

ASSESSING SPORTS SPONSORSHIP EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH FANS LOYALTY ENGAGEMENT AMONG MALAYSIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE FANS

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ABSTRACT

The findings of this study show that fan loyalty has a strong and significant relationship with sports sponsorship engagement among Malaysian Football League fans ($r=0.78$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that loyal fans form deeper connections with sports sponsors based on their involvement, attachment and satisfaction. These results carry practical implications for sports sponsors and football clubs, suggesting the need for stronger activation strategies, better sponsor-event fit, and more consistent visibility to reduce risk and enhance investment returns. Theoretically, this study extends existing sports sponsorship and fan loyalty literature by highlighting how fan loyalty and sports sponsorship factors such as sponsor event-fit, favourability, and perceived ubiquity influence fan responses within a Malaysian context. However, this study is limited to one league and uses a quantitative approach, which restricts generalisability and causal interpretation. Future research could include qualitative, cross sport comparisons, or longitudinal studies methods to deepen the understanding of fan and sports sponsorship engagement.

Keywords: *Sport Sponsorship, Fans Loyalty, Malaysian Football League Fans*

INTRODUCTION

Sports sponsorship is a company commitment to form a partnership with sports club, event, or athlete to reach a specific target audience through activities not directly related to its core business (Biscaia et al., 2013). Sports sponsorship has associated with high attention and companies are now more willing to invest in sporting events (Nuseir, 2020). In Malaysia, the growth of sports sponsorship continues to rise as brands seek to evaluate both the financial and non-financial returns of their involvement. Globally sports have also become a major profit generator, motivating companies to sponsor clubs and athletes.

In Malaysia, sports sponsorship is on the rise. Several private and corporate companies have expressed interest in collaborating and providing sponsorship to ensure continuity of high-performance sports programmes (Bernama, 2021). Companies such as Petronas Nasional Berhad (PETRONAS) and Telekom Malaysia (TM) have been involved in sports sponsorship for a quite long time (Jamal et al., 2016). There are also Government Linked Companies (GLCs) and Government Linked Investments Companies (GLICs) companies such as Khazanah Nasional, Tenaga Nasional Berhad (TNB) and Perbadanan Nasional Berhad (PNB) have been involved in sports sponsorship. Private companies such as CIMB Bank, 100PLUS and Milo are also active in sports sponsorship. Recently, Proviton STR signed on as a part of two-year official isotonic partner for the MFL (MFL, 2022).

As sports sponsorship becomes more competitive, both sponsors and sponsees must manage partnership carefully to ensure its effectiveness. Savir (2021) highlighted that companies may invest heavily without receiving meaningful returns, or events may fail to deliver on promised commitments. This shows that sports sponsorship involves financial risk. Despite sponsorship ability to strengthen engagement and fan loyalty, securing sponsors remains a major challenge. Sponsors typically expect their involvement to increase fans purchase intentions (Koronois et al., 2016).

Fans play a crucial role in the success of sporting events and sponsorship outcomes (Sandsten, 2021). Fans act as supporters who motivate teams and influence overall engagement levels (Mays, 2012). Sponsorship effectiveness depends greatly on fans' loyalty and emotional connection to their favourite clubs. Research shows that fans' attitudes toward a sponsor strongly influence their purchase intentions (Tsaousi, 2007). Fans who view a sponsor positively are more likely to purchase the sponsor's products (Papadimitriou et al., 2016). Fan behaviour is now strongly viewed through the lens of loyalty. A loyal fan maintains a positive attitude toward a team, thinks about the team often, stays supportive during losses, develops emotional attachment, and consistently watches or attends matches (Funk et al., 2000). Fans first perceive a sponsor through the visibility of its products, either when their favourite players or teams use the sponsor's brand, or when the sponsor advertises around the event (Dzoolkarnain et al., 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sports Sponsorship

Sports sponsorship has been perceived as a powerful communication tool because it has been proven as a tool that generates awareness and expresses the image of brands (Biscaia et al., 2013). Main concept of sports sponsorship does come from advertisement due to the benefits and outcome are better than advertisement. Performance and the value of sports sponsorship can be measured and evaluated according to the element offered in the sports sponsorship (Adiguzel, 2018). The parties who were involved in sports sponsorship received more outcome and known as a win-win situation among two parties who agreed the sponsorship agreement (Biscaia et al., 2013).

The term "sponsorship" is derived from the Greek word "horigia," which meaning guarantor, and the practice dates to the ancient Greek and Roman periods (Nazila et al., 2019). Businesses' sponsorship efforts have drawn large audiences and helped them accomplish their goals. In Malaysia, businesses that are most secure and reliable for sponsorship include banks, telecommunications, fast-moving goods, electronics, manufacturing, food and beverage, and internet and application enterprises. According to Zamri et al. (2024), all the businesses also frequently engage in sponsorship. A sponsorship is characterized as a

material or monetary investment in a person, activity, or event in return for future communication about that person, activity, or event (Chebli, 2014). There are four factors that relate to the sports sponsorship in this study. These four factors were attitude toward sponsor, sponsor-event fit, favourability and perceived ubiquity. Each factor plays a role in determining the sports sponsorship effectiveness.

Attitude Toward Sponsor

It is considered that most fans have a good or positive attitude towards all types of sports sponsorship if there is something that is associated with the sponsorship and the sponsored subject, such as the company product (Melovic et al., 2019). Attitudes are often the results of experience or upbringing, and they can have a powerful influence over behaviour. While attitudes are enduring, they can also change by some factors such as experience, social factors, learning, conditioning, and observation (Cherry, 2021).

Sponsor-Event Fit

Previous research has covered several dimensions in the sports sponsorship field, namely determinants of sponsor-event fit (Speed & Thompson, 2000). Sponsor-event fit, or congruence of the sponsor is defined as the extent to which a consumer perceives that an event and its sponsoring brand have a similar image, value, and a logical connection (Simmons, 2006). Past research shows that fans are able to judge the sponsor-event fit because it has a direct relationship with the fans' responses. To be considered a sponsor, the fans need a company or the sponsor to have some form of link or relationship with the sport club or event (Adiguzel, 2018).

Favourability

Favourability defines the quality of being good for something and making it likely to be successful or have an advantage (Anil, 2019). The other primary purpose of sponsorship favourability is to improve the fans' perception of the sponsor. Sports sponsorship can have a significant effect on the favourability of the fans and their purchase intention (Malcolm, 2020). Furthermore, a loyal fan with sponsorship favourability will be increased by the promotion of sponsor manufactured products and services. Previous research also shows that sponsorship favourability can be an appropriate tool for promoting ethical and responsible companies with sustainable practices. For sport sponsors, favourability is also an indicator of work to support their passion and promote a sense of benefit and excitement in the company.

Perceived Ubiquity

Perceived ubiquity means that the sponsor appears in multiple sorts of sport events or sports sponsorship at the same time (Valino et al., 2022). Speed and Thompson (2000) also defined sports sponsor ubiquity as expressions regarding the sponsorship activities and their level of interest in sporting events. Perceived ubiquity of sports sponsorship has a close relationship to gambling issues (Hing et al., 2013). In order to achieve their goal of gaining global recognition from sporting events, gambling sponsorship requires businesses to pay enormous sums of money (Lamont et al., 2011). Gambling is one of the alleged ubiquities in sports sponsorship. Gambling in sporting events, especially in football, has grown in popularity and has been normalized in recent years, although this perceived ubiquity has drawn increasing controversy (Global Lottery Monitoring System, 2020). The ubiquity of sports sponsorship by gambling companies is now at a worrying level. To some, the fact that gambling sponsorships have become so prevalent in sports is an issue and others argue that it encourages the company to invest money in sport and helps football clubs to operate efficiently (O'Boyle, 2020).

Fans Loyalty

According to James (2016), fans loyalty is defined as a form of sports spectator that is characterized with a strong sense of attachment to and affiliation with their particular sport or team. A loyal fan is someone who has a positive attitude toward a team, frequently thinks about the team, stands firm when the team loses, has a personal or collective bias toward the team, and attends and/or watches team games on a regular basis (Funk et al., 2000). A fan is also an individual who embraces themselves to be a supporter of their favourite

clubs and athletes, fan also referred to a group of people who tend to back up and act as an extrinsic motivator towards the clubs and athletes (Mays, 2012). In this study, the fan was observed from the aspects of loyalty. It relates to three factors of measurement followed by situational involvement, attachment, and satisfaction.

Situational Involvement

In psychology, Hesselbarth et al., (2015) defined situational involvement goes on to say that, given suitable current environmental circumstances, any individual, regardless of psychological disposition has the ability to behave in a particular way. Situational involvement refers to the transitory perceptions of increased involvement that accompany a certain situation. Furthermore, early definitions of situational involvement have been modified over the years as researchers have spent much time and effort in defining and understanding the context of situational involvement (Maxton, 2019). There is not much research on the situational involvement of fans loyalty in sports sponsorship undertaken (Valino, 2022). Situational involvement will differ from one fan to the next because it shows the personal connection between the sports event and sports sponsorship.

Attachment

Attachment can be defined as a deep and enduring emotional bond between people or objects in which each seeks closeness, bonds, and security. The person will feel happier and comfortable when there is presence of attachment in the current situation. This approach has been expanded through research entitlements of attachment in various sports context (Carr, 2013). A sport fan may be theoretically oriented to different aspects of the fandom experience other than the sport team or club under sports sponsorship (Biscaia et al., 2013). It is important to identify the unique sources of fans attachment between the fans and the sport team or clubs (Wang, 2012). Fan attachments are an important component of independent person development in the areas of identity, intimacy, and generativity (Stever, 2011).

Satisfaction

Previous research by Dzoolkarnain et al., (2023) stated that satisfaction is the process of offering goods and services that creates perceived value and makes fans stay connected in a positive way. Fans satisfaction is also defined as joyful, fulfilling response to sport competition entertainment and or supplementary services presented during a game (Oliver, 1997). Sports fans can be considered heterogeneous in nature and achieving fans satisfaction in sports sponsorship should be a priority (Silva, 2017). In sports sponsorship, fans satisfaction is one of the important predictors used to measure the purchase intention as well as a measure for evaluating the sports sponsorship effectiveness in one event. There is a surprising lack of research examining the element of fans satisfaction in the field of sports sponsorship (Chun et al., 2019). Fans satisfaction with sports sponsorship can create a long-term bonding and benefit for the company including positive feedback and increase the fans loyalty not just to the sport clubs but also to the sponsors.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Quantitative study is the process of collecting and analyzing statistical data. It is because research conducted is descriptive research design. In subject matters, the research involves assessing the sports sponsorship effectiveness through fans loyalty engagement. The research design above was chosen because research involves cross sectional study through a process of analyzing and collecting data using convenience sampling. A set of questionnaires were distributed to the Malaysian Football League fans.

Sampling Technique

The target population and location for this research are the Malaysian who represent as Malaysian Football League fans of Johor Darul Ta'zim FC in total of 2,272 seasonal pass fans and frequently watch the match (Johor Darul Ta'zim, 2022). The fan phenomenon is increasingly being observed from the aspect of loyalty. In Malaysia Football League, The Johor Darul Ta'zim FC (JDT) has the most influential fan club, with

Boys of Straits as its official fan club. Msar (2019) also stated that, JDT managed to gain the attendance of 196,858 supporters last season for all competitions including the Super League, FA Cup and Malaysia Cup. Johor Darul Ta'zim FC, also simply known as JDT FC, is a football club based in Johor. The club currently plays in the top division in Malaysian football, the Malaysia Super League. The club is owned by HRH Major General Tunku Ismail Ibni Sultan Ibrahim, The Crown Prince of Johor (Johor Darul Ta'zim, 2019). Table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) played a major role for the method of sampling used in this study. It is calculated based on a 5% margin of error with 95% confidence level. Alongside the total of 2,272 number of populations of the recommended sample size for this study is 330. This study has been reviewed and approved by the UiTM Research Ethics Committee.

Instrumentation

A set of questionnaires was used to obtain the data for this study. There are three sections, section A, B and C. Each section measured the variable of the study. Section A consists of respondent demographic profile. Section B consists of the sports sponsorship factors adapted from Speed and Thompson (2000). While section C consists of fans loyalty factors adapted from Laverie and Arnett (2000). All items in section A and B are based on the 5-point Likert Scale with responses ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1), “Disagree” (2), “Neutral” (3), “Agree” (4) to “Strongly Agree” (5).

The pilot study was conducted with a total of 30 participants who shared similar characteristics. The purpose of the pilot testing was to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility of the questionnaire items, as recommended by Kumar et al., (2013). Feedback from the participants was analyzed, and revision were made to assess the validity and reliability of the questionnaire items and to investigate how well each question represented in the questionnaire.

Table 3.1 Section B: Sports Sponsorship Factors

Factors	Number of Item	Reliability
Sports Sponsorship		
Attitude Toward Sponsor	3	0.94
Sponsor-Event Fit	5	0.96
Favourability	3	0.80
Perceived Ubiquity	3	0.92

*Cronbach Alpha $\alpha > 0.60$

Table 3.1 shows the sports sponsorship factors, number of items and the reliability of the questionnaire. Attitude toward sponsor as the first factor in this variable consists of 3 items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.94$. Sponsor-event fit consists of 5 items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.96$. The third factor, favourability has 3 total number of items with reliability $\alpha = 0.80$. Lastly, perceived ubiquity consists of 3 numbers of items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.93$.

Table 3.2 Section C: Fans Loyalty Factors

Factors	Number of Item	Reliability
Fans Loyalty		
Situational Involvement	4	0.91
Attachment	5	0.85
Satisfaction	3	0.84

*Cronbach Alpha $\alpha > 0.60$

Table 3.2 above shows the fans loyalty factors, number of items and the reliability of the questionnaire. Situational involvement is the first factor which consist of 4 items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.91$. Attachment consists of 5 number of items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.85$. While satisfaction consists of 3 number of items with the reliability $\alpha = 0.84$.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Sports Sponsorship Factors

Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitude Towards Sponsor	4.30	0.66
Perceived Ubiquity	4.21	0.70
Favourability	4.18	0.70
Sponsor-Event Fit	4.10	0.70

The descriptive statistics of sports sponsorship factors in table 4.1 used the mean score interpretation by Jenkins et al., (2007) based on table 4.7. Factors were ranked according to the highest to the lowest mean. The findings indicate that attitude towards sponsor was the highest with a mean score of strongly agree, $M=4.30$, $SD=0.66$. This was followed by perceived ubiquity, mean score of strongly agree with $M=4.21$, $SD=0.70$. Then followed by favourability, mean score of agree with $M=4.18$, $SD=0.70$. While the last factor sponsor-event fit, mean score of agree with $M=4.10$, $SD=0.70$. Overall, all four factors attitude towards sponsor, perceived ubiquity, favourability and sponsor-event fit were positive and agreed with the sports sponsorship.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics of Fans Loyalty Factors

Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
Situational Involvement	4.10	0.85
Attachment	3.90	0.93
Satisfaction	3.61	0.70

The descriptive statistics of fans loyalty factors in table 4.2 used the mean scores interpretation by Jenkins et al., (2007) based on table 4.7. Factors were ranked according to the highest to the lowest mean. The findings indicate that situational involvement was the highest with a mean score of agree, $M=4.10$, $SD=0.85$. This was followed by attachment, mean score of agree with $M=3.90$, $SD=0.93$. While satisfaction was the lowest with a mean score of agree, $M=3.61$, $SD=0.70$. Overall, all three factors situational involvement, attachment, and satisfaction were positive and agreed with the fans loyalty.

Table 4.3 Relationship Between Sports Sponsorship and Fans Loyalty

	Fans Loyalty		
	r	p	n
Sports Sponsorship	0.78**	0.001	330

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

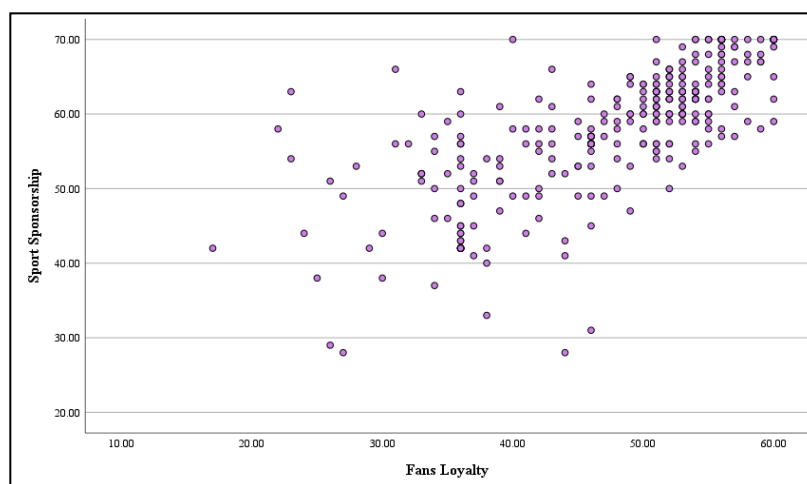


Figure 4.1: Boxplot of Sports Sponsorship and Fans Loyalty

Table and figure above show the correlation between sports sponsorship and fans loyalty. The result shows strong correlation between sports sponsorship and fans loyalty $r = 0.78$, ($p < 0.001$). However, the result shows that the correlations between sports sponsorship and fans loyalty shows a significant correlation. This p-value is less than 0.001, indicating that the correlation is statistically significant at the 0.001 level. These findings show that fans loyalty develops a strong connection with sports sponsorship.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of sports sponsorship through fan loyalty among Malaysian Football League supporters, revealing a strong and significant relationship between both variables ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$). The results show that attachment emerged as the most influential dimension of fan loyalty, followed by satisfaction and situational involvement, demonstrating that emotionally connected fans are more responsive to sponsorship messages. In terms of sponsorship predictors, attitude toward the sponsor and event-sponsor fit were found to be the strongest contributors to sponsorship effectiveness, while favourability and perceived ubiquity also played meaningful roles. These findings highlight that loyal fans are more likely to support sponsor brands, making long-term engagement strategies essential for sustaining positive outcomes. However, the study also identifies potential risks, such as sponsorship overexposure, which may reduce fan responsiveness. Overall, the results underscore the importance of designing targeted and emotionally driven sponsorship strategies, while future research should explore the long-term and causal mechanisms that strengthen fan-sponsor relationships across different sports contexts.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Hasyati Husna led the manuscript by presenting the original concept and overseeing the effort, as well as contributing to the manuscript draft. Azlina Zid provided project supervision, authored the manuscript and guided its overall direction. Mohammad Adzly Rajli reviewed the manuscript to ensure clarity, coherence and logical flow. Muhammad Hamdan managed the data collection process. All authors participated in the final review and gave their approval for submission.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No agency or organization has a conflict of interest with this study, which might be interpreted as influencing the findings or interpretation of this study. No financial resources were available to support this project.

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