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# The Effect of Fans' Attitudes on Sponsorship Outcomes

*Evidence from an Exploratory Study in Greece*

Pantelis Nassis  
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Yanni Afthinos  
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## Abstract

This study examines the effect of sport involvement and fans' beliefs about sponsorship on certain sponsorship outcomes in the context of professional basketball. Quantitative data were collected from a survey of 222 spectators attending a professional basketball game in Greece. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to examine the validity of the scale. Overall, the examination of the structural parameters indicated that attitude towards sponsors was significantly predicted by sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship, while it significantly predicted purchase intentions, word of mouth, and fans' satisfaction from the use of sponsor's products.

**Keywords:** *sport involvement; sponsorship; attitude toward sponsors; satisfaction; behavioral intentions*

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## Introduction

Commercial revenue has become a vital part of funding for a number of sport clubs, events and facilities. With huge operating budgets, sporting organizations rely heavily on their marketing departments to secure revenue from the commercial sector. Corporate sponsorship represents a substantial source of revenue, and long term sponsorship agreements can provide sports organizations with a steady stream of revenue. Sponsorship has been defined as “an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity” (Madrigal, 2001, p. 147).

Sponsorship’s ability to achieve a wide range of marketing goals, has led companies of all sizes to invest in sports and arts global events (i.e., music festivals, Olympic Games, World Cup) or sport teams (Tripodi, 2001). The estimated worldwide sponsorship expenditure had increased from \$13.4 billion in 1996 to \$48.6 billion in 2011, with the sport sector accounting for 69% of North American sponsorship spending (IEG, 2012). These figures represent only the money spent acquiring the right to be officially associated with a team or an event. Leveraging or developing the sponsorship investment requires in some cases almost an equal amount of money (Meenaghan, 2001).

Empirical evidence in the area of sponsorship effectiveness pointed to the importance of fans’ identification with their team and/or fans’ involvement with a sport as a means to explain the way fans form attitudes toward sponsors’ products (Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007; Madrigal, 2001; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Consumer attitudes, which can be defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, cited in Madrigal, 2001, p. 149), have a strong influence on behavioral intentions. Attitudes are comprised of three distinct components: cognitive, which refers to knowledge, belief, or thoughts related to the object of the attitude (e.g., beliefs about a given brand); affective, which refers to emotional responses to a given object (e.g., the degree to which one likes/dislikes a given brand); and conative, in other words, the behavioral tendencies toward an object (Kyle & Mowen, 2005). Both academic and business writers confirm the role that sponsorship can play in influencing fans’ affective component of an attitude by forming a positive association between their sport team and the company’s product (Mason, 2005), as well as the cognitive component by altering associations held in fans’ memories about a brand (Madrigal, 2001).

Past empirical work has concentrated on a number of sponsorship effects such as brand awareness (Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Pitts & Slattery, 2004), brand preference (Nicholls, Roslow, & Laskey, 1994), corporate image (McDonald, 1991; Pope & Voges, 2000), and behavioral intentions mostly concentrated on purchase intentions (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Harvey, 2001; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell, & Clark, 2003; Lee, Sandler, & Shani, 1997; Madrigal, 2001). Only recently, research has focused on developing theories on how the

linkage between fans and the preferred property is likely to affect their responses toward sponsors. In this line of scholarly inquiry, conceptual frameworks have provided a better understanding of the relationship between fans' association with their team and their intentions to engage in a favorable course of action toward those supporting their team (Madrigal, 2001).

However, limited evidence has been provided on the way fans' psychological involvement with a sport, the affective component of attitudes, as well as their beliefs about sponsorship, the cognitive component of attitudes, might affect their receptiveness to sponsorship. Sport involvement, which is expressed as an individual's interest in a sport, is a multidimensional construct. Sponsorship studies so far have included only two of the three sport involvement dimensions (Alexandris et al., 2007; Alexandris, Douka, Bakaloumi, & Tsaousi, 2008). In addition, research on sponsorship outcomes has heavily concentrated on fans' behavioral intentions. Constructs, such as satisfaction from the use of sponsors' products, have been rather neglected, with the exception of Gwinner and Swanson's study (2003). The current study sought to first examine how the three dimensions of fan involvement with the sport described in literature, as well as their beliefs about sponsorship are likely to affect their attitude toward their team's sponsors and second, if fans' attitude toward sponsors influences their intentions to engage in favorable actions toward a sponsor and their satisfaction from sponsors' products.

## **Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

### **Antecedents of Attitude toward Sponsors**

Attitudes, as a research topic in advertising and marketing studies are useful in predicting consumer behavior. Sponsorship activity mainly aims at developing a positive perception or attitude toward a sponsor (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Harvey, 2001). Attitude toward the sponsor seems particular popular among researchers (Spears & Singh, 2004) and is seen as a person's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of a sponsor. In Spears and Singh's (2004) conceptualization, "attitude is relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand (sponsor) that presumably energizes behavior" (p. 55). Positive sponsor image, sponsor favorability, transfer of goodwill, and positive evaluation of a sponsor's product are all consumer attitudes that are targeted with sponsorship (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Meenaghan, 2001; Pope & Voges, 2000). Two constructs, sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship, have been frequently proposed by researchers as key antecedents that shape fans' attitude toward teams' sponsors (Alexandris et al., 2012; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

### **Sport Involvement**

It is widely accepted that activity involvement is best conceptualised in terms of "personal relevance" (Celsi & Olson, 1988), and it is said to "reflect the degree to which people devote themselves to an activity or associated product" (Kyle,

Absher, Norman, Hammitt, & Jodice, 2007, p. 399). In this sense, an activity (i.e., attending basketball) is considered personally relevant to the extent that sport fans perceive it to be self-related or in some way instrumental in achieving their personal goals.

In sport and leisure research, operationalization of the involvement construct has been drawn from the Consumer Involvement Profiles scale (CIP) proposed by Laurent and Kapferer (1985). Based on Laurent and Kapferer's multidimensional interpretation of involvement, McIntyre and Pigram (1992) utilised three facets to better describe involvement in sport and leisure contexts: attraction, centrality, and self-expression. "Attraction" refers to the pleasure derived from participating in a leisure activity along with the importance and meaning the activity conveys for an individual. The "Centrality" dimension is better understood as the opportunity to meet significant others, and the extent to which an individual organizes other aspects of his/her life around an activity. An activity may have a central role in an individual's life for the chance to be with family and friends through participation and for the healthy lifestyle it provides (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004). Finally, the "Self-expression" dimension "refers to the self-representation, or the impression of oneself that individuals wish to convey to others through their leisure participation" (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003, p. 253).

Studies have suggested that involved individuals are more inclined to engage in extensive search for related products and services (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Kerstetter & Kovich, 1997), and express specific preferences related to their leisure experience (e.g., preference for specific service providers and settings) (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998; Havitz & Dimanche, 1997; Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998; 2004; Kyle et al., 2003; Kyle, Bricker, Graefe, & Wickham, 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004). Involved recreationists also tend to participate more often (McCarville, Crompton, & Sell, 1993; McIntyre & Pigram, 1992) and express a resistance to change their activity preference (Kyle, Kerstetter, & Guadagnolo, 1999; McCarville et al., 1993).

Sport involvement has recently attracted sponsorship researchers' interest as an antecedent of fans' responses to sponsorship (Alexandris et al., 2007; 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). However, only two of the dimensions proposed above, attraction and centrality, have been included as measures of sport involvement in sponsorship-related studies. The centrality dimension was found to play an important role in sponsor awareness in all three leisure events in Greece: a snowboard exhibition, a basketball all-star game, and a folklore dancing festival, examined in the study of Alexandris et al. (2008). In terms of the attraction dimension, a significant effect on sponsor awareness was found in the snowboard and dancing events. Mixed results were also reported in the studies of Alexandris et al. (2007), and Alexandris, Tsiotsou, and James (2012) as far as the significance of the involvement dimensions in predicting sponsorship outcomes is concerned. In the context of a basketball all-star game, Alexandris et al. (2007) concluded

that centrality significantly predicted sponsors' image, purchase intentions, and word of mouth communications, while attraction was not found to be related to any of the sponsorship outcomes. Alexandris et al. (2012), in the context of a basketball professional game in Greece, reported that only attraction had an indirect effect on the variables examined (sponsor image, attitudes toward sponsorship, and behavioral intentions). Finally, Nassis, Theodorakis, Alexandris, Tsellou, and Afthinos (2012) found that both involvement dimensions significantly predicted football fans' intentions to prefer sponsors' products when considering a purchase in the future.

### **Beliefs about Sponsorship**

Beliefs are related to consumers' evaluations about the objectives of sponsorship. Individuals might appreciate the benefits of sponsorship such as helping the team, making an event possible, promoting an event, helping the community, etc. For others, sponsorship might be seen as a factor altering the character of sport for promoting commercial interests (Lee et al., 1997). For Eagly and Chaiken (1993), beliefs are "a psychological tendency to that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p. 1), which vary along a positive-negative continuum.

For example, one person may believe that sponsorship increases a team's budget and will therefore lead to a better athletic performance. In addition, for others, sports sponsorship is seen as a means for survival. Through this aspect, there is no inconsistency in people's mind when companies also try to promote their products. This belief results in a favorable evaluation of sponsorship. Conversely, other persons might associate sponsorship with commercialization. They might believe that the only reason companies engage in sponsorship activity is to generate more revenue. The suspicion toward sponsorship is then increased as consumers believe that this marketing activity comes in conflict with the sport's general interest (that companies provide support only to successful teams and sports and not to those that really need it, such as young athletes, amateurs etc.). As such they might be closer to form negative beliefs about sponsorship.

### **Sport Involvement, Beliefs about Sponsorship and Attitude toward Sponsors**

The importance of attitude toward the sponsor in achieving sponsorship objectives has been highlighted in sport sponsorship research (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Sponsors with a favourable image receive more positive sponsorship responses from fans.

McDonald (1991) has claimed that fans with an interest in a sport or team might perceive a sponsor as an ally of their favourite entity. In recent studies, involvement has been included in models assessing antecedent of sponsorship outcomes. Meenaghan (2001) has shown that consumers' responses to sponsorship are driven by their degree of involvement with, and knowledge about, the sponsored activity. Lee et al. (1997), as well as Speed and Thomson (2000), in their event

related studies, concluded that spectators who perceived the event to be attractive, interesting, and entertaining were more likely to exhibit positive responses to its sponsors. Alexandris et al. (2007), in their study of spectators at an all-star basketball game in Greece, empirically verified the role of beliefs about sponsorship and sport activity involvement in fans' positive attitude toward the event's sponsor. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) provided empirical evidence in their study in the context of collegiate sports, that sport involvement had a significant indirect effect on fans' attitude toward sponsors.

Based on the above discussion, we hypothesized that fans' involvement with basketball and beliefs toward sponsorship will influence their attitude toward teams' sponsors.

H1: Fans' involvement with basketball will positively influence their attitude toward sponsors.

H2: Fans' positive beliefs about sponsorship will positively influence their attitude toward sponsors.

### Fans' Responses to Sponsorship

Sponsorship, as an integral component of a firm's marketing strategy, aims at creating links with consumers, and using a sport team or event to pursue marketing goals. By linking brands to a property with which the target audience already has a favorable association, sponsorship can achieve a number of marketing objectives (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). Previous research has focused on sponsorship's ability to influence consumers' attitude toward sponsors and their brands, promote repeat purchases, affect consumers' willingness to recommend sponsors' products to others, and their satisfaction from using sponsors' products (Alexandris et al., 2007; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Smith, Graetz, & Westerbeek, 2008; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009).

**Purchase intentions.** Purchase intentions are "personal action tendencies relating to ... an individual's conscious plan to make an effort to purchase a brand" (Spears & Singh, 2004, p. 56). As a construct, purchase intentions have been used in marketing and advertising research to predict actual purchase behavior and, in some instances, have provided a reliable indicator (Grewal, Krishnan, Baker, & Robin, 1998; Madrigal, 2001). Intentions to purchase a sponsor's product are influenced both by consumers' beliefs about the benefits of sponsorship and by the emotional connection to a sport team or event.

A positive attitude toward a brand appears to have a strong influence on a consumer's intentions to purchase a product or service (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Pope & Voges, 2000). Pope and Voges (2000), in a sample of 964 Australian university students, found a significant relationship between a company's corporate image and an intention to purchase that company's products. In addition, Harvey, Gray and Despain, (2006) reported that a positive attitude toward the sponsor can lead to increased fans' willingness to buy sponsors' products. Finally, Alexandris



et al. (2008) also found that positive attitude toward a sponsor resulted in higher purchase intentions.

In our study, we proposed that fans' attitude toward sponsors can predict fans' intentions for purchasing sponsors' products. Subsequently, the following hypothesis was set:

H3: Fans' attitude toward sponsors will positively influence their intentions to purchase a sponsor's products.

**Word of mouth communication.** Furthermore, word of mouth communication has also been considered as a part of fans' favorable course of action toward sponsors (Alexandris et al., 2007). Word of mouth communication has been emphasized as a powerful communication tool for organizations because it has a more direct influence on consumers' behavior than other forms of advertising that are seen as more biased and as such less credible (Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003). This is particularly important for consumers wishing to use a product or service for the first time and for those wishing to reduce perceived risk (Murray, 1991). The above construct has been examined in the studies of Alexandris et al. (2007) and Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009), which emphasized the positive effect of attitude toward the sponsors on fans' willingness to engage in word of mouth communication. Consequently, we hypothesized that:

H4: Fans' attitude toward sponsors will positively influence their intentions to engage in positive word-of-mouth communications.

**Satisfaction with sponsors' products.** Oliver's (1999) conceptualization of satisfaction proposes that it is a post-consumption evaluation of an individual's cumulative experiences with a specific product or service. Satisfaction is a central construct in marketing literature since it has been shown to have a strong effect on costumers' behavioural intentions (Cronin, Brady, & Hult, 2000; Murray & Howat, 2002).

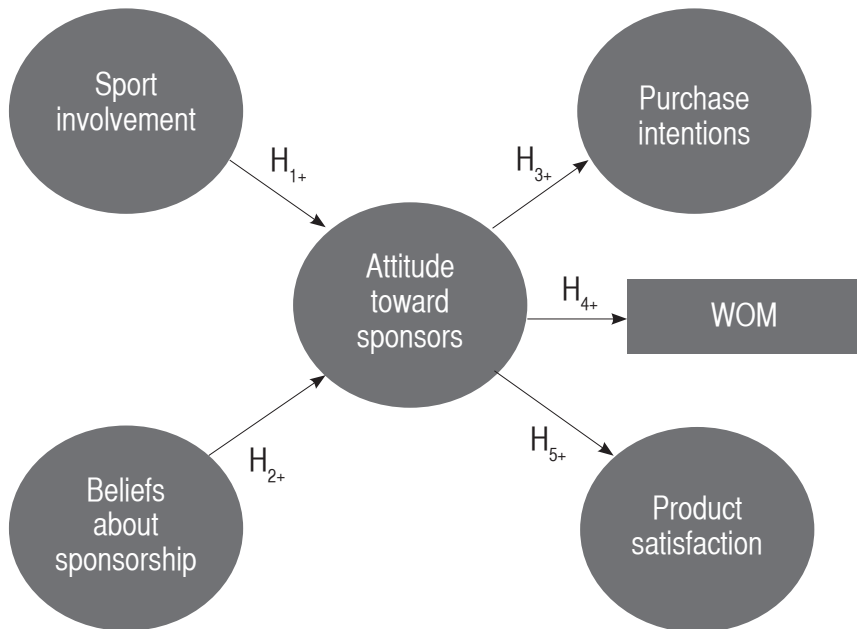
However, the satisfaction from using a sponsor's products has scarcely examined in sport sponsorship research although it is an outcome variable that can further improve scholars' understanding of consumers' decision making process. (Alexandris et al., 2012). For those highly involved with a sport, the linkage between sponsor and a property may trigger post-consumption evaluation that is consistent with their tendency to reinforce their sense of being involved with a property (Madrigal, 2001). As such, it is likely that negative properties of a service or product provided by a sponsor are discounted such that their perceptions remain consistent with their notion as "members" of a group (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). In the context of sport sponsorship, satisfaction from using sponsors' products has been employed in the study of Gwinner and Swanson (2003). Based on



organizational identity theory, these authors found that highly identified fans are more likely to exhibit satisfaction with sponsors' products. Focusing on the need to examine the relationship between fans' satisfaction with sponsors' products and their attitude toward sponsors we formed the following hypothesis:

H5: Fans' attitude toward sponsors will positively influence fans' satisfaction from using sponsors' products.

Concluding, in the present study we examined the influence of fans' beliefs about sponsorship and their involvement with basketball on their attitudes toward teams' sponsors. The effect of fans' attitude toward teams' sponsors on their intentions to engage in favorable actions toward sponsors' products was also tested. Finally, the relationship between attitude about the sponsor and satisfaction from consuming a sponsor's products was also investigated. The hypothesized model examined in this study is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Hypothesised Model

## Methods

### Participants and Procedures

Data were collected using a convenient sampling method during a basketball game between top competing teams for the Greek professional league. Before the distribution of the questionnaires, permission was received from the general manager of the home team. A team of seven researchers and one supervisor was placed in all facility gates to ensure representation of all spectators (Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005). Questionnaires were distributed and completed prior to the beginning of the game. Two hundred and twenty-two ( $N = 222$ ) spectators participated in the study, of whom 159 were males and 63 were females. Their mean age was 33.66 ( $SD = 13.64$ ), ranging 18 from to 67 years.

### Measures

**Sport involvement.** McIntyre and Pigram's (1992) scale was used to capture three facets of fans' involvement with basketball: Attraction, Centrality, and Self-expression. Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Beliefs about sponsorship.** A four-item scale adapted from Alexandris et al. (2007) was used to capture fans' attitudes about sponsorship. All items were measured along a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

**Attitude toward sponsors.** Three items were used to measure fans' attitude toward sponsors developed by Alexandris et al. (2012). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*).

**Purchase intentions and word of mouth.** Three items from the scale developed by Alexandris et al. (2007) were used to measure likelihood of buying sponsors' product in the future. For the measurement of word-of-mouth communication, a single item was used (Alexandris et al., 2007) assessing spectators willingness to recommend sponsors' products to family and friends. Seven-point Likert scales anchored by *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7) were used.

**Satisfaction with sponsors' products.** A scale adapted from Gwinner and Swanson (2003) was utilized to capture fans' satisfaction with sponsors' product. At first, participants were asked to name a sponsor of their team they had done business with, and then they responded to three satisfaction items related to the sponsor named before. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *unsatisfactory* and 7 = *satisfactory*). Those responses failed to name correctly a sponsor were not included in the analysis.

All scales' items are presented in Appendix A.

## Results

### Model Testing

Following suggestions made by Muliak, James, Alstine, Bennett, Lind, and Stilwell (1989) a two-step approach to modeling was employed to analyse the model, using a measurement and a structural model. The measurement model examined relations between the observed variables and the unobserved latent constructs, with the unobserved constructs allowed to intercorrelate freely. The structural model examined relations among only the latent variables (Anderson, & Gerbing, 1988; Byrne, 2010). The first step, confirmed the reliability (i.e. composite reliabilities) and validity (i.e. convergent validity) of the measurement model. On the second step, the structural model examined the predictive validity of the latent constructs.

### Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis via EQS 6 (Bentler, 2005) was first used to examine the suitability of the hypothesized factor structure for these data. The Mardia's coefficient (Mardia, 1970) of multivariate kurtosis was 60.77, and the normalized estimate was 14.98. According to Bentler (1995), normalized estimate values greater than five indicate that the data is not normally distributed. Since the normal distribution assumption was violated, it was decided to use the Satorra-Bentler  $\chi^2$  statistic (Satorra & Bentler, 2001). Model fit evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), for CFI and NNFI values greater than .95, and values below .06 for RMSEA are indicators of a good fit. Results indicated a good fit of the model to the data: S-B  $\chi^2 = 111.09$ ,  $df = 80$ ,  $p < .001$ , S-B  $\chi^2 / df = 1.38$ , \*NNFI = .960, \*CFI = .970, \*RMSEA = .056, 90% RMSEA CI = .027 - .080).

The convergent validity of our model was assessed using various tests: First, all factor loadings were above the .707 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), with the exception of one variable (self-expression, .584). Second, all t-values were statistically significant (t-values  $> + 1.96$ ) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were all above the .50 cut-off point (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The above results indicated strong evidence of convergence validity. Discriminant validity was also satisfactory, since the AVE value for each measure was greater than the squared correlations between each of the measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Confirmatory factor analysis item statistics and goodness of fit indices are presented in Table 1.

Finally, the reliability of our model was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability estimates. Alpha values ranged from .81 to .94 and composite reliability estimates met the minimum suggested value of .60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) indicating that these constructs could be used with confi-

dence. Descriptive statistics, correlations, reliability estimates and AVE values are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1**

*The Measurement Model*

Variable	Loadings	R <sup>2</sup>
<i>Purchase Intentions</i>		
Item 1	.73	.53
Item 2	.75	.56
Item 3	.83	.70
<i>Word of Mouth</i>		
Item 1		
Item 2		
Item 3		
<i>Satisfaction with Sponsor's Product</i>		
Item 1	.87	.76
Item 2	.94	.88
Item 3	.98	.97
<i>Attitude toward Sponsors</i>		
Item 1	.79	.63
Item 2	.93	.87
Item 3	.83	.69
<i>Beliefs about Sponsorship</i>		
Item 1	.86	.74
Item 2	.84	.72
Item 3	.77	.59
<i>Sport Involvement</i>		
Attraction	.84	.70
Centrality	.97	.94
Self-Expression	.58	.34
S-B $\chi^2$ / df	111.09 / 80	
*NNFI	.960	
*CFI	.970	
*RMSEA (90% CI)	.056 (.027 - .080)	

**Table 2**

*Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, Alpha Values, Composite Reliabilities, and Average Variance Extracted Values for Constructs*

	Variables	M	SD	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	r				
1	Purchase Intentions	3.41	1.64	.82	.70	.60					
2	Word of Mouth	3.53	1.79	-	-	-	.78*				
3	Satisfaction with Sponsor's Product	4.74	1.48	.94	.86	.86	.32*	.37*			
4	Attitude toward Sponsors	3.66	1.73	.90	.76	.72	.66*	.69*	.36*		
5	Beliefs about Sponsorship	6.11	1.22	.82	.67	.74	.19*	.11	.18	.21*	
6	Sport Involvement	3.24	.95	.81	.73	.66	.41*	.34*	.13	.37*	.12

\* $p < .01$

### Structural Model

After establishing the psychometric properties of all scales, a full structural model with all parameters estimates was computed using the EQS 6 software (Bentler, 2005). The analysis showed that our model fitted the data well: S-B  $\chi^2 = 159.46$ ,  $df = 98$ ,  $p < .001$ , S-B  $\chi^2 / df = 1.62$ , \*NNFI = .936, \*CFI = .948, \*RMSEA = .071, 90% RMSEA CI = .050 - .091.

**Predicting attitude toward sponsors.** We hypothesized that both sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship will have a positive effect on fans' attitude toward their team's sponsors. An examination of the structural parameters indicated that attitude toward sponsors was significantly predicted by sport involvement ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ) and beliefs about sponsorship ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < 0.1$ ), supporting our first and second hypotheses respectively (See Figure 2, and Table 3). Assessing the strength of the structural model using the square multiple correlation coeffi-

cient ( $R^2$ ) for the dependent variable, we found that sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship accounted for 13% of the variance in attitude toward sponsors.

**Predicting sponsorship outcomes.** It was hypothesized that fans' attitude toward sponsors will positively influence three sponsorship outcomes. Supporting the third hypothesis, results indicated that fans' perceptions about team's sponsors impacted their intention to buy sponsors' products in the future ( $\beta = .82, p < 0.1$ ). Also, fans' willingness to make positive comments regarding the team's sponsors was predicted by their attitude toward sponsors ( $\beta = .97, p < 0.1$ ), supporting Hypothesis 4. Finally, fans' satisfaction from a sponsor's product was influenced by their attitude toward their teams sponsors ( $\beta = .41, p < 0.1$ ). This result provided support for the fifth hypothesis of the study. In addition, fans' attitude on team's sponsors accounted for 67% of the variation in purchase intentions, 94% of the variation in word of mouth, and 17% of the variation in satisfaction with sponsors' products. Path estimates for the structural model are depicted in Figure 2 and Table 3.

### Discussion

The present study integrated key sponsorship variables (i.e., beliefs about sponsorship, fans' attitude toward sponsors, purchase intentions, satisfaction from sponsors' products and positive word of mouth) into a research model focused on Greek basketball fans, and empirically examined the theoretical relationships among the constructs.

**Table 3**

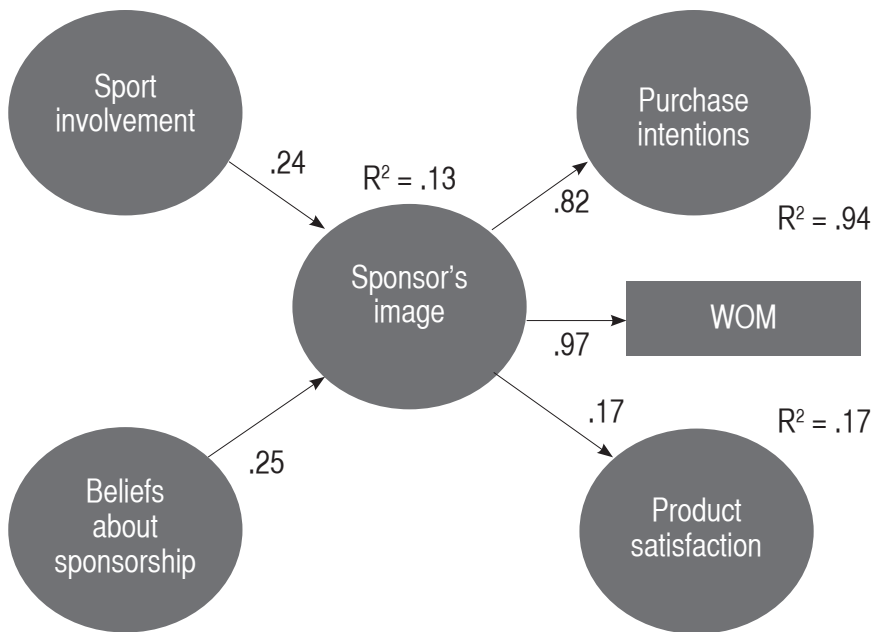
*Structural Model Analysis*

Dependent Variable	Predictor	$\beta$	t -values	$R^2$
Attitude toward Sponsors	Beliefs about Sponsorship	.24	2.54*	13
Purchase Intentions	Sport Involvement	.25	2.71*	67
Word of Mouth	Attitude toward Sponsors	.82	7.02*	94
Satisfaction with Sponsor's Product	Attitude toward Sponsors	.97	9.49*	17
		.41	4.35*	
	S-B $\chi^2$ / df	159.46/ 98		
	*NNFI	.936		
	*CFI	.948		
	*RMSEA (90% CI)	.071 (.050 - .091)		

\*p<.05

Before examining specific relationships among the research constructs and comparing the overall fit of the suggested model, the authors established the validity and reliability of the measurement scale through a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and reliability tests. Results of the CFA suggested good fit between the measurement model and the observed data. AVEs and reliability coefficients provided strong evidence of validity and reliability of the measurement scale, indicating that these constructs could be used with confidence.

This study treated fans' sport involvement and their beliefs about sponsorship as antecedents of fans' attitude toward sponsors. The study also examined the direct relationship between fans' attitude toward sponsors and their intentions to engage in favourable actions toward their team's sponsors. The results of the current study provided support for the hypotheses that those fans who were more involved with basketball and had formed a positive belief about sponsorship were more likely to develop a positive attitude toward their team's sponsors. Additionally, results supported the hypotheses that fans with a positive attitude toward sponsors were more likely to purchase sponsors' products, engage in word of mouth communications and be satisfied from using sponsors' products.



**Figure 2.** Structural Relationships between Sport Involvement, Beliefs about Sponsorship, Attitude toward Sponsors, Purchase Intentions, Word of Mouth (WOM), and Satisfaction from Sponsor's Product.



### Theoretical and Managerial Implications

The present study contributes to the literature first by proposing that the effect of the two main constructs examined, namely sport involvement and fans' beliefs about sponsorship, on fans' behavioral intentions and their satisfaction from using sponsors' products are "filtered" by fans' attitude toward sponsors. As discussed, previous studies have provided results that indicate the direct effect of the two constructs in the formation of fans' attitudes and fans' intentions. McDonald (1991) has highlighted the importance of fans' interest in a sport in their perception of their favourite entity's sponsors. Meenaghan (2001), Lee et al. (1997), as well as Speed and Thomson (2000) have supported that fans' positive responses to sponsors are driven by their involvement with a sport. Other studies support the impact of fans' attitude toward sponsors on their behavioural intentions (Speed & Thompson, 2000; Pope & Voges, 2000). Additionally, the construct of "beliefs about sponsorship" has been said to predict consumers' responses toward the sponsor (Alexandris et al., 2007). Our study specified the path through which fans form their intentions toward sponsorship. The results clarified that sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship had a significant effect on fans' attitudes which in turn influenced both behavioral intentions examined as well as the satisfaction fans derived from the use of a sponsor's products.

A second theoretical contribution of the study relates to the fact that for the first time empirical evidence has been provided on the role of the "self-expression" dimension of sport involvement, in predicting fans' responses to sponsorship. Even though research in leisure has implied that the "self-expression" dimension is a significant predictor of participant's behavioral loyalty to agencies and activity settings (e.g., Kyle et al., 2004; 2003) it has never been included in theoretical frameworks assessing the effect of sport involvement on sponsorship outcomes. In the sport sponsorship literature, Alexandris et al. highlighted the role of "attraction" and "centrality" dimensions in predicting sponsorship outcomes in a professional basketball event (2007) and in three different leisure events (2008). The self-expression dimension, as adapted by McIntyre and Pigram's (1992) scale, captures both fans' concern about others' evaluation of the self, and a concern about how they perform on a given situation relative to their own personal standards.

A third theoretical contribution of the present study relates to the fact that it has investigated how fans' attitudes and beliefs influence satisfaction from using a sponsor's products, which has been included in a sport sponsorship research model as a sponsorship outcome. Previous work in sport sponsorship, with the exception of Gwinner and Swanson's study (2003), has considered just intentions toward sponsors and their products as an endpoint. Satisfaction, however, is a construct that might advance sport sponsorship research beyond the examination of 'intentions', since it reveals fans' post-consumption evaluation of sponsors' products. The level of satisfaction highly involved fans receive when interacting with sponsors might be the result of the need to be consistent with their previous

beliefs about sponsorship (e.g., “Sponsorship is necessary for events, such as ... to take place”) and/or their perceptions of the sponsoring firm as a good sponsor (e.g., “I have a positive attitude toward the sponsors and its products, due to its sponsorship to my team”). In either case, satisfaction is a critical construct since it by itself might strengthen positive perceptions about sponsors which in turn is likely to further reinforce fans’ favorable behavioral intentions toward their sport’s sponsors.

From a managerial point of view, it becomes clear that the marketing directors of professional sports have an important role to play in fostering and creating a favorable climate for sponsorship. The formation of a positive fans’ attitude toward sponsors is influenced both by fans’ degree of involvement with a sport and by their perception of whether a sponsor acts as an ally to their favorite sport or not. The above findings of our study pose specific guides for sport marketers. First, fans’ involvement with a sport has become a meaningful basis for segmenting sport fans. Segmentation of fans based on their level of involvement with a sport can facilitate sponsorship outcomes. For sports like basketball, that usually enjoy moderate to high levels of involvement, teams and leagues should constantly try to keep fans involved with the sport since this presents better opportunities for sponsorship investment. Sponsors should always be provided with the opportunity to link with the events that target the increase of fans’ involvement. Increasing the level of fans’ involvement might be achieved by organizing, for instance, open to public events, such as street tournaments, and/or campaigns against racism, violence, and doping, and seminars at schools and universities on fair play and the game’s rules. Sports marketers could also keep fans involved with a sport through the use of multimedia (e.g., interactive games, communication with a broad base of prospect fans, etc.).

Second, by acting together with sports marketers, sponsors would be able to create a strong relationship with the sponsored organization which in turn is much likely for them to be considered as being an ally of the sport. By supporting and facilitating events such as youth training camps, charity programs, and local community’s initiatives for sport, sponsors are likely to influence positively fans’ beliefs about sponsorship. Third, a critical issue when designing sponsorship programs seems to be the duration of association with a sport or team. The establishment of a long association with a sport is likely to create favorable responses from the sport’s fans.

As a conclusion, the present study provided empirical evidence that sport involvement and fans’ beliefs about sponsorship are important elements of the mechanism fans form attitudes toward a sponsor. Fans with high involvement with a sport and a positive view about sponsorship are more likely to form a positive attitude toward sponsors of their favorite team. Finally, the results revealed the strong influence of fans’ attitude toward sponsors on fans’ behavioral intentions toward their team’s sponsors and on the satisfaction from the use of a sponsor’s products. By understanding the critical drivers of fans’ responses to sponsor-

ship, sport managers and marketers could influence those elements that seem to be most important in the formation of the above responses.

### Limitations and Future Suggestions

Before drawing any conclusions, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. First, the results of this study are based on a sample with specific cultural and contextual characteristics. Therefore, projecting the findings beyond the context of Greek basketball should be carefully considered. Specifically, like most researches on sponsorship, the sample of this study comprised fans from only one country. Cross-cultural studies in the future will increase our understanding about sport fans' attitudes and behaviors regarding sponsorship in different parts of the world. Future studies should also use larger samples, including fans of more professional sports, to allow results to be generalized with more confidence. A third limitation is the fact that this study focused on fans' broader intentions for purchasing products from, and engaging in word-of-mouth communication for companies the name of which was not specified. In other words, participants were asked about their general intentions to act in a favorable way for a company that sponsors their favorite team rather than from an actual sponsor. However, using the name of actual sponsors might have elicited somehow different answers. Finally, generalizations regarding relationships between attitudinal constructs and sponsorship outcomes should be made with caution due to the exploratory nature of this study.

Concluding, as previously discussed, sport involvement, beliefs about sponsorship, and fans' attitude toward sponsors are three constructs used in the present study. There are more constructs, which have been proposed in the literature, that influence fans' responses to sponsorship, and were not included in the present study. Examples are sport brand associations (Ross, 2006) and team identification. By including all constructs proposed in the literature, and testing a theoretical model in different sport and cultural contexts, all possible antecedents of fans' reactions to sponsorship programs might be depicted.

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## Appendix A: Scale Items

### Beliefs about sponsorship

Sponsorship is necessary for basketball teams.

Beliefs about sponsorship
Sponsorship is necessary for basketball teams. Sponsorship offers valuable financial support to basketball teams. Sponsorship helps basketball teams to be successful. Sponsorship increases commercialization of basketball.
<i>Involvement (Attraction)</i>
Watching basketball is one of the most enjoyable things I do. Watching basketball is one of the most satisfying things I do. Watching basketball is very important to me.
<i>Involvement (Centrality)</i>
I find a lot of my life is organized around watching basketball. Watching basketball occupies a central role in my life. To change my preference from watching basketball to another recreation activity would require major rethinking.
<i>Involvement (Self-expression)</i>
When I attend basketball games, others see me the way I want them to see me. Watching basketball says a lot about who I really am. When I attend basketball games, I can really be myself.
<i>Fans' attitude toward sponsors</i>
I have a positive attitude toward the sponsors and their products, due to their sponsorship to my team. The sponsorship improves my perceptions about the team sponsors and their products. Due to the particular sponsorship, I like more the products of the sponsors.
<i>Purchase intentions</i>
Consider buying my favorite basketball team's sponsors' products. Will try to buy my favorite basketball team's sponsors' products. Will buy my favorite basketball team's sponsors' products.
<i>Word-of-mouth communication</i>
How likely it is that you recommend sponsors' products to family and friends?
<i>Satisfaction with sponsors' products</i>
Based on all of your experiences, how satisfied are you with this organization's services and/or products? Compared to other, similar organizations that you have done business with, how would you rate your satisfaction with this organization? In general, I am satisfied with this organization.



Management Whitepaper

# The Effect of Fans' Attitudes on Sponsorship Outcomes

*Evidence from an Exploratory Study in Greece*

**Pantelis Nassis, Nicholas D. Theodorakis,  
Yanni Afthinos, and Haralambos Kolybalis**

## I. Research Problem

Commercial revenue has become a vital part of funding for a number of sport clubs, events, and facilities. With huge operating budgets, sporting organizations rely heavily on their marketing departments to secure revenue from the commercial sector. Therefore, it is useful to examine a related aspect with practical as well as theoretical implications. That is: (a) how fans' sport involvement, as well as their beliefs about sponsorship are likely to affect their attitude toward their team's sponsors? and (b) does fans' attitude toward sponsors influence their behavioral intentions, as well as their actual behavior toward sponsors?

This is an important issue for both sponsors and sponsored organizations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to propose a model in which fans' attitude toward sponsors can be predicted by sport involvement and fans' beliefs about sponsorship, while in turn, the aforementioned attitude can predict fans' responses to sponsorship. That is, their intentions for purchasing sponsors' products, their intentions for engaging in word-of-mouth communication, and their satisfaction from using sponsors' products. This article would likely be useful primarily to marketing directors of professional sports, since they now have an important role to play in fostering and creating a favorable climate for sponsorship. Their aim would be the formation of a positive fans' attitude toward their team's sponsors via raising their degree of involvement with the sport and by fostering their perception that a sponsor acts as an ally to their favorite sport and team.

## II. Issues

Both academic and business writers confirm the role that sponsorship can play in influencing fans' (a) affective component of an attitude, by forming a positive association between their sport team and the company's product (Mason, 2005), and (b) cognitive component of an attitude by altering associations held in fans' memories about a brand (Madrigal, 2001).

Past empirical work has concentrated on a number of sponsorship effects such as brand awareness, brand preference, corporate image, and behavioral intentions mostly concentrated on purchase intentions. Only recently research has focused on developing theories on how the linkage between fans and the preferred property is likely to affect their responses toward sponsors. In this line of scholarly inquiry, conceptual frameworks have provided a better understanding of the relationship between fans' association with their team and their intentions to engage in a favorable course of action toward those supporting their team (Madrigal, 2001).

However, limited evidence has been provided on the way fans' psychological involvement with a sport, as well as their beliefs about sponsorship, might affect their receptiveness to sponsorship. Sport involvement, expressed as an individual's interest in a sport, is a multidimensional construct. Sponsorship studies so far have included only two of the three sport involvement dimensions (Alexandris et al., 2007; Alexandris, Douka, Bakaloumi, & Tsaousi, 2008). In addition, research on sponsorship outcomes has heavily concentrated on fans' behavioral intentions. Constructs, such as satisfaction from the use of sponsors' products, have been neglected with the exception of Gwinner and Swanson's study (2003). Therefore, the issue that this study addresses is to examine, how the three dimensions of fans' sport involvement described in literature, as well as their beliefs about sponsorship are likely to affect their attitude toward their team's sponsor. Furthermore, do fans' attitudes toward sponsors influence their intentions to engage in favorable actions toward a sponsor and their satisfaction from sponsors' products?

### III. Summary

This study proposes that sport involvement and fans' beliefs about sponsorship, on fans' behavioral intentions and their satisfaction from using sponsors' products are "filtered" by fans' attitude toward sponsors. The results indicated that fans' attitude toward sponsors was significantly predicted by sport involvement ( $\beta = .25$ ) and beliefs about sponsorship ( $\beta = .24$ ), accounting for 13% of the variance in sponsor's image. Finally, fans' attitudes significantly predicted purchase intentions ( $\beta = .82$ ), word of mouth ( $\beta = .97$ ), and satisfaction ( $\beta = .41$ ), accounted for 67%, 94%, and 17% of their variance, respectively.

With regard to the hypothesis that both sport involvement and beliefs about sponsorship would have a positive impact on fans' attitude toward sponsors, which would in turn positively predict fans' purchase intentions, positive word of mouth and satisfaction from sponsors' products, the analysis showed that this study's proposed model fitted the data well. Therefore, sport managers/marketers can use it as a new sport-marketing tool.

### IV. Analysis

The present study provided empirical evidence that sport involvement and fans' beliefs about sponsorship are important elements of the fans' mechanism that form attitudes toward a sponsor. Fans having high involvement with a sport

and a positive view about sponsorship, are more likely to form a positive attitude toward their favorite team's sponsors. The results revealed also a strong influence of fans' attitude toward sponsors, on fans' behavioral intentions toward their team's sponsors and on the satisfaction from the use of a sponsor's product. The proposed research model may serve as a new marketing tool in order to use the produced information as a supporting element of added value to their team's sponsorship program.

## V. Discussion/Implications

By understanding the critical drivers of fans' responses to sponsorship, sport managers and marketers could influence the elements that seem to be most important in the formation of the fans' responses. Therefore, they may use the proposed research model in order to assess its team's fans attitude toward the team's sponsors, and accordingly create a tailor-made program with activities that build sport/team involvement and positive attitude toward the sport/team's sponsors. Then the process can be repeated for feedback.

However, before drawing any conclusion, one should be acknowledge a number of limitations. First, the results of this study are based on a sample with specific cultural and contextual characteristics. Therefore, projecting the findings beyond the context of Greek basketball should be carefully considered.

Future studies should use larger samples, including fans of other professional sports as well, in order to allow the generalization of the results with higher degree of confidence. Another limitation is the fact that this study focused on fans' broader intentions for purchasing products, and engaging in word-of-mouth communication for unspecified companies. In other words, participants were asked about their general intentions to act in a favorable way for a company that sponsor their favorite team, rather than from an actual sponsor. It is unknown if using the name of actual sponsors might have been resulted in different answers.

Finally, as previously discussed, sport involvement, beliefs about sponsorship, and sponsor image are three constructs used in the present study. However, in the literature, one can find more constructs proposed to influence fans' responses to sponsorship that were not included in the present study (e.g., sport brand associations [Ross, 2006] and team identification). By including all constructs proposed in the literature and testing a theoretical model in different sports and cultural contexts, all possible antecedents of fans' reactions to sponsorship programs might be depicted.