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The Role of Fans' Responses to Sponsorship Activation in Shaping Sport Sponsorship Effectiveness

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Abstract

This study explored how types of sponsorship benefits affect fans' inferences of sponsors' motives and how this impacts sponsorship effectiveness. A total of 1,478 National Basketball Association (NBA) fans were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk and completed surveys through Qualtrics. Findings indicated that sponsors' motives varied with types of benefit, with egoistic motives linked to utilitarian benefit and altruistic or normative motives tied to hedonic and social benefits. These results advance previous research by exploring more than the altruistic-egoistic motive dichotomy in linking benefit types to sponsorship effectiveness. They also highlight the importance of aligning benefit with fan preference to boost relevance.

Keywords: motive inference; recognizable benefit; sponsorship activation; sponsorship effectiveness

Simply having logo exposure at a sport event is insufficient for achieving sponsorship success. Additional expenditures, such as sponsorship activation, are necessary. Weeks et al. (2008) defined this activation as “communications that promote the engagement, involvement, or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor” (p. 638). McGinnis and Statz (2023) observed that although sponsorship activation can significantly enhance sponsorship effectiveness, not all activations successfully convey a cohesive proposition to consumers. For example, Dreisbach et al. (2021) noted that a German mobile provider’s fee-based short messaging service display at FC St. Pauli’s stadium led 3,000 fans to sign a petition against the perceived “sell out” of the club’s identity. To address the ongoing tension between the necessity for sponsorship activation to engage potential audiences and the audiences’ sensitivity to commercial motives in sport, sponsors have begun providing a variety of benefits to fans as a form of sponsorship activation to engage audiences (Dreisbach et al., 2021; Woisetschlager et al., 2017). However, there is still a limited understanding of which benefits most significantly impact sponsorship effectiveness. For example, Schonberger and Woratschek (2023) reported that a sponsor’s activations can result in either positive or negative fan engagement behaviors, depending on how sport fans perceived the activation. This study aimed to fill this gap by using an experimental design to measure variations in fan perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward a new hypothetical sponsor and to determine whether sponsorship effectiveness varied based on benefit types, including utilitarian, hedonic, and social benefit.

Numerous studies have examined the effect of sponsorship activation on sponsorship effectiveness. Such research efforts have looked at high technology communication style versus traditional communication style, utilitarian-oriented promotion versus non-utilitarian-oriented promotions, and fans’ affiliation with a sponsored sport team versus non-fans’ affiliation with a sponsored sport team (Ballouli et al., 2018; Burton & Schlieman, 2021; Dreisbach et al., 2021; Herrmann et al., 2016, McGinnis & Statz, 2023). In these studies, however, researchers have primarily focused on favorable effects of the activation (vs. nonactivation) on sponsorship effectiveness, rather than empirically examining effects of different types of activation activities on sponsorship effectiveness.

Another crucial aspect when examining the mediating effects of the benefits provided by sponsors in sponsorship activation on sponsorship effectiveness is the gap between the complexities of attribution theory and its simplistic application in understanding a multifaceted nature of the sport sponsorship activation process. Prior academic research by Dreisbach et al. (2021), for example, highlighted that the effects of different activation types on sponsorship effectiveness were mediated by fans’ attributions of the sponsor’s motives. They found that symbolic and social benefits were slightly more effective in eliciting altruistic motives, whereas financial benefits were associated with egoistic motives (Dreisbach et al.). However, focusing on sponsorship activation through a simple dichotomy of altruistic versus egoistic motives oversimplifies the sponsorship activation process. Recent sport sponsorship activations have evolved beyond basic one-way offerings (e.g., utilitarian benefit) and two-way communication methods (e.g., sponsorship signage). Instead, they now employ complex and immersive campaigns that encourage consumers to infer the underlying relationship between sponsor and sponsee. Fan’s perceptions of these complex and immersive campaigns are crucial for sports sponsors, as the messages deliv-

ered by these campaigns go beyond simple dichotomous attributions.

This research contributed to literature in three ways. First, this study conceptually linked benefits sponsors bestowed with fans' perceptions. Despite significant research on consumer-level perceptions of sponsorship outcomes (e.g., Alexandris et al., 2012) and sponsorship decision-making (e.g., Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), these areas have developed separately. By connecting benefits used in activation process to fans' attributions, this study highlighted the interplay between benefit characteristics and sponsorship outcomes, responding to a normative call for such integration (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). Second, this study conceptually accommodated fans' inference of normative sponsor's motive in attribution theory beyond a dichotomy of altruistic versus egoistic motives. Third, the study empirically showed that the benefits sponsor bestowed and sponsorship effectiveness were associated with fans' perceptions of benefits.

Method

To ensure a desired statistical power of .80 at $\alpha = .05$ for the suggested factor loading of .50 (Hair et al., 2010), Monte Carlo simulations determined that a sample size of 713 was required to achieve the desired power based on the previously reported correlation matrix among constructs (Dreisbach et al., 2021). This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB-2023-379), and all participants provided written informed consent. In total, 1,478 participants, who were self-reported National Basketball Association (NBA) fans, were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and completed surveys through Qualtrics. The following steps were used to ensure sample representativeness and data validity. First, five screening questions were employed to confirm that participants were NBA fans. The questions included: "Are you over the age of 18?"; "How many teams does the NBA currently have?"; "Which team won the championship last season?"; "Average number of games attended in the previous season?"; and "Average number of games watched in the previous season?" Second, MTurk implemented a qualification system to limit worker participation based on approval rates, helping maintain quality. Workers kept high approval rates through accepted submissions, whereas low-quality work decreased their rates, possibly leading to task restrictions. Enforcing a 95% approval rate threshold effectively enhanced data reliability (Buhrmester et al., 2018; Peer et al., 2014). Third, the built-in Qualtrics Expert Review used browser cookies to prevent duplicate submissions and robot detection features, enabling researchers to identify automated responses by assigning a value to each submission. Next, the participants were exposed to a hypothetical scenario that presented a new jersey sponsor and one of three activation scenarios: utilitarian, hedonic, and social benefit. The participants completed a 36-item survey that measured attitudes toward sponsor, sponsorship fit, and behavioral intention (Alexandris et al., 2012), fans' inference of sponsor's altruistic motive, fans' inference of sponsor's normative motive, and fans' inference of sponsor's egoistic motive (Dreisbach et al., 2021) and associated demographic information. Respondents rated their agreement for each item on a seven-point Likert type scale, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement.

Initially, descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix were analyzed to assess the distributions and relationships of the variables. The missing data of 145 respondents was handled by listwise deletion, and 303 respondents were removed due to ineligibility. A total of 1,030 completed the survey after

data cleaning, resulting in a response rate of 69.68%. Among these respondents, 31.07% were females ($n = 320$) and 68.93% were males ($n = 710$). Approximately 74.76% of the participants ($n = 770$) had completed a higher education degree, and 81.26% of the participants' ethnicity was Caucasian ($n = 837$). There was an approximate balance among hypothetical scenarios (Utilitarian: 33.01%, Hedonic: 28.55%, Social benefit: 38.44%). The data analysis followed four steps. First, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) identified the scale's dimensions, followed by Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to assess the fit, reliability, and validity of the measurement model, ensuring that the factors identified aligned with theoretical expectations. Second, each latent construct's value was determined using weighted factor scores, where the weights were derived from the factor loadings obtained in the CFA. This approach provided a more accurate representation of the latent variables by accounting for the contribution of each indicator to its respective construct. Third, a three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the influence of demographic variables on the inference of sponsors' motives. Fourth, a Linear Discriminant Analysis (LDA) was conducted to explore the relationship between fans' inferences about the sponsor's motives and the types of benefit. LDA was used to classify different benefit types based on the inferred motives. In addition, a Canonical Correlation Analysis (CCA) was performed for the examination of the multi-variate relationships between these two sets of variables, identifying the patterns of association between inferred motives and sponsorship effectiveness.

Results

Before performing LDA and CCA, the EFA with direct oblimin rotation was used to examine the scale's dimensions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was .91, indicating satisfactory variance explained. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (BTS) was significant ($X^2 = 83.983$, $p < .001$), confirming the suitability of EFA. Based on item retention criteria (Hair et al., 2010), 18 items with factor loadings greater than .50 were retained. Six-factor with 18 items emerged, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Factor Pattern Matrix From Principal-Components Extraction and Direct Oblimin Rotation

Construct	Items	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6
F1. Attitudes toward sponsor	AT-1	.60					
	AT-2	.75					
	AT-3	.54					
F2. Sponsorship fit	SF-1		.68				
	SF-2		.71				
	SF-3		.59				
F3. Behavioral intention	BI-1			.71			
	BI-2			.68			
	BI-3			.65			
F4. Altruistic motive	A-1				.59		
	A-2				.71		
	A-3				.65		
F5. Normative motive	N-1					.67	

	N-2	.65
	N-3	.67
F6. Egoistic motive	E-1	.70
	E-2	.62
	E-3	.65

Next, the authors utilized the CFA to assess the fit, reliability, and validity of the measurement model. The results of CFA indicated that the data fit the model well, χ^2/df ratio = 4.93, CFI = .964, RMSEA = .057, 90% CI [.051, .064], SRMR = .031 (Hair et al., 2010). As shown in Table 2, the convergent validity was supported by all standardized loadings ($\lambda > .50$), CR (CR > .60) and AVE (AVE > .50; Hair et al., 2010). Reliability was evaluated by Cronbach's alpha value (CR > .70; Hair et al., 2010). Finally, the discriminant validity indices were all beyond the threshold values shown in Table 3.

Table 2

Standardized Factor Loadings, CR, AVE, and Cronbach's Alpha Values for the Measurement Model

Construct/Item	Item	λ	CR	AVE	α
Normative					
N-1	A reason for [Brand] getting involved as a sponsor is that they feel a moral obligation to their environment.	.72	.75	.50	.73
N-2	[Brand] is principally engaged in sponsorship because they feel that it is expected from a company this size.	.71			
N-3	[Brand] is a sponsor, primarily because customers, employees or other important target groups expect it.	.70			
Egoistic					
E-1	[Brand] initiated this sponsorship to act in its own self-interest.	.71	.76	.52	.70
E-2	[Brand] initiated this sponsorship to act to benefit itself.	.68			
E-3	[Brand] initiated this sponsorship for selfish reasons	.77			
Altruistic					
A-1	The [Brand] initiated this sponsorship because it feels committed to its customers and sponsored team fans.	.79	.76	.52	.74
A-2	The [Brand] initiated this sponsorship because it wants to give something back to its customers and sponsored team fans.	.66			
A-3	The [Brand] initiated this sponsorship because it	.71			

		wants to support customers and sponsored team fans.				
Fit						
	FI-1	The connection between [Brand] and [favored team] is similar.	.79	.75	.51	.72
	FI-2	The connection between [Brand] and [favored team] is complementary.	.59			
	FI-3	The connection between [Brand] and [favored team] is fit.	.74			
Attitude						
	A-1	Your overall attitude toward sponsor [brand] is positive.	.71	.75	.51	.76
	A-2	Your overall attitude toward sponsor [brand] is good.	.62			
	A-3	Your overall attitude toward sponsor [brand] is favorable.	.79			
Behavioral Intention						
	BI-1	I would consider myself loyal to this [brand] in the future	.69	.77	.53	.74
	BI-2	This [brand] is always my first choice	.78			
	BI-3	Instead of buying from somebody else, I will always buy from this [brand].	.71			

Table 3*Construct Correlations for the Measurement Model*

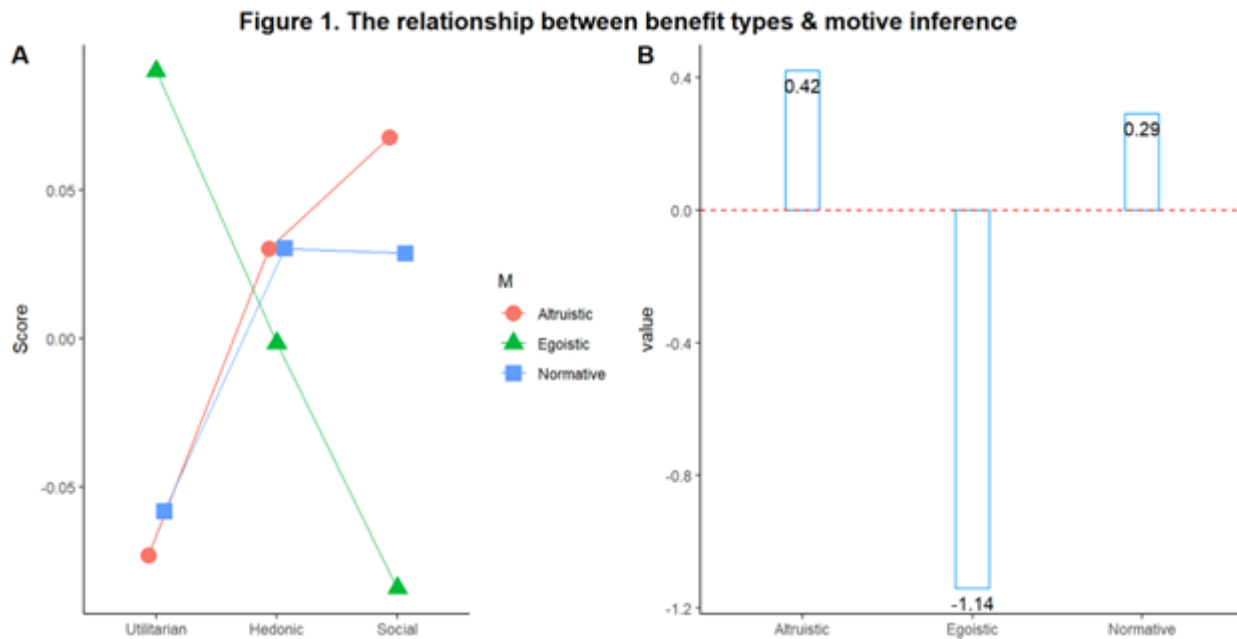
Construct	Normative	Egoistic	Altruistic	Fit	Attitude	Behavioral Intention
Normative	.71					
Egoistic	.53	.72				
Altruistic	.62	.59	.72			
Fit	.49	.45	.34	.71		
Attitude	.49	.41	.28	.71	.71	
Behavioral Intention	.54	.58	.42	.56	.51	.72

Note. Diagonal values for discriminant validity (given in bold) are the square roots of the average variance extracted values.

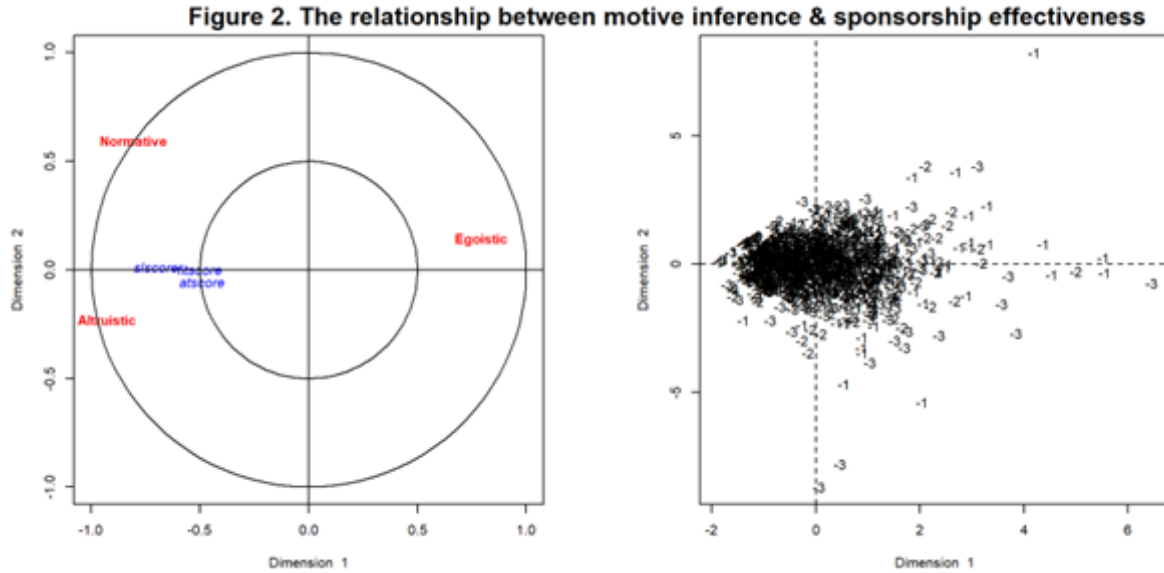
Figure 1A indicated that the inference of sponsors' motives varied across benefit types for altruistic: ($F [2, 1001] = 3.72, p = .020$) and egoistic: ($F [2, 1001] = 6.52, p = .001$), but not for normative: ($F [2, 1001] = 1.87, p = .156$). There was a statistically significant three-way interaction between gender, benefit types, and income levels on altruistic motive inference ($F [8, 1001] = 2.83, p = .004$), but not for egoistic ($F [8, 1001] = 1.77, p = .079$). In addition, there was a statistically significant simple two-way interaction between gender and income levels on utilitarian benefit ($F [8, 331] = 3.49, p = .008$),

and social benefit ($F [8, 386] = 4.61, p = .001$), but not for hedonic benefit ($F [8, 286] = 1.95, p = .079$). There was a statistically significant simple main effect of utilitarian benefit for males at a high-income level, $F (2, 147) = 14.8, p = .001$, but not for males at a low-income level, $F (2, 147) = 0.66, p = 0.521$. In other words, the utilitarian benefit taken has a statistically negative effect on altruistic motive inference in males who were at a high-income level. In contrast, the reversed pattern occurred for females, where social benefits had a significantly positive effect at low-income levels.

The LDA analysis indicated that percentage separations achieved by the first linear discriminant function was 80.88%. As shown in Figure 1B, egoistic score explained more for utilitarian benefit whereas altruistic score and normative score explained more for hedonic and social benefits.



Finally, a CCA was conducted to examine the relationship between fans' inference of sponsor's motives and sponsorship effectiveness. This analysis was performed using weighted factor scores from the CFA data. The CCA revealed two significant functions (Wilks's lambda = .48, $F [9, 3202.95] = 125.41, p < .001$; Wilks's lambda = .99, $F [4, 2634.00] = 3.18, p = .013$), and the canonical correlation coefficients were .72, and .10 with 97% overlapping variance. Figure 2 indicated that the normative inference of sponsors' motive and altruistic inference of sponsors' motive were positively associated with sponsorship effectiveness.



Discussion and Implications

Theoretical Contributions

This study, which drew on attribution theory, contributes to the sport sponsorship literature by developing a full framework of sponsor motive inference in sponsorship activation domain. The empirical research concentrates on examining how the types of benefit used in sponsorship influence consumers' inference of sponsors' motives and their consequences on sport sponsorship effectiveness.

First, the effectiveness of sponsorship activation varies notably with the types of benefits that resonate with fans. Sponsorships offering hedonic and social benefit tend to be more successful than those providing utilitarian benefit, aligning with similar findings from previous research (Ball & Bennett, 2024; Dreisbach et al., 2021; Herrmann et al., 2016). This difference is largely because hedonic and social benefits are more effective at eliciting altruistic and normative inference regarding sponsors' motives. Hedonic-oriented benefit, which focuses on providing enjoyable and pleasurable experiences, engages fans on an emotional level, making them perceive the sponsor as more caring and invested in their enjoyment (Jee, 2021). Similarly, social-oriented benefit, which emphasizes community engagement and social responsibility, fosters a perception of the sponsor as a socially conscious and responsible entity (Inoue et al., 2013). Fans develop more favorable attitudes toward sponsors who they perceive to be motivated by altruistic and normative motives. This positive attitude is crucial for the overall effectiveness of the sponsorship, as it enhances the brand image and reputation of sponsors. When fans infer that sponsors have altruistic motives, they perceive a better alignment between the sponsor and the sports team being sponsored. This perceived fit is also important because it reinforces the legitimacy and appropriateness of the sponsorship, making it more acceptable and credible in the eyes of the fans. Positive inferences about sponsors' motives lead to stronger behavioral intention supporting sponsors. Fans are more likely to purchase the sponsors' products, engage with their brand, and advocate for them within their social circles. In contrast, utilitarian-oriented benefit, which provides practical and functional ends, often leads to egoistic inferences about the sponsors' motives. Fans may see these activations as

self-serving, primarily driven by the sponsors' desire to promote their own interests. This perception can undermine the effectiveness of sponsorship, resulting in less favorable attitudes, a weaker perceived fit, and reduced behavioral intentions to support the sponsor.

Second, consistent with attribution theory, social benefit-oriented and hedonic-oriented activations enhance sponsorship effectiveness by fostering altruistic and normative inferences of sponsors' motives. In contrast, utilitarian-oriented activation diminishes sponsorship effectiveness by promoting egoistic inferences of sponsors' motives. Comparing Dreisbach et al.'s (2021) findings, which verified that the altruistic inference of sponsors' motives was positively associated with sponsorship activation effectiveness, the current study's findings indicate that the normative inference of sponsors' motives might be even more important than previously thought. Dreisbach et al. (2021) simplified fans' inference of sponsors' motives focusing on a dichotomy of altruistic versus egoistic attribution. Moreover, the study highlights that the complexity and depth of modern sponsorship activation campaigns require consumers to make more nuanced inferences about sponsor motives. These inferences are shaped by various factors, including the nature of the benefits provided (utilitarian, hedonic, or social), the context of the sponsorship, and the communication strategies employed by the sponsor. Understanding these inferences allows sponsors to design more effective and impactful campaigns that resonate deeply with their target audience.

Managerial Contributions

When it comes to managing sponsorships, it is crucial to recognize that the value derived from sponsorship is not solely dependent on the sponsorship itself but significantly enhanced through effective sponsorship activation offering recognizable benefit for fans. Sponsorship activation refers to the marketing activities a sponsor undertakes to communicate its association with the sponsored property (Weeks et al., 2008). Indeed, in traditional sport sponsorship, sport sponsors often rely heavily on sponsorship signage and brand logo exposure as the primary means of communication. This includes placing logos on jerseys, stadiums, and other visible locations during events. Although this approach provides brand visibility or brand awareness among fans, it cannot guarantee desired outcomes because the potential commercial intentions behind the communication could negatively impact fans' psychologically driven connections with sponsors. Therefore, it is a concern for sponsors to hold the inherent goodwill of sponsorship itself and further communicate it maximumly by effective sponsorship activation, which may be "more difficult to design, but this additional effort may be worthwhile" (Dreisbach et al., 2021, p. 787). For example, utilizing exclusive opportunities secured by sponsorship, sponsors can create engaging content such as behind-the-scenes videos, athlete interviews, and interactive games to provide fans with deeper insights and a stronger connection to both sponsee and sponsor.

Another approach could be to tailor benefit types in sponsorship activation depending on the fans' preferences to increase relevance. For example, high-income male fans might feel displeased with utilitarian benefit, whereas low-income female fans tend to favor social benefit. This means customizing the benefit or perks provided through sponsorship based on what different groups of fans value and how they behave. The following steps explain how this approach works. Initially, sponsors need to identify and understand the different segments within the fan base of sponsored sport entities. These segments could be based on demographics (e.g., age, gender, location), interests, level of engagement with the

sport, or other factors. Once a clear understanding of these segments is created, sponsors can tailor the benefit to suit each group's specific preferences. For example, hardcore fans who attend games regularly might appreciate benefits that provide discounted tickets, early access to merchandise, or VIP experiences at events. Casual viewers who watch games occasionally might be more interested in flexible ticket packages, promotions that allow them to try the sport at a lower cost, or family friendly activities at events.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has several limitations that present new opportunities for future research. First, the study used an experimental design involving hypothetical scenarios to gather responses from NBA fans. Respondents might not fully understand the complexities or emotional impacts of a situation without experiencing it first-hand. In addition, hypothetical questions might not accurately reflect real-life responses, as there is often a gap between what people say they would do and their actual behaviors. This potential discrepancy could result in either an overestimation or underestimation of actual intention. Second, regarding the sample composition, the participants were primarily NBA fans, which could potentially bias the results. This overrepresentation might affect the generalizability of the findings, as the views of dedicated fans could significantly differ from those of nonfans or casual viewers. To mitigate this potential bias in future research, it would be better to include a more diverse participant pool. This should encompass individuals with varying degrees of interest in the sport, including occasional viewers and those with no prior interest, to offer a more balanced perspective that accurately reflects the broader public's attitudes toward benefit and sponsorship effectiveness.

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