




THE INFLUENCE OF A SPORTS EVENT SPONSORSHIP ON BRAND IMAGE AND BRAND PREFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of a sports event sponsorship on brand image and brand preference. An explanatory and survey research design was adopted, and a pre-designed questionnaire was administered to 400 soccer supporters' selected using simple random sampling. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the influence of soccer event sponsorship on brand image and brand preference. The result shows that soccer event sponsorship influences the brand image and brand preference respectively. The research provides empirical evidence of how consumers can respond to a brand associated with a sports event sponsorship that is uniquely attached to specific sports teams and where sports supporters are involved in the playing team selection process. This study is based on a uniquely structured sport event of a major beer brand, two large football teams in the country and supporter involvement. The study shows that a one-day annual sports event sponsorship effectively influences brand image and brand preference.

INTRODUCTION

Sponsorship of events is a rapidly growing marketing phenomenon which used to be for the high-social class in ancient Greece and now developed into a renowned strategy for big brands (Knott, 2015). Big brands such as Nike sponsor tennis events such as the United States (US) Open, Australian Open or Roland Garros, and Wimbledon. Heineken sponsors soccer events such as the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League. Over the past few decades, sports sponsorship has turned into a valuable marketing tool for communication. Thus, according to Morgan et al. (2014), sports sponsorships present an exceptional potential for commercial enhancement in the market because of their adaptable marketing platform or pillar. This is because sports sponsorship can cut through traditional advertising clutter, communicate directly with various stakeholders, and differentiate the brand within the competitive market (Zhang et al., 2018). As such, using sports sponsorships as a marketing and corporate tool can enhance the brand and corporate image, as well as increase consumer interest in the sponsor's products and services (Do et al., 2015). However, the sponsorship of events is an evolving phenomenon as organisations keep seeking new ways to improve consumer experience and increase brand value. Many studies have sort to explore the effectiveness of general sports sponsorship on brand awareness. However, this study seeks to examine how a single-day soccer event sponsorship influences the brand image and brand preference. In addition, the soccer event is uniquely held once annually for the past thirteen years, involving a major beer brand, two large soccer teams, and team supporters who are required to select and vote for their preferred soccer players to play in the event day. The study aims to understand if one-day annually held sport event sponsorships can influence brand image and brand preference when there is supporter involvement.

Sponsorship is most often commercial in nature, where a company involves itself in a public event to improve sales, image, and consumer awareness, in return for direct financial benefits (Blake et al., 2019). While sponsorship used to be mostly philanthropic in the past, it has evolved into a commercial activity in recent years, as companies pay premiums to acquire sponsorship rights and certain exclusive rights (Keshkar et al., 2019). An example is the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) World Cup sponsorship of 2020, which had 20 brands such as Budweiser, Adidas, Coca Cola and Visa, with exclusive rights to advertise around the tournament.

The evolution of sponsorships has taken place over the years, with specific areas within deals that involve programme/broadcast, arts and sports used for sponsorship. Sports sponsorships attract the most attention from those areas since there are a significant number of individuals acting as supporters of the teams and the sport (Grimaldi, 2014). Companies have realized that sponsorships can achieve a variety of marketing goals through sports and entertainment with sponsorship deals being evaluated for their ability to achieve communication objectives of gaining corporate image (Zia et al., 2021). As such, sponsorships have become part of the marketing mix that increases social responsibility, enhances brand recognition, introduces new products to key markets, and enhances credibility (Biscaia et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2021).

Many companies employ sponsorship activities as a means of increasing brand equity by enhancing the image of their brands or companies (Aaker, 2016). According to Miyazaki and Morgan (2016), brand image enhancement increases goodwill and elevates brand awareness to form part of the specific goals that companies use to base their sponsorship decisions. As a medium of communication, sponsorship creates identities, increases sales, and builds loyalty (Kończak, 2021). Through sponsorship, more specifically through sports sponsorship, many companies have also been able to achieve new levels of exposure at much lower costs for marketing and communication (Aaker, 2016). Hence, sports sponsorship, events sponsorship, meetings sponsorship, gathering sponsorship, and functions sponsorship have become some of the methods companies use to promote their brand, products, and services.

Sports sponsorships can enhance brand image, brand loyalty, team loyalty, and purchase intention through the sponsorship effectiveness framework (Grimaldi, 2014). The criteria for effective communication are outlined in Aida's model, which emphasizes the factors of attention/awareness, interest, desire, action, and satisfaction (Wijaya, 2012). However, sponsors and their brands cannot exist separately (Chelbi & Gharbi, 2014). Therefore, this concept stipulates the following relevant aspects: spectators must realize the sponsored brand's existence, then develop a desire to consume it, purchase it, and be satisfied. Satisfaction usually leads to repeat purchases, leading to brand loyalty (Kataria & Saini, 2019). Satisfaction also creates specific brand images and certain preferences towards the brand.

Sponsoring a "grassroots" event can vary in scope from regional, national, and international events sponsored by businesses (Branışte, 2021). With 220 countries tuning in from around the world for the Sydney 2000 Olympics, hundreds of thousands of athletes compete in 28 different sports over 16 days because of this wide variety of sports (Baade & Matheson, 2015). However, the objectives of companies often determine how to sponsor sports events and other activities (Dos Santos & Moreno, 2018). Sports, arts, and music broadcasting are several areas in which sponsors may offer sponsorships, as well as naming rights to stadiums, demonstrations of products at sporting events, tournaments, and personal or group sponsorships (Kramer et al., 2021). Johnson and Woodcock (2021), list several categories of sponsorship that include title sponsorships of events and/or leagues, such as Vodacom Super Rugby. Stadium and/or arena naming rights such as the Toyota Stadium in the Free State, the sponsorship of a club and/or league such as Cell C sponsoring Cell C Sharks and MTN sponsoring Premier Soccer League top 8 tournament called MTN8, the sponsorship of a company hospitality area such as the Multichoice DSTV hospitality at the Multichoice DSTV Delicious Festival as well as sponsorship of a sports team such as Sportpesa sponsoring Cape Town City Football Club; and individual athletes such as Nike sponsoring Tiger Woods. Sporting events provide company representatives with an appealing setting for reaching their target audiences and positively projecting their brand's image (Knott et al., 2017). Sponsors usually commit to supporting events for a defined period (Breese et al., 2020). For example, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games at-

tract millions of viewers around the world for a limited period during a particular season of the year. It is therefore easy to reach a wide international audience in this case (Rookwood, 2019).

At every level of sports, sponsorship is a business transaction between two parties to generate a return on investment. However, sports sponsorship differs from other types of financial support in the sense that it can provide a long-term return whilst undertaken to benefit all involved parties (Slåtten et al., 2017). In other words, sponsorship in sports has a reciprocal relationship between the sponsor and the sponsee (Demira & Söderman, 2015). According to Cook et al. (2021), in business, sponsorship of a club in the form of a sponsorship agreement is a mutually beneficial arrangement based on synergy and commercial interests. Thus, providing cash or kind to a club in exchange for rights can lead to the company gaining exposure or commercial benefits because of such a partnership (Jóźwiak, 2021).

Therefore, sports sponsorship has grown to such an unsalable level that it has become unthinkable for major events to take place without a major brand in support or sponsoring. In South Africa, sports sponsorship, as forecast by BMI Sports Info (2016, p.76), reached an estimated R5.703 billion in direct spending on rights fees in 2016. Consequently, sports sponsorship growth has been positively contributing to sports development and has consequently increased brand exposure through different marketing efforts many times (Viriri et al., 2020). Football sponsorship has proven to be an excellent way to give brands exposure during matches, no matter what the opportunity may be including stadium naming rights, digital match day programme, company logos on club memorabilia, Light Emitting Diodes (LED) boards, perimeter advertising and team media platforms (Kramer et al., 2021; Poppa & Woratschek, 2016).

Given that sports teams represent important vehicles for companies to boost relationships with target audiences, supporters are routinely exposed to multiple sponsors from multiple industries (Nuseir, 2020). A major theme in sponsorship research has now become the role that actual sponsors play in professional sports (Biscaia et al., 2013; Hong, 2022). Sponsors need to see sports supporters reacting positively to sponsors as they do to their teams. However, the level of product knowledge of supporters may influence their response to sponsorship activities (Chien et al., 2016). For example, big soccer teams such as Mamelodi Sundowns and Kaizer Chiefs have massive support from their supporters. Therefore, a brand supporting these teams would expect the supporters to have the same positive reactions to the sponsor's brand the same way as they do to their team.

The value of sponsorship is differentiated from competitors through brand positioning (Kim et al., 2021), increasing sales and market share by reaching target markets and maintaining consumer relationships (Kang et al., 2019). As a result of the sponsorship, the company hopes to bridge cultural differences (Cousens et al., 2016), participating in the community, increasing brand awareness, and boosting the positive image of the brand through relationships with media corporations (Poppa & Woratschek, 2016). Sports sponsorship is an effective marketing strategy used by companies to communicate their brand messages to immense external and internal audiences to differentiate themselves from the competition (Bilgin, 2018). The goal is to align consumer preferences with the sponsors' products (Hughes et al., 2019). Additionally, the public also accepts sponsorship more readily than advertising (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). There may be a reason for this, as many events would not be possible without sponsors. In a study by Skard and Thorbjørnsen (2014), it was found that most people who are knowledgeable about a company's sponsorship activities and advertising tend to be more positive toward the company's brand. Hence, an organisation can effectively block competitors' brands from exploiting the same opportunities with the right sponsorship mix.

However, many companies and sports entities consider a sponsorship to be the best investment even though its implementation process poses various challenges (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022). Sponsoring clubs, teams, or individuals can be risky because of possible threats, such as damage to the image of the sponsored property (Keshkar et al., 2019). Furthermore, according to Intravia et al. (2020), bad Nike publicity was reported where some people were shown burning Nike shoes because of the Nike advertisement done by a National Football League (NFL) player not saluting the United States (US) National Anthem. Naturally, such incidences affect the brand value and the sponsorship mandate.

In light of the merits and development of sport sponsorship in business, there is not much empirical evidence showing how sport event sponsorships influence brand image and brand preference.

Influence of sponsorship on brand preference

Brand preference can be defined as the tendency of consumers to favour certain brands over others (Chang & Liu, 2016). Palusuk et al. (2019), state that brands are defined as how consumers favour one brand over another or the degree to which they are attached to a brand. It is essential to understand consumer behaviour in terms of brand choice to understand consumer choices. As brands seek to gain market share and strengthen their position in the market, it is always a good idea to understand what type of attributes the brand possesses. Hence, according to Overby and Lee (2016), consumers are inclined to favour certain brands because they perceive them as being more trustworthy. In this way, the brand preference is close to reality as far as the consumer's assessment of the brand is concerned. It is often the case that consumers are faced with having to choose from several options available in the market. Thus, in sports sponsorship, the brand attributes are influenced by consumer attitudes to favour the brand being promoted over other brands (Tsordia et al., 2018). In this present study, the brand preference for the sponsor's beer is critical in ensuring the sponsorship effectively influences the purchase intention of the sponsor's branded products. Therefore, the study seeks to understand if soccer supporters favour or prefer more of the sponsor's brand than other brands.

Influence of sponsorship on brand image

Brand image refers to the opinions formed by individuals about a company, its products, services, or performance (Buli et al., 2016). As a result of a brand's image, more consumers connect with its products or services (Lee & Jin, 2019). Therefore, the popularity of an event sponsorship assists companies in their marketing efforts to promote the sale of their products (de Oliveira Duarte & Silva, 2018). In addition, sports sponsorship is defined as one form of the concept that companies use to enhance their corporate or brand image through sporting activities, events, or exhibitions. Therefore, the act of investing in a sporting asset to secure a return on investment can be seen as both a sponsorship and an investment (Biscaia et al., 2013; Dolores et al., 2021). In this way, the business-to-business relationship between sponsors, sports organizations, and supporters is aligned with this definition as it benefits all parties (Farrelly et al., 2016). Partnering with companies can thus benefit sports as they receive financial support and other in-kind resources that can enhance the quality of the game (Siegfried et al., 2021). As a result of the sponsorship relationship, sports teams and sponsorship companies gain more exposure to sports supporters. In turn, these groups become closer to each other. By sponsoring sports events, supporters have built emotional connections with their favourite teams (Hammerschmidt et al., 2021; Lee, 2021; Madrigal, 2013; Su et al., 2021). Through sports, brands also connect with customers on an emotional level using their passion for sports (Santomier, 2013).

Blomkvist et al. (2012) contend that a brand image is composed entirely of bits of information, much of which is probably derived from inference rather than observed or experienced directly, and many of these inferences may only be tenuous and indirect connections with reality. Similarly, Toldos and Orozco-Gomez (2015) describe a brand image as a set of unique personal characteristics of a brand. In other words, a brand image is the result of the combination of principles, notions, and impressions that a person has concerning a company or its products or the mental construct that a person develops because of a few selected impressions (Crompton, 2014). The brand identity a company creates reflects the distinct associations that it strives towards, to develop and maintain its aspired image as a company and can thus be argued to direct the company's direction, and indirectly, define the company's purpose (Aaker, 2016). In most common cases, companies are seeking brand image benefits by using the image of a sporting event to create relevance and a positive attitude toward their product (Martínez-Cevallos et al., 2020). By borrowing images from sporting events, companies can enhance their brand or product's image with their market target audiences (Ntshike, 2016). For example, Vodacom through the Vodacom Super Rugby tournament has increased its image because of its association with the tournament (Pickton & Broderick, 2015). Another example of event sponsorship by Heineken of the UEFA Champions League in Europe made the brand image more recognisable in many countries because of its association with the Champions League event.

In light of the reviewed literature, this study aims to examine the influence of a sports event sponsorship on brand image and brand preference.

METHODS

Research approach

The study is the case of a beer business company that sponsors a one-day soccer event that is held once on an annual basis since 2010. The five-year sponsorship agreement extends to two big football clubs in South Africa with an option to extend (Moholola, 2011), and these contracts are being renewed and extended (Madyira, 2021). The supporters of the two football teams pick the players to play for the winner's trophy using a cellphone short-message-service-based voting system including the selection of which players to substitute on the day the match is played.

An explanatory approach was adopted to quantitatively understand how soccer event sponsorship influences the brand image and brand preference. A pre-designed 5-point Likert scaled questionnaire was administered using a survey on statistically computed and significant at a confidence interval (95%) and margin of error (5%) of a 400 supporters sample selected using simple random sampling. Trained fieldworkers distributed a self-completion questionnaire among the 500 supporters visiting the two teams' sports clubs to watch the soccer match to achieve an 80% response rate. The questionnaire consisted of 26 items and sport management executives were involved in validating and improving the questions. The questionnaire was also subjected to the Cronbach test (0.876) which was considered reliable for the three measuring items analysed in this study (Samuel, 2015). Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data collected using SPSS v25.

RESULTS

Demographic data

The respondents' demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data

| Variable | Category | Soccer Supporters n=400 (%) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------|
| Age | Below 25 years | 21.4% |
| | 25-35 years | 16.5% |
| | 36-45 years | 24.3% |
| | 46-55 years | 15.8% |
| | Above 55 years | 22% |
| Gender | Male | 55.5% |
| | Female | 44.5% |
| Standard of Event Soccer | Excellent | 25.7% |
| | Good | 36.7% |
| | Fair | 21.3% |
| | Poor | 11.8% |
| | Uncertain | 4.5% |
| Supported Team | Football team 1 | 43% |
| | Football team2 | 52% |
| | Others | 5% |
| Employment Status | Student | 14.4% |
| | Employed | 57.5% |
| | Unemployed | 23.8% |
| | Others | 4.3% |

The majority of the respondents were male (55.5%), aged 36-45 years (24.3%), employed (57.5%), from football team 2 (52%), and regarded the event standard as good (36.7%).

Data collection and analysis procedure

Reliability data

The Cronbach alpha test of the items was computed to 0.878. This means that the research instrument was reliable and above the threshold of 0.7 (Samuel, 2015).

Descriptive data

Influence of sponsorship on brand preference

Consumption of the product

The respondents were asked if they consume the sponsor's branded beer above other brands and the result is shown in Figure 1.

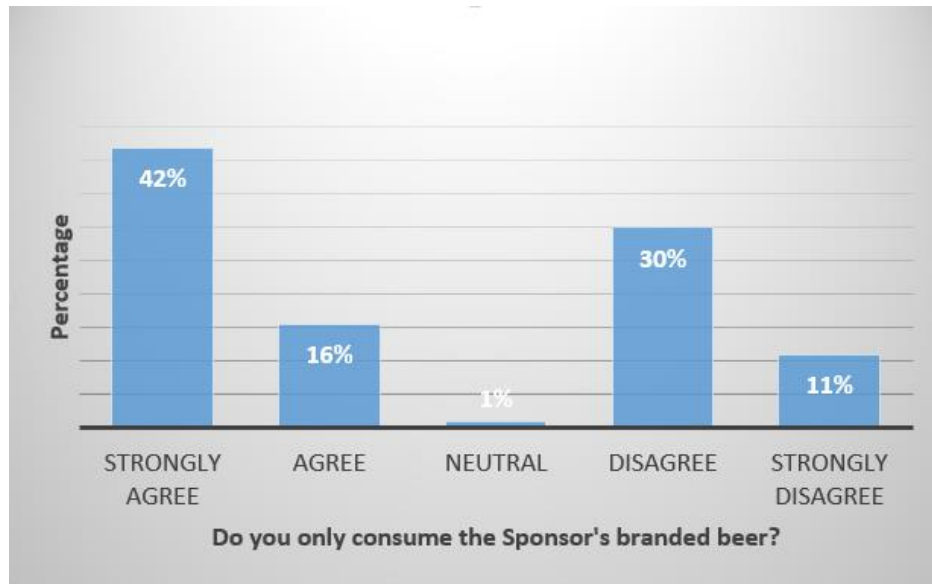


Figure 1. Consumption of the sponsor's branded beer

Most of the respondents (58%) strongly agreed and agreed that they consume the sponsor's branded beer, as shown in Figure 1. However, 41% disagreed and strongly disagreed with consuming the sponsor's beer which could be people who support football but not beer drinkers and those individuals who drink other brands. Only, 1% remained neutral.

Preference of Sponsor's branded beer due to Sponsorship of the soccer event

The respondents were asked if they prefer the sponsor's branded beer over other brands because of the soccer event sponsorship. The result is shown in Figure 2.

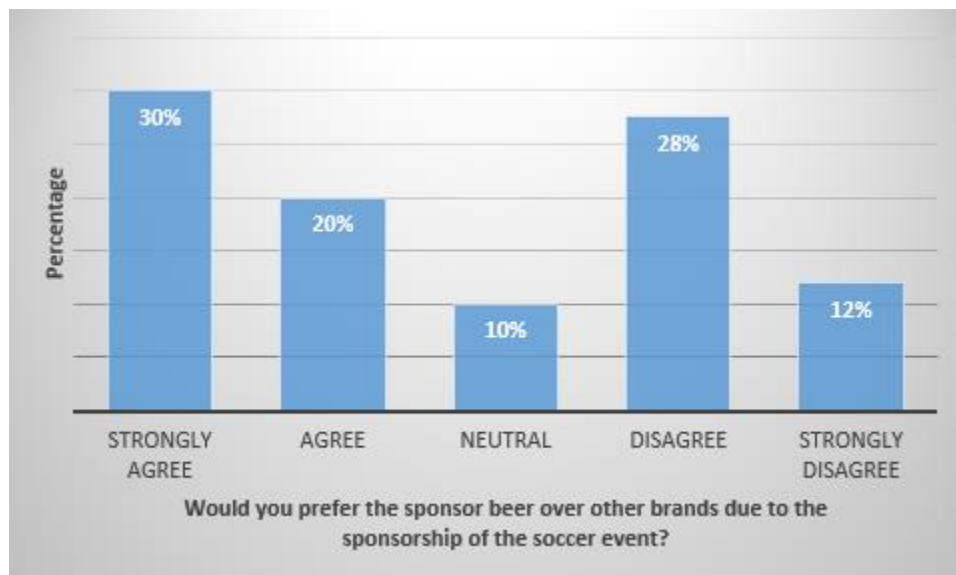


Figure 2. Preference of sponsor's branded beer due to the sponsorship

The results (Figure 2) show that (50%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed, (40%) disagreed and strongly disagreed, whilst 10% remained neutral. Therefore, half of the respondents were influenced by the sponsorship of the Cup to consume the beer.

Influence of sponsorship on brand image

The respondents were asked if the event contribute to the sponsor's brand image from their point of view. Figure 3 presents the result of the responses.

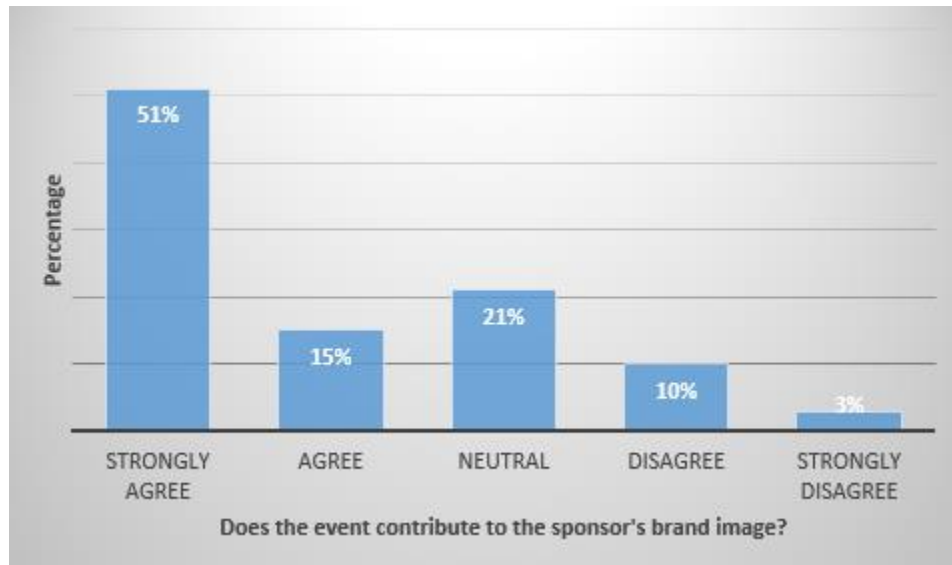


Figure 3. Event's contribution towards the sponsor's brand image.

Figure 4 shows that (66%) of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed that the event contributes to the sponsor's brand image and (13%) disagreed and strongly disagreed whilst 21% remained neutral.

DISCUSSION

Sponsorship influence on brand preference

The findings show that consumers prefer to consume the sponsor's branded beer over other beers because of the sponsorship. Thus, according to Chae et al. (2020), such a successful brand is identifiable to consumers and can perceive its relevance, quality, value, and matching to their desires and needs. When consumers are aware of its attributes, a particular bias develops towards the brand (Chang & Liu, 2016). Consumers will tend to favour one brand over others (Mathur et al., 2016). Therefore, the consumer consumes more of the sponsor product and shows brand preference as influenced by the soccer event sponsorship.

Sponsorship influence on brand image

The findings show that soccer event sponsorship contributes to the brand image. This is supported by Uphoff et al. (2013) arguments that sponsorship is a mute non-verbal medium that increases awareness and brand image by changing attitudes. As a result of a brand's image, more consumers connect with its products or services (Lee & Jin, 2019). Therefore, the popularity of an event sponsorship assists companies in their marketing efforts to promote the sale of their products (de Oliveira Duarte & Silva, 2018). In the sponsorship relationship, sports teams and sponsorship companies gain more exposure to sports supporters. The brand identity or image that a company creates reflects the distinct associations that it strives towards to develop and maintain its aspired image as a company and can thus be argued to direct the company's direction, and indirectly, define the company's purpose (Aaker, 2016). Therefore, the sponsor sought brand image benefits by using the image of a sporting event to create relevance and a positive attitude toward their product. By borrowing images from sporting events, the sponsor can enhance their brand or product's image with the market target audiences (Ntshike, 2016).

CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The study examined how a soccer event sponsorship influence brand image and brand preference. It has been shown that soccer event sponsorship influence considerably brand image and brand preference. Therefore, the sponsor's beer brand is very common amongst the two big football team supporters because of the soccer event sponsorship.

The study empirically shows how a soccer event sponsorship can enhance brand image and brand preference. This assists marketing managers in crafting an effective promotional mix that stimulates the purchase of products and services through event sponsorship.

However, the study is limited to a cross-sectional approach of a specific beer brand, two big football teams and the involvement of supporters in team selection within the South African context. There is a need for future studies to consider a longitudinal study that measures the relationship whilst observing any supervening and intervening factors to effectively understand how sponsorship influence consumers and the brand using multi-regression analysis and research instruments with more measurement items.

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