Given that Nike produces the England football kit making Adidas an unrealistic choice of sponsor and Media Markt is not as well well-known outside of central Europe as the other alternatives, we decided on Aldi, Audi, Bosch and Lufthansa as hypothetical sponsors in Study 2.

Materials

Single-item measures (see Table 1) for each dimension were employed. We made two further changes as compared to Study 1. We truncated two control variables (ethnocentrism: 3 items and prior attitude: 2 items) to reduce the questionnaire length based on the highest standardized loadings from Study 1 (Table 2). Respondents were asked about their knowledge and experiences with one of the four brands, before being shown a print advertisement announcing it as the new sponsor of the England football team. Other than switching the brand, each advert was identical. Respondents read that:

“The England Football Association has announced in the media that its relationship with Vauxhall has been terminated with immediate effect, and that the new sponsor is [insert German brand]”.

Remaining questions pertained to sponsor-object fit, each of its dimensions and sponsorship favorability. Other relevant control variables were gathered at the end.

Data Collection & Scale Validation

In total, 500 questionnaires were collected via a Qualtrics panel for a small fee (n=125 per brand). Item means, standard deviations and standardized factor loadings are provided in Table 2. Only respondents with familiarity of the brand, and an ability to identify it as German were included in the final quota. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirmed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 414.37$; $d.f. = 175$; $p < .01$; CFI = .97; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .04) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Other checks for construct validity, common method bias and metric invariance were satisfactory.

Results

We specified a series of models to establish the importance of each dimension of fit, once again using the LMS algorithm in Mplus. Before doing so, we replicated the interaction model in Study 1 using the five-item measure of sponsor-object fit by Speed and Thompson (2000). Despite the change in context, higher sponsor-object fit was again found to attenuate the effect of animosity on sponsorship favorability ($\beta_{\text{sponsor-object fit} \times \text{animosity}} = .09, p < .01$) (see Table 5, Model 1 for all parameters).

Table 5 about here

We next turned our attention to the moderating properties of each individual dimension of fit. We specified five models (Table 5, Models 2-6) with an interaction term between animosity and each dimension. It is worth Control variables were selected from Study 1. Only *Color* (model 2c: $\beta = .05, p < .05$), *Status* (Model 2e: $\beta = .08, p < .01$) and *Personality* (Model 2f: $\beta = .07, p < .01$) were significant moderators. Closer inspection showed that, in all three cases, the effect of animosity on sponsorship favorability was more negative at lower (one standard deviation below the mean) levels of fit ($\beta_{\text{Color}} = -.16, p < .01$; $\beta_{\text{Status}} = -.18, p < .01$; $\beta_{\text{Personality}} = -.19, p < .01$), negative but non-significant at the mean ($\beta_{\text{Color}} = -.06, p = \text{NS}$; $\beta_{\text{Status}} = -.07, p = \text{NS}$; $\beta_{\text{Personality}} = -.06, p = \text{NS}$), and positive but non-significant when fit was one standard deviation above the mean ($\beta_{\text{Color}} = .03, p = \text{NS}$; $\beta_{\text{Status}} = .04, p = \text{NS}$; $\beta_{\text{Personality}} = .06, p = \text{NS}$).

Discussion

This research investigates a new context in which brands might experience the dark side of sponsorship, specifically cross-border partnerships. Cross-border sponsorships are extremely popular; for example, by 2019, all but one of the shirt-sponsors of English Premier League football teams originated from a foreign country (Statista, 2018). We show that some fans might not respond and evaluate sponsorships and sponsors in a manner typical for in-group sponsorships (i.e. positively). Indeed, consumers exhibiting the highest levels of animosity to the sponsor's COO may denigrate a sponsorship involving a brand from that country. Specifically, we show that when animosity to a sponsor's COO is higher, the more likely consumers will be to disagree that the sponsorship worked to increase their brand attitude – a product of how they evaluate and feel about the relationship between the brand and sponsee.

Previous research identifies several potential solutions to animosity: conducting business through a local partner, localizing the company or brand name, emphasizing product value and withdrawing from the market (Amine, Chao, & Arnold, 2005). However, each of these entail significant costs (e.g. related to localization or the opportunity costs of foregone sales) and risk (e.g. using a local partner). Moreover, such approaches are inappropriate where companies wish to use sponsorship as part of an international communications strategy in which global and local objectives are united, with a consistent image presented across multiple markets. The latter is often an important objective for cross-border sponsorships (Cornwell, 2014). Thus, we take a different approach considering how a sponsor can remain within a market characterized by animosity toward its COO but configure its sponsorship arrangements to weaken the adverse effect of animosity.

Within the context of a single country, Olson (2018) finds that fans' derogatory attitude toward a rival's sponsor is exacerbated by higher sponsor-object fit. In other words, high fitting sponsors experience even worse negative out-group effects. In our international case, however, we find that sponsor-object fit plays a positive moderating role, weakening the adverse effect of animosity, and at higher levels even neutralizes it altogether. The apparent disparity likely reflects two elements: differences between whether the in- or out-group team is the sponsee and between domestic and international contexts. First, we consider the perspective of the in-group when their team partners with a sponsor linked to an out-group country, whereas Olson (2018) considers the perspective of the in-group when an out-group team gains a sponsor. It is logical that the effect of fit differs between these cases. When a rival *gains* a high fitting sponsor it is likely to be particularly galling for fans as it implies that a feasible and desirable partnership is lost to them. This is likely to be particularly pronounced in a domestic context where high fitting sponsorships are perceived as a zero-sum gain, with resources accrued by one club coming at the expense of a rival.

Aside from the differences between our research and Olson (2018), we argue and show that poorer fit in this context works to amplify the detrimental impact that animosity has on sponsorship favorability, but this can be reduced when perceived fit is higher. Although we do not formally test the mechanism behind this outcome, prior research suggests that ill-fitting partnerships encourage individuals to elaborate more deeply on the sponsorship, question motives and pay greater attention given to negative aspects (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). This leads to more negative sponsorship evaluations. In contrast, better perceived fit, amongst high animosity individuals, appears to pass the: "that makes sense" test, engenders less scrutiny, and in turn weakens and, at moderate to high levels, even turns off the detrimental effect of animosity on sponsorship outcomes. Indeed, in Study 1, we found that when fit was high,

animosity actually had a positive impact on favorability, but conclude, when not replicated in Study 2, that this is likely to have been an anomaly. We acknowledge that an issue of the Speed and Thompson (2000) scale adopted in this research is that it captures the marginal effect of the sponsorship on raising a person's attitude to the brand, rather than the absolute level of change *per se*. This may have been a contributing factor and warrants careful consideration in the interpretation of findings based on the scale, including this study.

In Study 2 we take a more granular view of sponsor-object fit, drawing on previous work that unpacked the sub-dimensions of the concept (e.g., Olson & Thjørmøe, 2011; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). As previously discussed, we adopted the terminology of Zdravkovic et al. (2010) who classified dimensions in terms of *prominence* or *marketing strategy*. Generally, we find that the prominence-based fit outperforms marketing strategy-based fit from the perspective of ameliorating the effect of animosity on favorability (although we do not find any that have a significant and positive effect). More congruent *colors*, *status* and *personality* are significant moderators. While we do not formally make predictions for which dimensions will be more or less effective, we can shed light on our findings by relating them to the accessibility-diagnostics framework of Feldman and Lynch (1988). Whilst we label our dimensions as either *prominence* or *marketing strategy*, other research classified fit into *functional* or *image* types (e.g., Bigné, Currás-Pérez, & Aldás-Manzano, 2012). Functional fit requires consumers to compare characteristics, attributes and functions of the brand with the sponsored object. Image fit is more impressionistic (e.g. visual). We draw a comparison between image fit and *prominence*, as well as functional fit and *marketing strategy* dimensions. Returning to the diagnostics-accessibility framework, when faced with two equally accessible pieces of information, people tend to use the most diagnostic to form judgments, but when this

is not possible, the most accessible information takes prevalence. Functional dimensions of fit (i.e. marketing strategy) tend to be comparatively less accessible to image fit, predominantly because they require recipients to devote more cognitive resources to process. As such, it makes sense that sponsor-object fit is most strongly related to image fit (i.e. prominence dimensions), an assumption which is supported in our data through a follow-up correlation check. Although all five dimensions are positively correlated with sponsor-object fit and sponsorship favorability, participant and target-use had the weakest relationships of the five dimensions (r 's between .30 and .50). In summary, from a more practical perspective, practitioners should prioritize image over functional fit – or in the categories we derive, prominence rather than marketing strategy dimensions.

Limitations and Further Research

For consistency, in our empirical work, we retain a common object (national football team) and measure the immediate effect, following news of the sponsorship, on favorability (extent of agreement that this sponsorship will improve brand attitude). We acknowledge that the selected partner countries differ in the likelihood of having a sponsorship of this kind; where there is precedent for German brands sponsoring high profile English objects, having a Serbian sponsor of the Croatian national football team (and vice versa) is far less likely, at least in the short- to medium-term.

We also do not capture long-term effects in our focal variables. It is likely that, amongst low animosity individuals, sponsorship outcomes improve over time through mere exposure (Lee & Mazodier, 2015). However, for high animosity individuals, time may not yield more favorable sponsorship outcomes. Moreover, we do not know how perceived fit alters over time for low and high animosity individuals, or in contexts where the sponsorship is more prevalent,

such as on the front of team jerseys, causes more extreme effects. One may expect that perceived fit between sponsor and object improves during the lifetime of a sponsorship as individuals become accustomed to the partnership (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). However, this may not be the case for high animosity individuals where agonistic emotions and a sense of resentment could fester, with the perceived fit between sponsor and object becoming more discordant over time.

The study finds evidence for the importance of sponsor-object fit in weakening the adverse effect of animosity on sponsorship outcomes and identifies the most promising types of fit for doing this (e.g. colors, personality, status). However, we do not manipulate fit or consider how framing of the news of the sponsorship affects outcomes. We also acknowledge that we have only tested a sub-section of possible fit dimensions (our five dimensions explain 73% variance in sponsor-object fit). In different contexts, a change in the assortment of dimensions may generate varied results.

In addition, sponsor-object fit may not be the only moderator that attenuates the effect of animosity. Following Schmidt and Eisend (2015), establishing if communications elements such as timing, message style (e.g. humor) and degree of financial investment affect consumer responses would help further develop a toolbox of strategies for sports sponsors wishing to mitigate such denigration.

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Table 1: Dimensions of Sponsor-object fit

Dimension of Fit	Source	Definition	Example	Measure used
Colors	Zdravkovic et al. (2010); Kuo and Rice (2015)	Extent to which the sponsor's colors are perceptually congruent with the object.	Vodafone with its red and white brand logo, sponsoring Manchester United, with has the same team kit colors.	In your opinion, how well do the colors of Brand X fit with the [country] football team? (1 = Poor Fit – 7= Good Fit)
Participant_Use	Olson and Thjømøe (2011)	Likelihood that participants of the object (e.g. players, celebrities) would use the brand.	Basketball star James Harden's sponsorship by sports brand Adidas.	How likely is it that Brand X's products are used by players of the [country] football team? (1 = Very Unlikely – 7= Very Likely)
Target_Use	Zdravkovic et al. (2010)	Extent to which the sponsor's target market is also interested in the object.	Budweiser's sponsorship of the FA Cup with both football and beer being important to men.	+ How likely is it that current customers of Brand X are interested in the [country] Football Team? (1 = Very Unlikely – 7= Very Likely)
Personality	Kuo and Rice (2015)	Degree to which the sponsor and sponsee share a similar conceptual image	Golfer Tom Watson sponsored by Ralph Lauren; both have the image of being sophisticated, refined and successful.	Some experts talk about the "image" or "personality" of different brands. In a sponsorship between Brand X and the [country] Football Team, how would you rate the union in terms of image/personality? (Semantic Differential: 1 = Incompatible: 7 = Compatible)
Status	Olson and Thjømøe (2011)	Degree to which the sponsor and sponsee perceptually share a compatible status	McDonald's sponsorship of the Olympic Games. Whilst McDonalds would normally be seen in contrast to sport, it shares comparable global status with the Olympic Games.	The [country] Football Team and Brand X share a similar status (size, importance) to one another. (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

Table 2: Item-level statistics for model constructs

Factor	Label	Mean	STUDY 1	Standardized Factor Loading	Mean	STUDY 2	Standardized Factor Loading
			Standard Deviation			Standard Deviation	
Animosity (IV)							
Ani1	I dislike [country]	3.05	1.69	.85	2.70	1.51	.85
Ani2	I feel angry toward [country]	3.45	1.83	.87	2.39	1.37	.88
Ani3	I will never forgive [country]	3.39	1.79	.85	2.38	1.47	.86
Ani4	[Country] is not a reliable trading partner	3.39	1.75	.79	2.54	1.44	.75
Ani5	You can never trust [country]	3.69	1.95	.81	2.45	1.50	.87
Sponsor-Object Fit (MOD)							
SO_Fit1	There is a logical connection between the [home country] football team and Brand X	2.49	1.40	.88	3.21	1.57	.87
SO_Fit2	It makes sense that Brand X sponsors [country]	2.45	1.29	.91	3.46	1.61	.96
SO_Fit3	Brand X and the [country] football team fit together well	2.62	1.40	.88	3.37	1.65	.92
SO_Fit4	The [country] team and Brand X stand for similar things	2.42	1.35	.87	3.36	1.59	.88
SO_Fit5	It makes sense to me that Brand X sponsors the [country] football team	2.56	1.65	.82	3.42	1.60	.87
Sponsorship Favorability (DV)							
FAV1	This sponsorship makes me feel more favorable to Brand X	2.64	1.38	.89	3.95	1.41	.92
FAV2	This sponsorship improves my perception of Brand X	2.70	1.42	.98	3.92	1.41	.95
FAV3	This sponsorship makes me like Brand X more	2.62	1.42	.94	3.78	1.49	.93
Fan Identification (CONTROL)							
FI1	Others (friends & family) see me as a big fan of the[country] football team	3.86	1.91	.89	5.09	1.60	.77

FI2	I see myself as a big fan of the [country]football team	4.42	1.85	.85	5.28	1.47	.87
<i>Prior Attitude to the Sponsor (CONTROL)</i>							
Att1	Bad-Good	4.52	1.59	.93	5.42	1.35	.94
Att2	Dislike-Like	4.45	1.62	.94	5.35	1.40	.97
Att3	Unpleasant-Pleasant	4.48	1.57	.93	-	-	-
Att4	Unfavorable-Favorable	4.11	1.61	.90	-	-	-
<i>Ethnocentrism (CONTROL)</i>							
Ethno1	Only products that are unavailable in [country] should be imported	4.89	1.64	.64			-
Ethno2	[Country] products first, last and foremost	4.90	1.70	.70			-
Ethno3	Purchasing foreign-made products is un-Croatian/English	3.80	1.74	.80			-
Ethno4	It is not right to purchase foreign products because it puts local people out of jobs	4.27	1.74	.88	3.21	1.50	.87
Ethno5	A real local should always buy [country] made products	4.15	1.93	.86			-
Ethno6	We should purchase products manufactured in [country] instead of letting other countries get rich off us	4.63	1.67	.86	4.15	1.65	.80
Ethno7	Locals should not buy foreign products because this hurts [country] business and causes unemployment	4.33	1.61	.91	3.30	1.51	.93
Ethno8	It may cost me in the long run but I prefer to support [country] products	5.07	1.45	.73			-
Ethno9	We should buy from foreign countries only those products that we cannot obtain within our own country	4.87	1.57	.77			-
Ethno10	[Local country] consumers who purchase products made in other countries are responsible for putting their fellow locals out of work	3.84	1.85	.82			-
<i>COO-Fit (CONTROL)</i>							
COO FIT1	Brand X is consistent with [foreign country] values	4.69	1.83	.96	5.02	1.42	.94
COO FIT2	Brand X is complementary to [foreign country] culture and values	4.73	1.86	.96	5.06	1.46	.94

[country] = refers to Croatia / Croatians in study one and England / English in study two

Table 3: Inter-construct correlations

FACTOR	ANI	SO_FIT	FAV	FAN-ID	ATT	ETHNO	COO-FIT
Animosity (ANI)	.81 / .80	-.07	-.10*	.08	-.13**	.43**	.05
Sponsor-object Fit (SO_FIT)	-.08*	.86 / .89	.64**	.06	.34**	-.05	.05
Sponsorship Favorability (FAV)	-.17**	.43**	.92 / .93	.14**	.40**	-.04	.10*
Fan Identification (FAN-ID)	.29**	-.22**	-.01	.86 / .79	.06	.12**	.19**
Prior Attitude (ATT)	-.20**	.14*	.22**	.04	.93 / .95	-.12**	.19**
Ethnocentrism (ETHNO)	.46**	-.08	-.09	.22**	-.17**	.61 / .89	.04
Country-of-Origin Fit (COO-FIT)	.13*	-.11	.00	.09	.09	.30**	.92 / .92
Composite Reliability	.95 / .95	.86 / .98	.93 / .88	.97 / .98	.92 / .98	.76 / .94	.96 / .96

Key: ** sig < .01 level; * sig < .05 level

Values below the diagonal are factor inter-correlations for Study 1. Values above the line are for Study 2

Values on the diagonal (black cells) represent the AVEs for Study 1 / Study 2

Composite reliabilities for Study 1 / Study 2

Table 4: Unstandardized model estimates (Study 1)

Path (→ Sponsorship Favorability)	Model 1	Model 2
	<i>Direct Model</i>	<i>Interaction Model</i>
<i>Direct Effects</i>		
Animosity	-.13 (.07)*	-.04 (.06)
Sponsor-Object Fit	-	.42 (.08)**
<i>Interaction Effects</i>		
Animosity x Sponsor-object Fit	-	.16 (.04)**
<i>Control Variables</i>		
Fan ID	.03 (.05)	.10 (.05)*
Ethnocentrism	-.03 (.10)	-.07 (.09)
Prior Attitude	.17 (.06)**	.14 (.06)**
COO-FIT	.05 (.08)	.06 (.05)
Visited (yes/no)	-.19 (.15)	-.17 (.13)
Relatives (yes/no)	.16 (.20)	.12 (.16)
Purchased brand (yes/no)	-.03 (.20)	.03 (.17)
<i>Model Fit</i>		
Log-likelihood	-11902.78	-13910.21
AIC	23997.56	28056.43
Adjusted BIC	24051.49	28122.71

Key: ** sig < .01 level; * sig < .05 level

AIC: Akaike Information Criteria

Adjusted BIC: Adjusted Bayesian Criteria

Table 5: Unstandardized model estimates (Study 2)

Path (→ Sponsorship Favorability)	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Ani	-.11 (.05)	-.10 (.08) *	-.08 (.10)	-.07 (.05)	-.07 (.05)	-.07 (.05)
Sponsor-object Fit	.61 (.04)**	-	-	-	-	-
Color	-	.10 (.03)**	.09 (.04)**	.09 (.04)**	.09 (.04)**	.09 (.04)**
Part-Use	-	-.03 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)
Target-Use	-	.07 (.04)	.06 (.04)	.07 (.04)	.07 (.04)	.06 (.04)
Status	-	.22 (.05)**	.22 (.05)**	.22 (.05)**	.22 (.05)**	.22 (.05)**
Personality	-	.18 (.04)**	.18 (.04)**	.19 (.05)**	.19 (.05)**	.20 (.04)**
<i>Two-Way Interactions</i>						
Ani X Sponsor-object Fit	.09 (.03)**	-	-	-	-	-
Ani X Color	-	.05 (.02)*	-	-	-	-
Ani X Part-Use	-	-	.02 (.02)	-	-	-
Ani X Target-Use	-	-	-	.03 (.03)	-	-
Ani X Status	-	-	-	-	.08 (.03)**	-
Ani X Personality	-	-	-	-	-	.07 (.02)**
<i>Control Variables</i>						
Fan ID	.09 (.04)*	.11 (.04)**	.11 (.04)**	.11 (.04)**	.11 (.04)**	.10 (.04)**
Ethnocentrism	.05 (.04)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)	.05 (.05)
Prior Attitude	.11 (.05)*	.12 (.05)**	.13 (.05)**	.13 (.05)*	.12 (.05)*	.11 (.05)**
COO-FIT	.04 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)
Visited (yes/no)	-.06 (.09)	-.00 (.09)	-.00 (.09)	-.02 (.09)	-.03 (.09)	-.03 (.09)
Relatives (yes/no)	-.12 (.09)	-.13 (.10)	-.13 (.10)	-.13 (.10)	-.12 (.10)	-.12 (.10)
Purchased brand (yes/no)	-.06 (.09)	.12 (.10)	.11 (.11)	.11 (.11)	-.12 (.11)	-.12 (.11)

Model Fit

Log-likelihood	-14056.028	-10590.19	-10592.51	-10592.55	-10588.67	-10587.37
AIC	28272.05	21310.19	21315.02	21315.02	21307.34	21304.74
Adjusted BIC	28355.93	21378.34	21383.18	21383.24	21375.49	21372.89

Key: ** sig < .01 level; * sig < .05 level

AIC: Akaike Information Criteria

Adjusted BIC: Adjusted Bayesian Criteria

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