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The Negative Effect of Team Performance on Sponsorship Brand Performance: The Mediating Role of Social Identity Threat

Xiuli Dong^a, Hang Yuan^a, Lu Huang^{a,*} —

^a Business School of Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610064, China

Abstract

Nowadays, sports sponsorship has become an important marketing method and means for enterprises to improve brand image and visibility. Previous studies focused on the positive effects of sponsorship on brand and consumer factors, but the performance of the sponsored team may also be an important factor for audiences to evaluate the sponsored brand and products. Moreover, the poor performance of a team may have potential negative effects, which is worth exploring in depth. This article explores how poor team performance affects sponsors negatively in the context of sports sponsorship. Through experiments, it was verified that compared with high win rate, poor performance of sponsored teams significantly reduces the brand performance of sponsors, and social identity threat plays a mediating role. In addition, compared with men, the negative impact of poor team performance on brand performance is more significant for women. This study reveals the potential negative effects of implementing sponsorship for enterprises and introduces social identity threat as a mediator to explain the impact mechanism of team performance on brand performance in sports sponsorship. It has certain enrichment and enlightenment effects on related research of sports sponsorship.

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1. Introduction

As an important marketing communication method for corporate brand strategy^[1], sports sponsorship has attracted increasing attention from companies around the world. According to data from international market research firm IpsosMORI, the global sports sponsorship market reached \$50 billion in 2021 and is showing a rapid growth trend. This indicates that sponsoring sports events has become an important marketing strategy for many companies. In 2008, many companies successfully transformed consumers' impressions of the Olympics into brand recognition through sports sponsorship. However, actually, poor team performance may directly reduce the audience's overall impression

* Corresponding author. Tel.: (86) +28-85415452; fax: +28-85415452.

E-mail address: huanglu@scu.edu.cn

of the team and shift the negative emotion to the Sponsor brand, most truly damaging the corporate brand equity. These reasons are worth further exploration.

The performance of sports teams in competition has a strong impact on viewers' perception and attitude toward sponsored brands^{[2],[3]}. Previous researches showed that a team's winning performance can increase the corporate value of sponsors^[4]. Limited researches have focused on the negative spillover effects of sports sponsorship and suggested that if a sponsored team loses continuously in competitive sports events, this may negatively affect viewers' trust in the sponsored brand through a "halo effect" mechanism^{[5],[6]}. At the same time, the poor performance of the sponsored team has a negative impact on the perceived quality of the sponsored brand^[3] and purchase intention^[7]. These scholars have also proposed that the negative impact of a team's performance on the sponsored brand is worth further exploration. At the same time, most of above researches have ignored the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions.

This study believes that the performance of the sponsored team is a key influencing factor on brand performance. According to social identity theory, when a group is in a low status, people usually have a negative evaluation of it, which makes individuals in the group feel socially threatened. Therefore, when a sports team performs poorly, people are likely to have a negative evaluation of it, which may trigger viewers' social identity threat. This sense of threat may lead consumers to have resistance to brands associated with the team^[8]. Therefore, this study will use social identity theory and introduce social identity threat as a mediating variable to explore how poor team performance negatively affects brand performance from the perspective of the sponsored team.

This study's contributions are: 1. Explore the negative impact of team performance on sponsored brands, further enriching the relevant research on sports sponsorship. 2. Determine the mediating mechanism in this negative effect. By introducing social identity threat as a mediating variable, this study verifies that poor team performance may negatively affect brand performance through social identity threat. 3. Introducing gender as a moderating variable, it was found that the negative impact of poor team performance on sponsored brand performance was more significant for women than for men.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

Currently, the academic community has extensively studied sponsorship marketing, including sponsorship management, sponsorship effect evaluation, and influencing factors^{[9],[10],[11]}, and sponsorship marketing strategy applications^{[12],[13]}. Among various sponsorship activities, sports sponsorship is one of the most widely used media for reaching and communicating with target audiences. Liu and Wang^[14] pointed out that sports sponsorship is a resource exchange activity where both sponsors achieve their commercial goals through sports events.

Whether sports sponsorship is effective has been a hot topic among scholars. The current studies focused on the positive effects of sports sponsorship. Among them, the study found that sports sponsorship is helpful to improve brand trust and purchase intention^[15]. Brand familiarity can increase consumers' attitude towards sponsor brands^[16]. However, some studies indicate that negative spillover effects may exist in sports sponsorship. Yuan⁵ revealed the negative economic impact of poor performance by sponsored teams on audience trust in sponsored brands. Meanwhile, highly identified fans experienced a threat when responding to the sponsorship of a competitor, which led to anger, negatively affecting their attitudes toward sponsorship and reducing their willingness to purchase^[17].

2.1. The impact of team performance on brand performance in sponsorship

Brand trust and brand affect are important components of brand performance, jointly affecting consumers' willingness to purchase^[18]. Brand trust refers to a willingness of consumers to trust the brand when negative information about the brand appears, that is, when the consumer faces some purchase risks. The positive emotion generated when a consumer buys or uses a brand is the brand emotion^[19]. The positive emotion generated by a consumer when buying or using a brand is the brand affect. . For example, a powerful national brand will elicit positive emotional responses, while brands with negative issues will cause consumers to feel dissatisfied^[20].

The study of the halo effect suggests that people tend to infer unknown traits of a person using known traits. These known traits act like a "halo," influencing people's perception of other unrelated qualities^[21]. In the context of sports sponsorship, poor performance of a sponsored team may become a "halo" and have a negative impact on the audience's

evaluation of the sponsor. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will reduce the brand performance of the sponsor.

H1a: Compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will reduce audiences' trust in the sponsor's brand

H1b: Compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will reduce audiences' affect in the sponsor's brand.

2.2. The Mediating Role of Social Identity Threat

Sociological theory suggests that by engaging in social comparison, groups may develop differences in status. Individuals may tend to negatively evaluate groups with lower status, leading to social identity threat for individuals within these groups^[22]. When individuals within a social group face social identity threat, they may take measures to change the negative evaluations^[23].

In the context of consumer behavior, the threat of social identity will increase the purchase risk of consumers, which may have a negative impact on the brand.. Brand affect expresses a consumer's liking or disliking of a brand^[24]. The emergence of social identity threat may cause consumers to dislike a brand, which could lead to their boycott of the brand^[错误:未定义书签.]. Thus, social identity threat is an important factor that affects consumer purchasing motivation. Therefore, when a team consistently performs poorly, it may lead to negative evaluations from the audience, triggering their social identity threat and further inhibiting their brand trust and emotions towards the sponsor. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Social identity threat plays a mediating role between team performance and brand performance, such that compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will trigger social identity threat among the audience, thus reducing the sponsor's brand performance.

H2a: Social identity threat plays a mediating role between team performance and brand trust, such that compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will trigger social identity threat among the audience, thus reducing the sponsor's brand trust.

H2b: Social identity threat plays a mediating role between team performance and brand affect, such that compared to high win rate, low win rate of a team will trigger social identity threat among the audience, thus reducing the sponsor's brand affect.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Gender

According to the empathy-systemizing theory, there are often differences in information processing and behavior between consumers of different genders. The theory suggests that women are more inclined to use emotions in both psychological and behavioral aspects, while men are more inclined to use cognition^[25]. Female individuals report experiencing more social exclusion in their lives^[26]. Additionally, when dealing with social exclusion, females exhibit stronger physiological stress responses than males^[27]. Female consumers who are good at using emotions to process information are likely to develop negative attitudes towards the team and transfer these negative attitudes to negative evaluations of brand performance when the team performs poorly. Moreover, poor team performance is likely to act as a social threat signal, eliciting stronger reactions from females. Based on these findings, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Gender moderates the effect of team performance on the brand performance of the sponsor: compared to males, the negative impact of low team win rate on the sponsor's brand performance is more significant for females.

H3a: Compared to males, the negative impact of low team win rate on the sponsor's brand trust is more significant for females.

H3b: Compared to males, the negative impact of low team win rate on the sponsor's brand affect for is more significant for females.

In summary, the research model of this study is as follows:

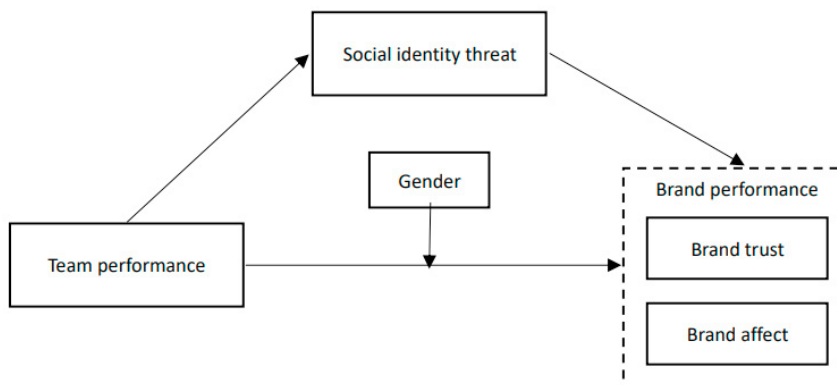


Figure1. Conceptual framework

3. Research design

3.1. Pre-test

To select the object of study for this research, a pre-test was conducted in the experiment. Through interviews, people's reactions to the Chinese National Men's Football Team and the Chinese National U17 Men's Football Team were tested to avoid the possible bias in their real-world performance. Twenty participants took part in the pre-test. 20 subjects had equal sex ratio and age distribution of 20-50 years. Among the 20 subjects, including 10 college students, 2 teachers, 4 freelancers and 4 other occupations. The analysis found that people showed a negative attitude towards the Chinese National Men's Football Team due to their poor real-world performance. Therefore, this study chose the Chinese National U17 Men's Football Team as the object of study.

3.2. Variable measurement

The measurement scales used in this study are all from existing research. At the same time, some items have been modified to adapt to the research background of this article. Table 1 lists the final measurement items and their sources.

Table 1. Variable measurement and source

Variable	Measurement items	Sources
Brand trust	I believe in the SANS brand The SANS brand is trustworthy SANS is an honest brand The SANS brand is solid	Chaudhuri and Holbrook., 2001
Brand affect	Buying the SANS brand can feel good Buying SANS brand can be a pleasure Buying the SANS brand brings a lot of joy	Chaudhuri and Holbrook., 2001
Social identity threat	The performance of the Chinese national U17 men's football team made me feel ashamed I was embarrassed by the performance of the Chinese national U17 men's football team The performance of the Chinese national U17 men's football team is a disgrace to the motherland	Heere, et al., 2016

3.3. Experimental Design and Data Collection

The experiment used a between-subjects design with a single factor. Previous research has shown that factors such as brand awareness and consumer familiarity with a brand can affect consumer attitudes towards the brand. In order to eliminate the influence of real companies on the experiment, the experiment referred to the manipulation method

proposed by scholars such as Huo^[28] and used a virtual brand, SANS, to manipulate the experimental scenario.

All participants first read a basic introduction about the SANS brand and were then told that SANS was the title sponsor of the Chinese national U17 men's football team. They were then randomly assigned to the high win rate or low win rate group. Under the condition of the high win rate group, participants saw that in the latest 10 international A-level matches, the Chinese U17 men's football team won a total of 8 games and lost 2 games. Under the condition of the low win rate group, participants saw that in the latest 10 international A-level matches, the Chinese U17 men's football team won a total of 2 games and lost 8 games. After reading the instructions, participants filled out a measure of the number of wins and losses for the U17 men's football team, followed by measures of brand trust, brand affect, and social identification threat. Finally, participants provided information such as gender and age.

The experiment was conducted using the Credamo(www.credamo.com) online data collection platform. The sample size was 216 people, and after excluding invalid data such as incomplete responses and repeated IP addresses, a total of 203 valid data sets were obtained. The ages ranged from 18 to 47 years old, with males accounting for 51.2% and females accounting for 48.8%. The gender ratio was roughly the same. The income levels and occupational backgrounds were varied, and there was no phenomenon of bias towards specific groups.

3.4. Results Analysis

The impact of team performance on brand sponsorship effectiveness, brand trust, and brand affect was examined. Independent samples t-test results showed that when the team showed a low win rate, consumers' perceptions of brand sponsorship effectiveness, brand trust, and brand affect were significantly lower than when the team showed a high win rate.

Table 2. Independent sample T test results

	Team performance		t	p
	low win rate (n=83)	high win rate (n=120)		
Brand trust	5.03	5.92	-6.076	0.000**
Brand affect	4.77	5.91	-7.922	0.000**
Brand performance	4.90	5.92	-7.140	0.000**

p<0.05 **p<0.01

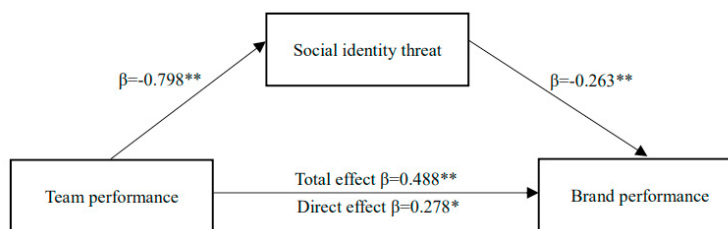


Figure2. The mediating effect of social identity threat on team performance and brand performance

Mediation Analysis. An independent samples T-test was conducted with social identity threat as the dependent variable. Results showed that participants in the low win rate group had higher scores on social identity threat than those in the high win rate group (M high win rate=1.71, M low win rate=4.68, $t=16.13$, $P<0.001$). This was consistent with the theoretical expectation of the study and laid the foundation for subsequent mediation analysis. Using Model 4 in the Process plugin and bootstrap method, a mediation analysis was conducted on the mediating effect of national identity threat. The results showed that social identity threat played a partial mediating role in the relationship between team performance and brand performance (LLCI=0.025, ULCI=0.371, not including 0), with an estimated mediation effect value of 0.210, as shown in the figure 2. For brand trust and brand affect as the dependent variables, the results

showed that social identity threat played a partial mediating role in the relationship between team performance and brand trust (LLCI=0.030, ULCI=0.385, not including 0), with an estimated mediation effect value of 0.217, and in the relationship between team performance and brand affect (LLCI=0.017, ULCI=0.347, not including 0), with an estimated mediation effect value of 0.194.

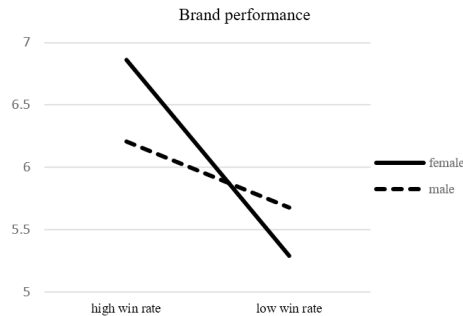


Figure 3. The moderating role of sex

The interaction term between team performance and gender showed significance ($t=-4.181$, $p=0.000<0.05$), indicating that the impact of team performance on brand performance varies significantly at different levels of gender, as shown in Figure 3. When separately examining brand trust and brand affects, the same trend was observed. The results indicate that compared to male consumers, female consumers are more sensitive to team performance. Under high-performing conditions, female consumers have higher levels of brand trust and emotions, but a reversal occurs when team performance is poor, where females exhibit lower levels of brand trust and emotions compared to males.

4. Conclusion

The study discusses how team performance can have a negative impact on the performance of sponsor brands and examines the moderating effect of gender. The positive effects of sports sponsorship on sponsor brand, such as brand awareness and brand image, have been widely proven in previous research. However, only limited studies have occasionally revealed the negative impact of poor performance of sponsored teams on audience perception of sponsor brand performance. This study found through experiments that poor team performance has a negative impact on the audience's perception of sponsor brand performance, brand trust, and emotions, which is mediated by the social identity threat of the audience. Specifically, compared with a high win rate situation, poor performance of the sponsored team significantly reduces the sponsor's brand performance, brand trust, and emotions, which is in line with previous research findings^{[5],[6]}. In addition, compared with males, the negative impact of poor team performance on sponsor brand performance is more significant for females. Specifically, in the high win rate situation, female audience has higher trust and emotions towards sponsor brand; however, in the low win rate situation, female audience has lower perception of brand performance, brand trust, and emotions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical contributions

One of the main purposes of participating in sports sponsorship is to bring positive impact to its brand ^[29]. The positive impact of sports sponsorship has been widely recorded and emphasized, but the negative impact of sports sponsorship has not received enough attention in previous studies. Limited studies have incidentally shown the negative impact of sports sponsorship due to poor performance of sponsored teams. These studies focused on the negative impact of team performance on the perception of audience on the quality of sponsored brand and their willingness to purchase sponsor products. However, they did not sufficiently focus on identifying how such negative effects occurred (mediation mechanism). Thus, the main theoretical contribution of this study to this field is: first, this study explores the potential negative impact of team performance on the sponsored brand, further enriching the

relevant research on sports sponsorship. Second, it identifies the mediation mechanism in this negative effect. This study introduces social identity threat as a mediating variable, verifying that poor team performance can negatively affect the performance, brand trust, and emotional impact of sponsored brands through the mediating variable of social identity threat. Third, it introduces gender as a moderating variable and finds that female audiences are more susceptible to the influence of team performance in their evaluation of sponsored brands.

5.2. Practical implications

This study has some managerial implications for companies' sponsorship decisions. The purpose of companies engaging in sports sponsorship is to improve brand awareness, brand image, brand trust, and willingness to purchase. However, companies often overlook the potential negative impact of sports sponsorship on their own brand, as revealed by this study. If a sponsored team performs poorly, it may have a negative impact on the sponsored brand, which may even damage the company's brand investment in sports sponsorship. Companies should be aware of these issues. Sponsorship companies often assume that there is a positive relationship between sponsors and brand development, but they overlook the potential negative impact of failed teams; however, this does not mean that the company's brand will not be affected if the sponsored team loses frequently. By paying attention to negative effects, companies need to consider whether to make strategic decisions on whether to sponsor a team. It is better to sponsor other things (such as sponsoring a sports event or other events) than to sponsor a team that loses frequently. At the same time, variable sponsorship rewards based on team performance can also be negotiated as part of the sponsorship contract. In addition, companies need to pay attention to the fact that sponsored activities will not bring risk perception to the audience, so as to avoid negative effects on brand perception.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research Prospects

Given that this study focuses on the mediating role of negative effects and social identity threat in sports sponsorship, several related issues have not been explored in this research. Firstly, the study did not consider the impact of audience involvement in sporting events on the results. However, previous research has found that when a team's performance is poor, the audience with different levels of involvement in the event may react differently to the sponsored brand. Therefore, future research needs to consider the audience's level of involvement in sporting events. Secondly, this study did not consider the potential effects that sponsorship brands may bring. In reality, a sporting event often has multiple sponsors, and primary sponsors usually have more exposure than secondary sponsors.

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