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UNDERSTANDING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING SOCCER TEAM IDENTIFICATION AND ITS IMPACTS ON TEAM SPONSORS: AN EVIDENCE FROM THAILAND PREMIER LEAGUE

Abstract:

Sponsorship expenditures have increased dramatically in the past decade worldwide. The amplified investments are associated with the effectiveness of sponsorship as a marketing communication tool. The most common form of sponsorship is in sport, which relates to sponsoring sport teams, associations events or even athletes. This study was conducted in the professional sport sponsorship setting by investigating antecedents and consequences of team identification. Even though previous studies examined a variety of factors influencing team identification and its outcomes; for example, team identification was found to influence consumers' intention to purchase the products from sponsoring companies, there is few research combines antecedents and consequences of team identification into one study. This study proposes a model to investigate the determining factors and the outcomes of sport sponsorship. Whilst soccer is reported to be the most popular sport in the world and also in Thailand, questionnaires were collected from 400 fans of professional soccer teams in Thailand. The hypotheses in the proposed model were tested using regression analysis. The results indicated that team attractiveness, similarity, and awareness significantly influenced team identification, and team identification in turn affected sponsor identification, attitudes toward the sponsor, sponsor patronage, and satisfaction with the sponsor. From a practical perspective, both sponsors and sport team marketers should have a firm understanding of when and how sponsorship works to maximize its value

Keywords:

Sport marketing, team identification, sponsorship, soccer team

JEL Classification: M31

1.   Introduction

"Some people believe football is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that," said by Bill Shankly, the legendary football manager of Liverpool Football Club. This statement shows that football was very significant to those English as it has been already one of their lifestyles or traditions. However, football is not popular only in England, but it is also popular all over the world. According to the survey of the most popular sport, football came into the first place of around 3.5 billion fans all over the world. Furthermore, football has been most popular around four regions which are Europe, Africa, Asia, and America (Ibid). In Thailand, nowadays, football is very popular as the Thailand Premier League has been booming. Thailand Premier League was founded in 1996 replacing the Kor Royal Cup at that time. Currently, Thailand Premier League consists of 18 teams competing 34 matches for a season (Soccerway, 2013). Two biggest teams in Thailand Premier League lately are Muang Thong United and Buriram United. Muang Thong United won the title three times in 2009, 2010, and 2012. On the other hands, Buriram United also won the title three times in 2008, 2011, and 2013. However, this only shows that football has been very popular, and it has created more fans, but no one knows why people become football fans and how they become loyal fans. As the football becomes more popular and the fans are bigger, there are some complexities of sociological and psychological processes which lead people to become football fans. There are three factors that affect the team identification, which are team attractiveness, team similarity, and team awareness (Kim & Kim., 2009). This research is useful for football clubs in Thailand Premier League as this research singles out the essential factors team identification so that the clubs can make a use of this study to enhance themselves in order to have more supporters. This study intends to explore the factors that significantly affect the team identification and how the team identification impacts the sponsorships of football teams in Thailand Premier League.

2.   Literature Review

2.1 Sport Marketing

Gray and McEnvoy (2005) described sport marketing in a two ways which are marketing of sport and marketing through sport. They claimed that sport marketing is the application of marketing and processes to market goods and services directly to sports participants and spectators. This could be considered as 'marketing of sport'. However, Gary and McEnvoy (2005) also mentioned about another type of sport marketing which is "marketing through sport." Gary and McEnvoy (2005, p153) mentioned that "marketing through sport; that is using sport as a promotional vehicle or sponsorship platform for companies that market consumer, and to a lesser extent, industrial products." These two types of sport marketing allowed Gary and McEnvoy (2005) to define the sport marketing as the anticipation, management, and satisfaction of consumers' wants and needs through the application of marketing principles and practices.

2.2 Sponsorship

Meenaghan (1983) defined sponsorship as the provision of assistance either financial of in kind to as activity by a commercial organization for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives. Moreover, Arun (2004) noted that the aspiration and passion of a target audience were successfully linked to specific sports by sports sponsorship. Sponsorship had an impact in creating brand awareness which would differentiate marketing platforms, assisting direct business benefits and providing significant opportunities in hospitality and networking so that sponsorship played an important role by holding a unique position in the marketing mix.

2.3 Team Attractiveness

Being a winner has some psychological effect on people's mind. Winning would increase testosterone. Thus, winning would logically make people feel better. This demonstrates that inside our mind, people need to be the winner. Therefore, this can be related to the desire of the fans which is pleased to see their favorite teams win the match according to the previous researches stated that the highest desire of a fan was

to witness his or her favorite team performed well and won so that the fan could had a pleasure on the positive feeling flowing from the glory of winning, Moreover, highly sport fans tend to relate team's success and failure to personal success and failure meaning that those fans are affected by the team performance (Hirt et al, 1992; Sutton et al, 1997).

2.4 Team Similarity

Social identity theory posits that individuals determine their special identity by categorizing themselves, categorizing others, and attaching value to different social categories (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Steele (1998) asserted that individuals tended to treat people with similar kind more favorable than people with different kind because they want to maintain consistent identity so that the positive identity was maintained by individuals. Furthermore, the similarity-attraction paradigm stated that individuals who are similar will be interpersonally attracted,

2.5 Team Awareness

Keller (1993) asserted that brand awareness, which is the capability of consumers to recall and recognize a brand from memory, is a significant factor in the consumer decision making process. Keller (1993) also mentioned that brand awareness had a positive relationship with the probability that a particular brand would be recalled by consumers in the stage of purchasing decision. Furthermore, when it comes to the decision making on purchasing, consumers are likely to consider familiar or well-established brand, (Jacoby et al, 1977; Roselius, 1971).

2.6 Team Identification

According to prior research, team identification has been defined as the level of psychological attachment felt by a sports fan towards his or her favorite team (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). However, the social identity's concept placed a fundamental part to this concept as team identification obviously demonstrated social identity (Underwood et al, 2001). Furthermore, previous research found that the sports

spectators derived a sense of identity from affiliation to become affiliated with the team (Hirt et al, 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). As group members, they categorized in-group members as fans who supported the same team, but they categorized out-group members as fans who supported other teams (Melnick, 1993). This perspective raises their sense of belonging to a team, which leads to higher team identification (Underwood et al, 2001).

2.7 Sponsor Identification

Several studies found that one of the main objectives of sponsorship association is achieving awareness from consumers (Johar et al, 2006; Madrigal, 2001; Sandler & Shani, 1993). In a context of sporting event, Stotlar and Johnson's (1989) found that the signs in the sport stadium or sport arena were identified correctly by nearly 70% of college football fans and also college basketball fans. To be specific, Stotlar and Johnson (1989) concluded that the stadium's location played a significant role in the success of brand awareness. Cuneen and Hannan (1993) studied on the recognition levels of sponsorship at an LPGA golf tournament, and they found that the advertising around the tournament grounds, which located separately, was noticed by 98% of subjects.

2.8 Sponsor Image

Keller (1993) defined brand image as the perceptions about the brand which stuck in the memory of consumer that was affected from the brand associations. In addition, several studies claimed that in order to realize an image transfer, congruence between the sponsored event and the sponsoring brand was significant (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Cornwell et al, 2005; Dean, 2002; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Dowling (1993) asserted that investing in the images was the must for many of world's successful company.

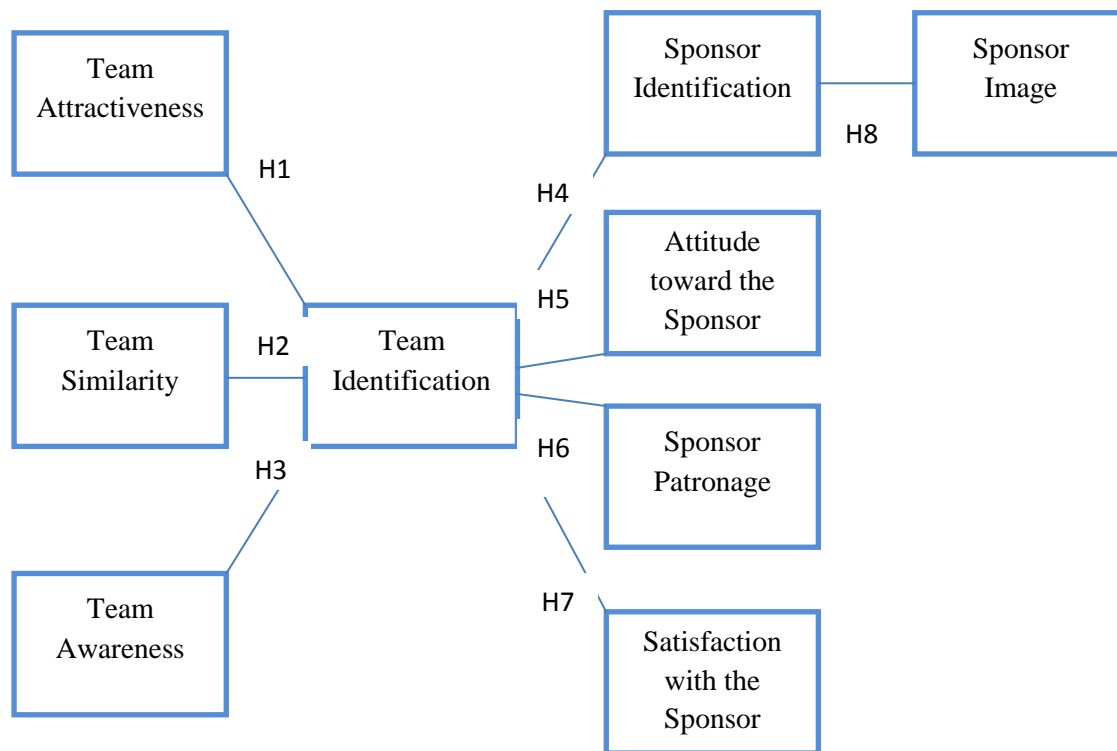2.9 Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

The relationship between team attractiveness and team identification is investigated as follows. The team performance has an impact on sport fans who has a high level of team identification as they have a tendency to take the success of the team to their own personal success and the failure of the team as their own failure, (Hirt et al, 1992; Sutton et al, 1997). Gladden & Funk (2002) demonstrated the relationship between players and team identification as there was a tendency that the statistics of players in their favorite teams were remembered by many sports consumers in order to show their positive attitudes toward their teams, which was explained in terms of identification. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 1: Team attractiveness positively affects team identification.

The previous research found that fans of the same team share and perceive both characteristics and similarity between them (Stotland et al, 1961). To confirm this statement, Kelman (1961) and Fisher (1998) also gave the support by denoting that team identification is affected by both team attractiveness and team similarity. Furthermore, the further support made by Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Dutton et al (1994) stated that one of factors affecting identification with an organization was the perception of similarity. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 2: Team similarity positively affects team identification.

Trail et al (2000) and Heere (2005) described that team identification resulted from awareness and knowledge. Furthermore, Keller (1993) mentioned that the occurrence of customer-based brand equity was when the consumer was familiar with brand and held some favorable, strong and unique brand associations in the memory. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 3: Team awareness positively affects team identification.

Meenaghan (2001) reported that sponsor awareness was highest among individuals who most involved with the activity of sponsors. Moreover, the relationship between team identification and sponsor identification can also be applied from the perception that highly involved sport fans continue watching sports events (Colleen & Kahle, 2006). In addition, this was also asserted by Pitts & Slattery (2004), who demonstrated that the awareness and identification of sponsors has been developed over a period of time. Thus, it is hypothesized that;

Hypothesis 4: Team identification positively affects sponsor identification.

Chien et al (2005) found that the brand could gain additional meaning and value through the sponsorship's association of a brand with a specific event, and this finding is consistent with the study conducted by Meenaghan (2001), that found that the best

individuals who could comprehend the meanings and capable of transferring the values to the sponsor through association were highly involved fans. Thus, the apparentness of the transferring from the role of team identification, that builds an event image, to the sponsor image will be occurred at the time when the presence of a highly identified team of the level of team identification are recognized by individuals as an individual factor or a possible event characteristic. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 5: Sponsor identification positively affects sponsor image.

Hoek et al (1993) figured out that the assumption of sponsorship developed consumers' attitudes toward the company or its product was made by managers of sponsoring firms. In addition, Gwinner and Swanson (2003) asserted that supporting something that identified fans have a faith in is significant to a sponsor because it can be perceived as an ally to those identified fans. McDonald (1991) also asserted that the interest of people in a specific event or sport would lead to the favorable feeling through that particular sponsoring company. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 6: Team identification is positively related to attitude toward sponsors.

Patronizing these brands may support an individual's own membership in the group in order to extent that sponsoring brands are perceived as in-group member, Fisher and Wakefield (1998, p53) stated that "a key aspect of identification is that individuals are motivated to establish and maintain their ties to the group through their behaviors." In contrast with Hoek et al (1997), a link between sponsorship and purchasing intention has been found by several studies (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). For example, Crimmins and Horn (1996) found that the products of the companies that supported Olympic Games would be purchased by 70% of US adult population. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 7: Team identification is positively related to patronage behaviors toward sponsors.

Sherif and Howland (1961) supported that there was a well acceptance of the notion of individuals seeking out or modifying their perspectives to be consistent with their faith or belief. Brown and Starkey (2000) also supported with their theory in the organizational identity literature stating that "the ego defense of denial is proposed to be a tactic by which an organizational information." Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed;

Hypothesis 8: Team identification is positively related to satisfaction with a sponsor.

3. Methodology

The target population will be Thailand Premier League fans who can identify that which team in Thailand Premier League they support. People who normally watch Thailand Premier League match but do not have a particular team to support are not included in the sample because they do not have the team identification. The respondents are expected to be 18 years old and above because this age range is considered to be mature enough to have their own decision making. The amount of samplings are 300 of Male fans and 100 of Female fans as male has higher proportion participating in football fans. Respondents are approached randomly at football stadiums located in Bangkok. A sample size of 400 respondents is optimal and adequate for the research. According to the table of Yamane formula, the sampling size of 400 is optimal for the population. Therefore, it was sufficient based on the statistical approach and the sample size from similar studies.

3.1 Measurement Model

All constructs were measured using existing scales drawn from literature with some adjustments to the Thailand context. The 9 constructs used were measured as follows.

Table 1 Measurement Scales

Variables	Items	Sources
Team Attractiveness	6	Fisher (1998)
Team Similarity	4	Fisher (1998)
Team Awareness	4	Yoo et al (2000), Park & Srinivasan (1994), Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991)
Team Identification	8	Fisher (1998)
Sponsor Identification	6	Mael & Ashforth (1992)
Sponsor Image	6	Javalgi et al (1994) and Pope & Voges (2000)
Attitude toward Sponsor	3	Sengupta & Fitzsimons (2000)
Sponsor Patronage	3	Sengupta & Fitzsimons (2000)
Satisfaction with Sponsor	3	Bitner & Hubbert (1994)

The present study employed 5-point likert scale to measure all the constructs. The reliability coefficients of all constructs are above 0.70 which were satisfactory according to the guidelines suggested by Nunnally (1978).

4. Results

Respondents are all in the qualifications properly as there are 300 male or 75% and 100 female or 25%. Furthermore, for the experience with the team, there are 0 respondents from "Less Than 1 Year" meaning that every respondent must have supported the team for at least one year. There are 246 respondents from "1-2 Years" which is 61.5%, 106 respondents from "2-5 Years" which is 26.5%, and 48 respondents from "More Than 5 Years" which is 12%.

4.1 Initial Analysis

Each item is primarily examined for skewness and kurtosis. Furthermore, histograms and box plots are appropriate for obtaining a holistic picture of each variable across a range of score (1-5) as the histograms and box plots are visually examined. The data is considered to be normal distribution when the results of these values are found to be less than (+/-) 2.00.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 Multiple Regression of Hypothesis 1, 2, and 3

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	t	Sig	VIF	R Square	Durbin - Watson
1	Team Attractiveness		0.241	5.529	0.000			
2	Team Similarity	Team Identification	0.221	5.085	0.000	6.85	0.674	2.061
3	Team Awareness		0.449	10.019	0.000			

Based on the result of multiple regression analysis illustrated in the Table 2, all independent variables have positive correlation to the dependent variable which is Team Identification. For the Team Attractiveness, it has the beta of 0.241, t=5.529, and P<0.05. For the Team Similarity, it has the beta of 0.221, t=5.085, and P< 0.05. Lastly, for the Team Awareness, it has the beta of 0.449, t=10.019, and P< 0.05. Therefore, Team Attractiveness, Team Similarity, and Team Awareness significantly affect the Team Identity

Multiple regression analysis is also applied in this research. According to the assumption of independent errors, in regression, the residuals shall not be correlated in term of any two variables (Field, 2005). In order to prove this assumption, the Durbin-Watson test is applicable. The value of Durbin-Watson is in the range of zero to four, and the residuals are not auto-correlated when the result is close to two (Fielding, 2005)

Furthermore, multicolinearity is also used for finding the relationship between variables. Multicolinearity is the condition when two or more variables are related highly, and the multicolinearity shall be determined by the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) in which VIF is greater than 10 is considered to have highly correlation or multicorrelation. However, the VIF in the table 4.3 is less than 10, so the multicorrelation is not occurred.

Table 3 Regression Results of Hypothesis 4

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	T	Sig
4	Team Identification	Sponsor Identification	0.782	25.029	0.000

Based on the result of bivariate regression analysis shown in Table 3, Hypothesis 4, Team Identification has significant impact on the Sponsor Identification (Beta=0.782, t=25.029, and P<0.05).

Table 4 Regression Results of Hypothesis 5

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	T	Sig
5	Sponsor Identification	Sponsor Image	0.749	22.544	0.000

Based on the result of bivariate regression analysis shown in Table 4, Hypothesis 5, Sponsor Identification has significant effect on the Sponsor Image (Beta=0.749, t=22.544, and P< 0.05).

Table 5 Regression Results of Hypothesis 6

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	t	Sig
6	Team Identification	Attitude Toward the Sponsor	0.678	18.414	0.000

Based on the result of bivariate regression analysis shown in Table 5, Hypothesis 6, Team Identification significantly affects the Attitude Toward the Sponsor (Beta=0.678, t=18.414, and P<0.05).

Table 6 Regression Results of Hypothesis 7

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	t	Sig
7	Team Identification	Sponsor Patronage	0.712	20.219	0.000

Based on the result of bivariate regression analysis shown in Table 6, Hypothesis 7, Team Identification significantly affects the Sponsor Patronage (Beta=0.712, t=20.219, and P<0.05).

Table 7 Regression Results of Hypothesis 8

H:	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Beta	t	Sig
8	Team Identification	Satisfaction with the Sponsor	0.701	19.587	0.000

Based on the result of bivariate regression analysis shown in Table 7, Hypothesis 8, Team Identification significantly affects the Satisfaction with the Sponsor (Beta=0.701, t=19.587, and P<0.05).

5. Discussion

The main objective of this research is to investigate the factors that influence team identification and to investigate effect of team identification on the sponsorship outcome on football clubs in Thailand Premier League. Based on the results in this research, it shows that Team Attractiveness, Team Similarity, and Team Awareness are factors that influence Team Identification and Team Identification also has an impact on Sponsor Identification, Attitude toward the Sponsor, Sponsor Patronage, and Satisfaction with the Sponsor. Meanwhile, the Sponsor Identification also has an influence on Sponsor Image.

For the previous research, Kim & Kim (2009) found that team attractiveness, team similarity, and team awareness were found to positively affect team identification, and this team identification was found to positively affect sponsor identification, which in turn was found to positively affect sponsor image. Nevertheless, Fisher (1998) and Kelman (1998) also found the positive effect of team attractiveness and team similarity on team identification. Trail et al (2000) and Heere (2005) later found the positive effect of team awareness on team identification. Meanwhile, Meenaghan (2001) mentioned that a sport event's sponsor was mostly aware by highly involved fans. Groh & Reisinger

(2005) explained that the highly involve fans were significant for the transfer of image from the event to the sponsor. Gwinner (1997) proposed that event type, event characteristics and individual factors affect event image, and that sponsorship activities bring about a transfer of the event image to the sponsors' brand image. Another previous research found that sponsor recognition, attitude toward sponsor, sponsor patronage, and satisfaction with sponsors to all be higher for more highly identified fans,(Gwinner. & Swanson, 2003). Gwinner & Swanson (2003) also mentioned that highly identified fans might be focused by the sponsoring firms for their greater sponsor recognition and higher level of patronage. Sutton et al (1997) also stated that "highly identified fans may have greater price tolerance and be less sensitive to team performance.

According to the statistically-oriented projection of the significance of these findings from this study, the football clubs' owners in Thailand Premier League will be aware of the importance of team attractiveness, team similarity, and team awareness that they significantly influence the team identification. If the football clubs' owners need to have more fans supporting their clubs, they need to focus on those three factors which are team attractiveness, team similarity, and team awareness as they are major factors that influence team identification, so those factors shall be taken in to their consideration. Based on the results, they are able to know what the factors behind team identification are so that they might put more efforts on increasing team attractiveness, team similarity, and team awareness. They might decide to buy some big name players and provide good result in many matches in order to increase their team attractiveness. Furthermore, engaging in more activities such as setting up the sport events may also help to increase their team awareness.

Although this research mentioned that male has participated in team identification more than female, but Ross et al (2007) stated that sponsors were recognized by female more than were recognized by male. They explained more in details that male might focus more on the football game than female so that male might miss any particular signage or contests associated with teams' sponsors. Therefore, conducting the study

for male samples and female samples separately might be a possibility for a future research.

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