

Rivalries and Sponsor Affiliation: Examining the Effects of Social Identity and Argument Strength on Responses to Sponsorship-related Advertising Messages

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**Abstract**

This study examines how social identities and message characteristics influence the processing of sponsorship associations and persuasive messages. Using an experimental approach we found that sponsor affiliation with a rival team results in a negative response by highly identified fans, even when message characteristics include strong, favorable arguments. Conversely, less identified fans formed evaluations based on message characteristics, such that strong arguments were evaluated more favorably than weak arguments, independent of sponsorship affiliation. Overall, the study confirmed that strong social identities influence information processing in ways that are favorable for in-group associations and unfavorable for out-group associations. The implications for both consumers and marketing communications practitioners are discussed.

**Keywords:** advertising, sponsorship, argument strength, social identity, rivalry

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*"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."* Anais Nin

While sponsorship affiliations are not limited to just sports, there are substantially more partnerships between companies and sport-related properties than other property types. Worldwide sponsorship spending totaled \$51.1 billion in 2012 (IEG Sponsorship Report 2013) with sports sponsorship revenue accounting for \$39.17 billion or 77% (Statista 2013). Similarly, North American sponsorship spending on sport-related properties grew by 5.1% to \$13.01 billion in 2012, faster than any other major property sectors (i.e., entertainment, causes, arts, festivals, and associations), corresponding to 69% of total sponsorship expenditures (IEG Sponsorship Report 2013).

The motivation for a company pursuing such a sponsorship affiliation comes from the implication that there are certain benefits to be reaped by the company. Therefore, marketers use such partnerships as part of their marketing communications strategy in order to generate positive consumer response and build their customer base (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Gwinner and Swanson 2003, Smith, Graetz, and Westerbeek 2008). Aligning with a sports team capitalizes on the concept of affect transfer, where positive feelings toward a sports team are expected to transfer to companies associated with that team, leading to more favorable attitudes and purchase intentions (Pracejus 2004).

Sports provide an especially attractive situation for companies seeking to capitalize on affect transfer because fans are usually very loyal to and passionate about their favorite teams (Wann and Branscombe 1993). However, the competitive nature of sports creates an environment where fans can also develop similarly powerful negative sentiments targeted toward rival teams (Bergkvist 2012; Davies, Veloutsou, and Costa 2006; Wann and Dolan 1994a). For example, although the New York Yankees and the Oakland Raiders have

substantial fan bases in baseball and football, respectively, they are disliked by scores of fans as well (Barry 2001). Prior to the 2001 baseball American League Championship Series (ALCS) between the New York Yankees and the Seattle Mariners, ESPN conducted a poll asking fans “which statement best describes your rooting interest in ALCS?” The statement that received the highest percentage of votes (32.5 percent) was “hate the Yankees.” Therefore, of the 31,544 people who voted, almost one third of them had a strong dislike for the Yankees and were rooting against them. Similarly, Manchester United, one of the most recognized football teams worldwide, ranks as one of the top ten most hated brands in the United Kingdom (Simms 2007).

While prior research has considered favorable sponsorship transfer effects (e.g., Gwinner and Eaton 1999; Madrigal 2000), only recently has attention shifted to how negative feelings toward a rival generate negative responses toward rival-affiliated sponsors (Bergkvist 2012; Dalakas and Levin 2005; Davies, Veloutsou, and Costa 2006). However, responses to rival affiliations are an important consideration, given that many companies have multiple team and sport affiliations. For example, MasterCard has a sponsorship alliance with both the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox, two teams that have a well-known, longstanding, and passionate rivalry.

Although recent research has provided evidence of the negative effects of rival sponsorship affiliations (Bergkvist 2012), the current research builds and expands on this research by not only considering sponsor affiliation but also by explicitly assessing fan identification and examining the effect of message characteristics. In particular, the consideration of message characteristics in the context of sponsor affiliation and fan identification addresses a gap that has not been examined by previous research. Thus, our study makes a contribution with an experiment that examines how fan identification moderates the effects of sponsor affiliation and argument strength on fan attitudes and

intentions. We identify both positive and negative transfer effects related to sponsor affiliation, as well as consider how fan identification influences the effectiveness of sponsorship affiliation and message characteristics.

## **Theoretical Background**

### ***Social identity and sponsor affiliation***

Social identity theory provides a useful framework for understanding sports fans' affiliations with sports teams and the consequences of such affiliations (see Madrigal 2004 for a detailed review). The basic premise of social identity theory is that part of a person's definition or self-identity involves his or her affiliation to social groups (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg and Abrams 1988). As individuals identify closely with one group, they increasingly view and categorize others on an in-group or out-group basis. Such tendencies are especially strong for rival or competing groups where, due to the antagonistic relationship between the groups, the distinction between in-group and out-group or "us versus them" is particularly clear. Not surprisingly, individuals who identify strongly with one group actively avoid associating with rival groups, and those groups become dissociative groups (White and Dahl 2006, 2007). Given the competitive nature of sports, fans can easily identify with associative groups (favorite teams) and "disidentify" from dissociative groups (rival teams).

Sponsorship research has identified several positive effects for sponsoring companies among fans of the sponsored team. These effects are especially evident among highly identified fans who tend to recognize and notice their team's sponsors more easily, have higher levels of awareness for the sponsors, perceive a stronger fit between the sponsor and the team, have more favorable attitudes toward the sponsors, are more likely to purchase the sponsors' products, and report higher satisfaction with the sponsors (Coppetti et al. 2009; Dalakas and Levin 2005; Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Madrigal 2000, 2001; Smith, Graetz,

and Westerbeek 2008). These tendencies have been confirmed in studies involving different sports such as American college football (Gwinner and Swanson 2003), English Premier League football (Bennett 1999), and NASCAR auto racing (Dalakas and Levin 2005).

The affect transfer mechanism that can explain the positive responses from fans to sponsors of their favorite teams is based on the basic principle of balance theory (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Dalakas and Levin 2005; Heider 1958). Balance theory would suggest that, because of their desire for balanced relationships, fans will transfer their strong liking for their favorite team to any units associated with the team, like players, other fans, and persuasive messages, including advertising and sponsorship. However, in the case of dissociative groups, like rival teams, it is expected that fans would similarly transfer their negative feelings for the rival team to any units associated with it, including sponsor messages.

The concept of rivalry is inherent in sports and, in many respects, almost essential for fans' enjoyment of sports. According to Major League Baseball executive Sandy Alderson "fans are drawn to love-hate relationships in sports; it fuels the passion" (Gammons 2012). In fact, the important role that rivalries play and the hatred they evoke in sports is often emphasized in the media (e.g., Blythe 2007; Gibbs 2010). However, research on the concept of rivalry and its possible negative effects is lacking. Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw (2010) define rivalry as relational competition where groups or individuals place an increased importance on outcomes regardless of the objective characteristics of the situation. The authors view rivalry as a subjective psychological construct based on perceived competitive relationships. Rivalries are formed over time and are more likely to occur with groups or individuals that have a history of competition and are similar in location and characteristics (Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw, 2010). Not surprisingly, rivals are disliked and viewed very

unfavorably by their opponents (Bergkvist 2012). As such, it is important to consider the influence of these negative groups.

Although limited, research addressing the negative effects of rivalry offers consistent findings and confirms the existence of negative transfer effects. In a study of NASCAR racing fans, Dalakas and Levin (2005) found that fans of one driver reported negative attitudes toward companies sponsoring disliked rival drivers. Similarly, Bergkvist (2012) reported an overall negative transfer effect from a rival team to the sponsoring brand in the context of football in Sweden. Bergkvist (2012) examined differences in perceptions of two beer brands affiliated with either a home or a rival team. Findings indicated that attitudes toward the rival-affiliated brand were more favorable for the control group (i.e., non-fans) compared to a loyal fan group. However, Dalakas and Levin (2005) and Bergkvist (2012) did not consider message characteristics or account for varying levels of fan identification. Thus, it is important to consider whether these negative effects apply to low to moderately identified fans or just highly identified fans.

Davies, Veloutsou, and Costa (2006) examined fans' responses to a brand that sponsored two rival football teams in Scotland. Interestingly, while there were benefits for the sponsoring brand in general, those most likely to reject the joint sponsorship were highly involved fans of each team, who, consistent with the premise of associative and dissociative groups, did not appreciate an association with their rival. More recently, Dalakas and Melancon (2012) found that highly identified fans experience Schadenfreude (pleasure at the misfortune of others) at the expense of their rivals, including feelings of joy if a company that sponsors a team they hate goes out of business. Although accounting for either involvement (Davies et al. 2006) or identification (Dalakas and Melancon 2012), their research did not explicitly assess negative transfer effects. We extend previous research on affect transfer and

social identity by accounting for both favored and rival team affiliations, as well as fan identification.

Consistent with previous research, we expect a main effect of sponsorship affiliation, such that ads including a reference to the rival team compared to the favored team will result in less favorable attitudes and intentions. In addition, it is expected that fan identification will moderate this main effect of sponsor affiliation. More specifically, we expect that sponsorship affiliation will only matter for highly identified fans.

H1: Ads featuring a sponsorship affiliation with a rival team (vs. favored team) will result in a less favorable (a) attitude toward the ad and (b) purchase intention.

H2: Fan identification will moderate the effect of sponsor affiliation on attitudes and intentions such that higher levels of fan identification with a rival team (vs. favored team) will result in a less favorable (a) attitude toward the ad and (b) purchase intention. No such effect is expected for those with lower levels of fan identification.

### *Social identity and information processing*

Social identities exercise substantial influence on an individual's processing and interpretation of information because of their significance to an individual's self-identity (Madrigal and Dalakas 2008). Such influences usually occur in the form of biased judgments that favor the in-group and demean the out-group in an effort to present the associative social identity in a positive light and the dissociative social identity negatively. Specifically, tendencies for an in-group bias have been found with fans perceiving opposing players as playing violently and dirty (Hastorf and Cantril 1954), fans attributing a favorite team's victories to internal causes but attributing losses to external causes (Wann and Dolan 1994b), fans evaluating fellow fans of their own team favorably but evaluating opposing fans unfavorably (Wann and Dolan 1994a), or fans overestimating the number of fellow supporters purchasing products affiliated with the team sponsor (Bennett 1999).

While the fact that highly identified fans show this kind of favoritism is not surprising, it is worth noting that such biased judgments take place even when objective information suggests they may be erroneous (Madrigal and Dalakas 2008). For example, when Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson tested positive for steroids after the 1988 Olympics, Canadian fans had difficulty accepting his guilt, despite evidence to the contrary (Tanner, Sev'er, and Ungar 1989). Similarly, after watching a very physical college football game, fans were less likely to attribute "rough and dirty" play to their own team and more likely to blame the rival team (Hastorf and Cantril 1954). In this case, fans were presented with the same objective information; however the version of events reported by fans from each school was very different. Consequently, we examine how fans will perceive sponsors of their favored team or their rival team, when also faced with arguments about the quality of the sponsors' products. Do highly identified fans place such a strong emphasis on team affiliation that they would be willing to prefer seemingly lesser products because they are affiliated with their favored team or, similarly, avoid seemingly better products because they are affiliated with a rival team?

Argument strength about product quality can make a difference in influencing attitudes. In general, consumers respond more favorably to strong arguments compared to weak arguments (Petty, Harkins, and Williams 1980). However, various factors (e.g., involvement, processing motivation) have been found to impact the effectiveness of arguments used in advertising such that persuasiveness is, to a certain degree, dependent on the circumstances under which the ad is viewed (Coulter and Punj 2004; Samuelsen and Olsen 2010). We expect that sensitivity to the quality of information presented in persuasive messages will be different under varying degrees of identification.

Given the literature on social identity and the prejudiced processing exhibited by highly identified fans, we expect that highly identified fans will be indifferent to argument

strength but heavily influenced by sponsorship affiliation (favored team vs. rival team), whereas fans with lower levels of identification will be more persuaded by message characteristics than sponsorship affiliation. More specifically, highly identified fans will dislike an ad including an association with a rival, independent of favorable arguments (even when they are strong). However, for fans with lower levels of identification with the team, the arguments are more important in how they respond to the ad rather than the ad's affiliation with their team or a rival team. Therefore, we hypothesize that fan identification will moderate the effectiveness of argument strength and sponsor affiliation:

- H3: For less identified fans, there will be a main effect of argument strength such that a weak argument will result in a less favorable (a) attitude toward the ad and (b) purchase intention compared to a strong argument, independent of sponsor affiliation.
- H4: For highly identified fans, there will be a main effect of sponsor affiliation such that a rival team affiliation will result in a less favorable (a) attitude toward the ad and (b) purchase intention compared to a favored team affiliation, independent of argument strength.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and procedure***

A 2 (argument strength: strong vs. weak)  $\times$  2 (affiliation: favored vs. rival) between-subjects design was used to test the hypothesized effects. Fan identification was a measured variable. Participants were undergraduate students and received partial course credit for their participation. The university participates in Division I athletics as a member of one of the major sports conferences of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The NCAA is an appropriate context for studying our research questions as collegiate sports have loyal fan bases (Toma 2003) and sponsorship spending on college sports exceeds \$500 million (IEG Sponsorship Report 2007). Moreover, the university examined in our research has had a long and intense sports rivalry with another university in the state that plays in the same conference; this created an appropriate context for our design because of the

significance of having both a favored team and a rival team.

The sample consisted of 170 participants, 57.6% male and 42.4% female, with an age range of 19 to 47 ( $M = 22.65$ ). First, participants were given instructions regarding the purpose and nature of the research. They were informed that they would be taking part in two separate and unrelated surveys. Information regarding the first study indicated that participants would be assessing the appearance and effectiveness of a prototype for a potential ad. As such, respondents were instructed to focus on the overall ad presentation (in terms of design, appearance, and message). The second part included a survey about their interest in sports and sports teams. Participants were randomly presented with an experimental packet. Each packet contained written instructions, a full-page print advertisement including sponsor affiliation and persuasive arguments, and both sections of the survey. Participants then viewed the stimulus advertisement and completed the advertising effectiveness measures followed by the fan identification items.

### *Stimuli*

The advertising stimuli included the same generic color image and placement of ad copy (see Appendix). Ads were varied on ad copy content and the logo for the manipulated team. Each manipulation is discussed below.

*Argument Strength.* Consistent with previous research (e.g., Coulter and Punj 2004; Petty, Harkins, and Williams 1980), argument strength was manipulated with the persuasiveness of the arguments presented in support of the product. Participants in the strong argument version read statements that were based on persuasive evidence (i.e., independent, expert reviews): “Recommended by *Consumer Reports*” and “Customer Satisfaction Award by *J.D. Power and Associates*.” Prior to designing the stimuli, informal interviews with undergraduate students were conducted to identify sources that they consider as independent,

expert reviews; Consumer Reports and J.D. Power and Associates were most frequently mentioned as such. The weak version of the message included positive but vague statements that were based on quotations and opinions: “The answer to your problems” and “Simply great!” The statements originated from examples of language in ad copy of ads in sports publications.

*Affiliation.* Included in the ad copy was a statement about team affiliation. Two affiliations were manipulated with the following statement: Proud sponsor of the *Home* athletic team (vs. *Rival* athletic team) along with the logo of the respective team. The two teams meet the rivalry characteristics identified by Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw (2010): they are located in close proximity to each other (i.e., same state), have similar characteristics (e.g., large public university competing in same NCAA Division I conference), and have a history of competition (i.e., over 100 years).

### ***Measures***

*Fan Identification.* Fan identification was assessed through the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (Wann and Branscombe 1993) by asking respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale how strongly they disagree (1) or agree (7) with the following six statements: I see myself as a big *insert sports team* fan; other people see me as a big *insert sports team* fan; I wear clothes with the *insert sports team* colors and logo at least once a week; I follow the *insert sports team* with great interest during the season; I dislike the rivals of the *insert sports team*; it is very important to me that the *insert sports team* win. Consistent with previous studies, Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was high at .93 ( $M = 4.95$ ).

A median split was conducted on fan identification to be used in subsequent analyses ( $Md = 5.33$ ). This resulted in a highly identified group ( $M = 6.36$ ,  $Md = 6.42$ ) and a less

identified group ( $M = 3.69$ ,  $Md = 4.00$ ). The mean difference between the two groups was significantly different ( $t(168) = -17.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Attitude toward the ad ( $A_{ad}$ ).* Three 7-point semantic differential scales measured attitude toward each ad: very bad/very good; very unfavorable/very favorable; very negative/very positive ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 4.39$ ).

*Purchase Intent.* Purchase intent is defined as interest in purchasing based on information and imagery in the stimulus ad. Likelihood of purchase was measured by asking respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale how strongly they disagree (1) or agree (7) with the following three statements: the brand seems worth buying, I'd be likely to consider buying this brand, and I would be likely to purchase this brand ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.56$ ).

*Manipulation Check.* A manipulation check was included to assess respondents' perceptions of argument strength. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which the ad was credible, believable, and reliable, each measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Cronbach's alpha was .94 ( $M = 3.94$ ).

## **Results**

### ***Manipulation Check***

The argument strength manipulation was supported. Perceptions of trustworthiness were significantly greater for the strong argument statements ( $M = 4.37$ ) compared to the weak argument statements ( $M = 3.52$ ;  $t(168) = -4.01$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The effectiveness of the argument strength manipulation was also supported for both high ( $M_{\text{strong}} = 4.65$  vs.  $M_{\text{weak}} = 3.59$ ;  $t(78) = -3.29$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and low ( $M_{\text{strong}} = 4.11$  vs.  $M_{\text{weak}} = 3.45$ ;  $t(88) = -2.41$ ,  $p < .02$ ) identification fans.

### ***Test of Hypotheses***

*Test of H1.* It was expected that rival team sponsorship affiliations would result in less favorable attitudes and purchase intentions than favored team sponsorship affiliations. In support of the first hypothesis, evaluations were significantly less favorable for a rival team sponsorship affiliation ( $M_{\text{Ad}} = 3.96$ ,  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 3.18$ ) compared to a favored team sponsorship affiliation ( $M_{\text{Ad}} = 4.81$ ;  $t(168) = -3.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 3.92$ ;  $t(168) = -3.67$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Test of H2.* The second hypothesis posited that identification would moderate the effect of sponsor affiliation on attitudes and intentions. In order to test the second hypothesis we followed the procedure outlined in Aiken and West (1991) for testing interactions between categorical and continuous variables. Sponsor affiliation was entered as a dummy-coded categorical predictor, fan identification was entered as a continuous mean-centered predictor, and the interaction term was a product of mean-centered fan identification and categorical sponsor affiliation. The dependent variables were attitude toward the ad and purchase intent.

Consistent with the second hypothesis, the interaction of fan identification and sponsor affiliation was significant for both attitude toward the ad ( $\beta = .55$ ,  $t = 6.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and purchase intent ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $t = 5.70$ ,  $p < .01$ ) (also see Table 1). To interpret the significant interaction, we tested the significance of the simple slopes for the regression of sponsorship affiliation (predictor) on ad responses (dependent variables:  $A_{\text{ad}}$ , purchase intent) one standard deviation above and below the mean of fan identification (moderator). The procedure tests if the simple slope of the regression of sponsorship affiliation on advertising response ( $A_{\text{ad}}$ , purchase intent) for fan identification (high vs. low) is significantly different from zero.

As expected, highly identified fans had significantly less favorable attitudes and purchase intentions when exposed to an ad featuring a rival team relative to an ad featuring the favored team (see Table 2 and Figure 1). However, with less identified fans there was no

difference in their attitudes and purchase intentions between an ad featuring a rival or favored team. These results support the second hypothesis.

Place Table 1, Table 2, and Figure 1 about here

*Test of H3 & H4.* The final hypotheses examined how fan identification influenced the effectiveness of argument strength and sponsor affiliation. In order to enhance ease of presentation for the third and fourth hypotheses, a median split was used with fan identification (see Table 3 and Figure 2). As expected, for low identification fans, argument strength was effective in differentiating attitudes and intentions. Attitude toward the ad and purchase intent were significantly higher with a strong argument ( $M_{\text{Aad}} = 4.81$ ,  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 3.84$ ) compared to a weak argument ( $M_{\text{Aad}} = 3.93$ ,  $F_{\text{Aad}}(1, 86) = 12.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 3.13$ ,  $F_{\text{Pur-Int}}(1, 86) = 7.11$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The main effect of sponsor affiliation and the interaction of argument strength and sponsor affiliation were not significant (all  $ps > .05$ ).

On the other hand, for highly identified fans, it was sponsor affiliation that was significant in differentiating attitudes and intentions. As expected, attitude toward the ad and purchase intent were significantly higher when affiliated with the favored team ( $M_{\text{Aad}} = 5.47$ ,  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 4.54$ ) compared to the rival team ( $M_{\text{Aad}} = 3.31$ ,  $F_{\text{Aad}}(1, 76) = 57.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $M_{\text{Pur-Int}} = 2.70$ ,  $F_{\text{Pur-Int}}(1, 76) = 50.09$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The main effect of argument strength and the interaction of argument strength and sponsor affiliation were not significant (all  $ps > .05$ ). Consequently, hypotheses three and four were supported.

Place Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

## Discussion

In general, sponsorship helps companies improve their image and results in positive outcomes for sponsors (e.g., Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Gwinner and Eaton 1999). However, our research indicates that sponsorship of a rival team results in a negative

response toward the ad by highly identified fans, even when message characteristics indicate this should not be the case. On the other hand, less identified fans evaluated ads more objectively, based on message characteristics, such that strong arguments were evaluated more favorably than weak arguments, independent of sponsorship affiliation. Overall, our research confirmed that strong social identities influence how consumers process information in ways that are favorable for in-group associations and unfavorable for out-group associations.

Consistent with previous research (e.g., Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Madrigal 2000), linkages with associative reference groups resulted in positive evaluations and an increased likelihood of purchase. Our results also support previous research on negative transfer effects (e.g., Bergkvist 2012; Dalakas and Levin 2005). Ads affiliated with dissociative reference groups are evaluated negatively and have a decreased likelihood of purchase. Although recent research has considered, to a certain extent, the negative effects of affiliation, it has not considered the effect of fan identification or argument strength. Thus, we also extend previous research by assessing fan identification and manipulating argument strength. Our results indicate that high levels of fan identification with the favored team enhance the effect of sponsor affiliation, resulting in both positive (i.e., favored team) and negative transfer effects (i.e., rival team). Whereas message characteristics were more effective in persuading fans with lower levels of identification; strong arguments were found to be more effective than weak arguments.

Our findings provide additional insight into the way social identities impact the processing of information in advertising messages. Generally, consumers are able to recognize and respond accordingly to the quality of arguments presented in advertising (Petty, Harkins, and Williams 1980). Interestingly, in the manipulation check for argument strength highly identified fans were able to recognize the difference between strong and weak

arguments in that stronger arguments made a more compelling case regarding the credibility of the message. Nonetheless, highly identified fans did not appear to rely on these arguments when it came to their attitudes and intentions toward the advertisement. When the ad was paired with an associative (favored) or dissociative (rival) group, highly identified fans used that association as the primary cue for forming attitudes and intentions. Highly identified fans seemed to be, in effect, blinded by their affiliation with the favored team (and resulting dislike for the rival). The findings also supported the tendency that fans with lower levels of identification were able to clearly recognize and react to the quality of information presented in an ad. To our knowledge previous research has not examined the combination of fan identification, argument strength, and both favored and rival team affiliation. Thus, the findings provide new insight regarding effects of fan identification on sponsorship messages.

Our findings have important implications for both consumers and marketing communications practitioners. It is especially interesting to see such tendencies in the context of potential purchases for a consumer and therefore, at some level, some notion of personal risk. A highly identified fan appears to be willing to buy a seemingly lesser product or avoid a seemingly better product simply based on the affiliation with a favored or rival team. Therefore, it is likely that in the mind of such an identified fan, the “lesser” product still appears attractive because of the connection to a team the fan loves, the same way that a “better” product loses its appeal due to a connection to a rival. An example supporting this tendency can be found in the 2012 NCAA basketball tournament in the United States. A UPS commercial that ran during telecasts of the tournament, highlighted the company’s focus on logistical details in order to get great results. In doing so, the company used highlights from a classic moment in college basketball involving a victory by Duke University over the University of Kentucky. While the commercial drove the point across and indeed displayed the company’s strengths, many fans of Kentucky were upset by the ad and turned actively

against UPS for showcasing the victory of one of their hated rivals against their beloved team (Gerth 2012).

The fact that our findings indicate that high and low identification fans process information about sponsors differently has important marketing communications implications. It is important for sponsoring companies to keep that in mind when designing messages that incorporate their sponsorship affiliation with different sports teams. For messages that will appear in outlets where highly identified fans will see them, highlighting an affiliation with their team would be wise, whereas any reference to sponsorship of a rival may be detrimental. On the other hand, messages that appear in outlets targeted to a more general audience should focus instead on product benefits rather than sports sponsorship affiliations. While this may sound challenging, there are relatively simple ways to identify outlets that are primarily or even exclusively targeting highly identified fans.

Research has demonstrated that highly identified fans are more likely to attend games in person or follow their favorite team through the media and are also more likely to buy team-related licensed merchandise (Bristow and Sebastian 2001; Fisher and Wakefield 1998). Therefore, messages appearing on the team website, in the team store, at the facility of the home team, in the game program, or during radio and television broadcasts of the game, especially by local media, are quite able to target the highly identified fans and should include primarily the affiliation with the team as a key part of the message. Along those lines, national companies can tailor their message to regional markets in such a way that an affiliation with a sports team is prominent when advertising in that team's market but underplayed or even omitted altogether when running the ads in other markets, especially those representing rival teams. A campaign by Avis showcases the company's strong ties with the New York Yankees as their "official rental car" with the telling tagline "Not just

corporate sponsors. Fans.” Very wisely, those spots only ran in New York and not elsewhere where fans’ feelings toward the Yankees are less positive.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

It is important to recognize the limitations associated with this research. Although the current research considered the unique combination of fan identification, argument strength, and sponsor affiliation, the stimuli did not include a brand. We did not want pre-existing attitudes towards known brands to influence responses (Keller 1993). Thus, not including a specific brand was important from an internal validity standpoint to facilitate focus on the effect of our variables of interest; however, it does come at the expense of external validity. However, the cover story given to participants was believable and consistent with such stimuli. Nonetheless, inclusion of a brand would have made the stimuli more realistic and increased external validity. Therefore, the inclusion of additional sponsorship variables (e.g., brand, fit, number of sponsors, sponsor activities) and subsequent responses (e.g., attitude toward the brand, actual purchase) in research on dissociative reference groups would advance our understanding of the influence of rival team sponsor affiliations.

Although assessing fan identification with the favored team was an extension of previous research, we did not account for the level of dislike toward the rival team or consider responses to a less-hated opponent. As mentioned in the theoretical background, rivals are unique and different from regular opponents (Kilduff, Elfenbein, and Staw 2010). It is therefore important to recognize other possibilities regarding our findings. Research on intergroup conflict and intragroup processes indicates that high levels of intergroup conflict and competition can help reaffirm or heighten identification, cohesion, and attachment to the in-group (Dion 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1979). This is consistent with the more recent findings of Luellen and Wann (2010), who found that identification with the home team

increases when the rival team is made salient. Thus, it is possible that identity with the favored team was heightened as a result of the rival group. Or alternately, effects could be the result of hatred toward the rival team instead of identification with the favored team.

However, we did not assess feelings for the rival team. As such, our findings should be considered in light of these additional possibilities and future research should include an assessment of feelings toward the rival team or collect responses to both a rival and a more neutral opposing team.

Also, a print advertisement was used to manipulate and assess affiliation. However, affiliations and persuasive arguments can be communicated to consumers through a variety of methods (e.g., TV, radio, onsite, online, social media). Future research should also consider messages communicated through other types of media. Lastly, this study examined social identities in the context of sports; it would be interesting for future research to include other contexts with strong social identities (e.g., politics or religion) where affiliations with brands may be established.

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Table 1. H2: Interaction of Fan Identification and Sponsor Affiliation on Attitudes and Intentions

<i>Dependent Variable</i> Predictors	Standardized $\beta$	<i>t</i> -value
<i>H2a: Aad</i>		
Fan Identification	-.38	-4.26, $p < .01$
Sponsor Affiliation	.29	4.32, $p < .01$
Fan ID X Sponsor Affiliation	.55	6.15, $p < .01$
<i>H2b: Purchase Intent</i>		
Fan Identification	-.30	-3.34, $p < .01$
Sponsor Affiliation	.27	3.92, $p < .01$
Fan ID X Sponsor Affiliation	.52	5.70, $p < .01$

Table 2. H2: Simple slope analysis of attitudes and intentions on sponsor affiliation (predictor) within each level of fan identification (moderator)

	Moderator: Fan Identification	
	High ID	Low ID
	Simple Slope <i>t</i> -value	Simple Slope <i>t</i> -value
<i>H2a</i> : Predictor: Sponsor Affiliation DV: Aad	1.56 $t = 5.78, p < .01$	0.11 $t = 0.42, p = .68$
<i>H2b</i> : Predictor: Sponsor Affiliation DV: Purchase Intent	1.37 $t = 6.31, p < .01$	0.09 $t = 0.40, p = .69$

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for H3 and H4

	Low Identification (H3)						High Identification (H4)					
	Weak Argument			Strong Argument			Home Affiliation			Rival Affiliation		
	Rival n = 20	Home n = 25	<b>Weak Overall</b>	Rival n = 25	Home n = 20	<b>Strong Overall</b>	Weak n = 20	Strong n = 21	<b>Home Overall</b>	Weak n = 21	Strong n = 18	<b>Rival Overall</b>
Aad	4.15 (1.75)	3.75 (0.83)	<b>3.93 (1.32)</b>	4.84 (1.07)	4.77 (0.87)	<b>4.81 (0.97)</b>	5.18 (1.37)	5.75 (1.06)	<b>5.47 (1.24)</b>	3.08 (0.80)	3.57 (1.70)	<b>3.31 (1.30)</b>
Purchase Intent	3.22 (1.66)	3.05 (0.96)	<b>3.13 (0.30)</b>	3.91 (1.26)	3.75 (0.94)	<b>3.84 (1.12)</b>	4.30 (1.33)	4.76 (1.03)	<b>4.54 (1.19)</b>	2.68 (1.01)	2.72 (1.23)	<b>2.71 (1.11)</b>

Figure 1. Test of H2: Interaction of fan identification and sponsor affiliation on attitudes and intentions

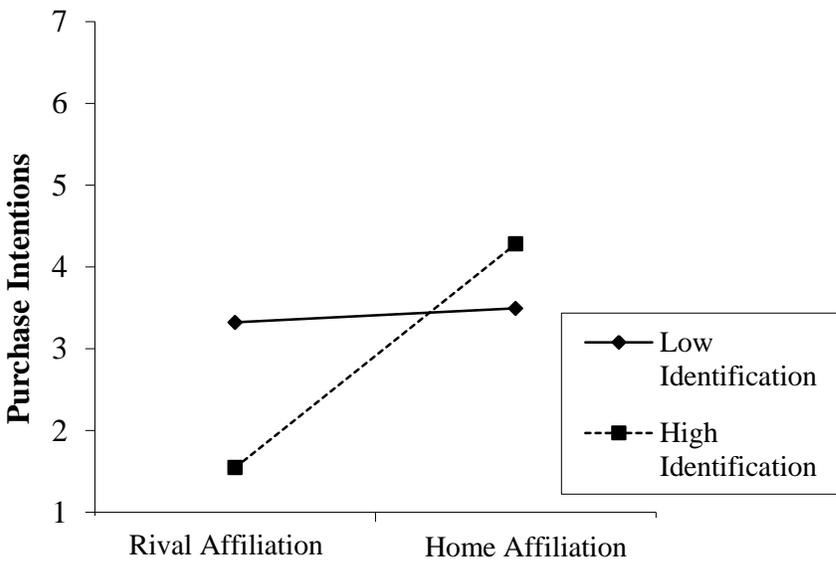
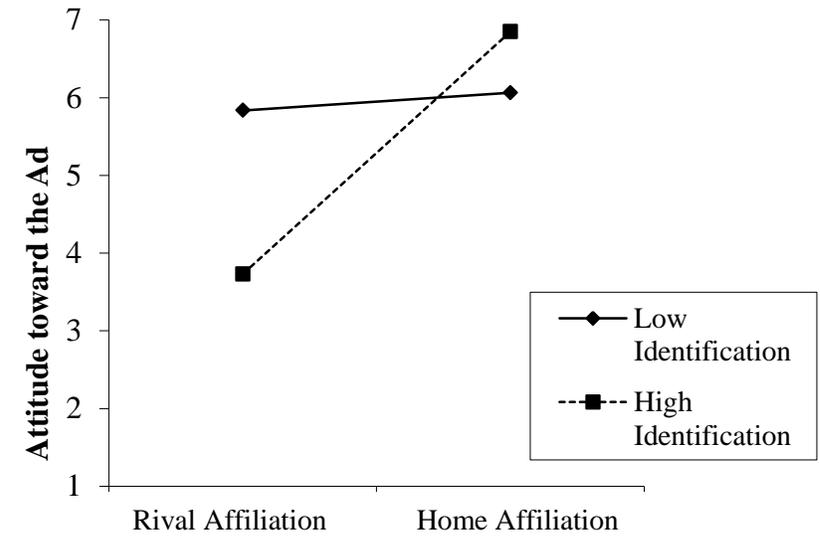
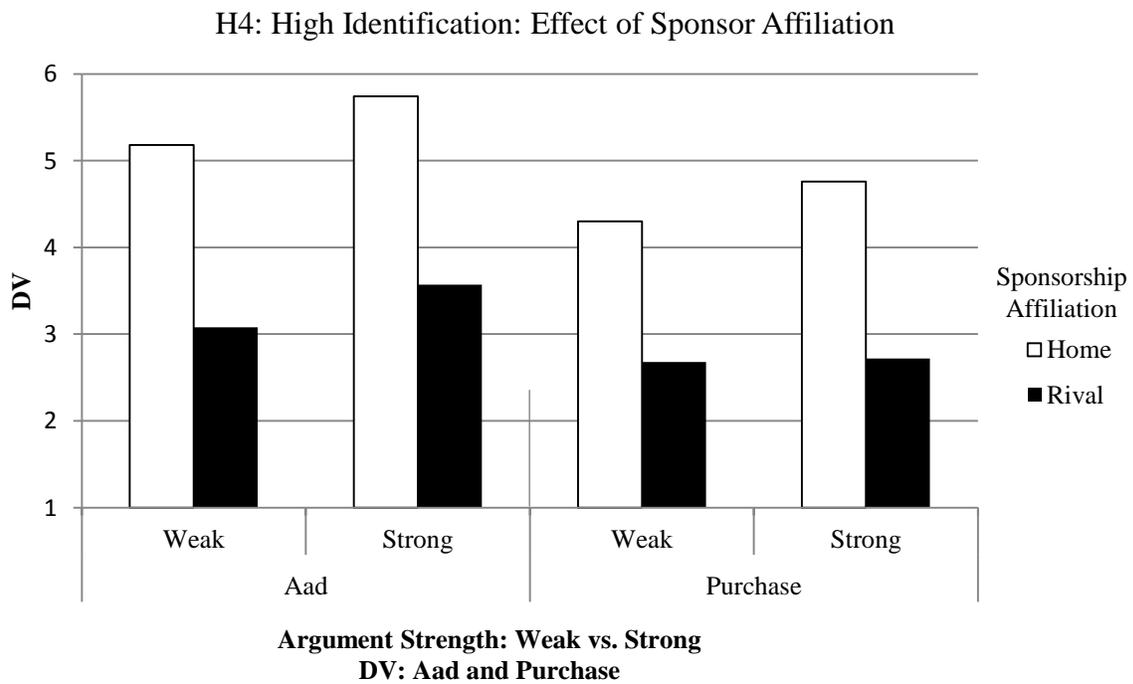
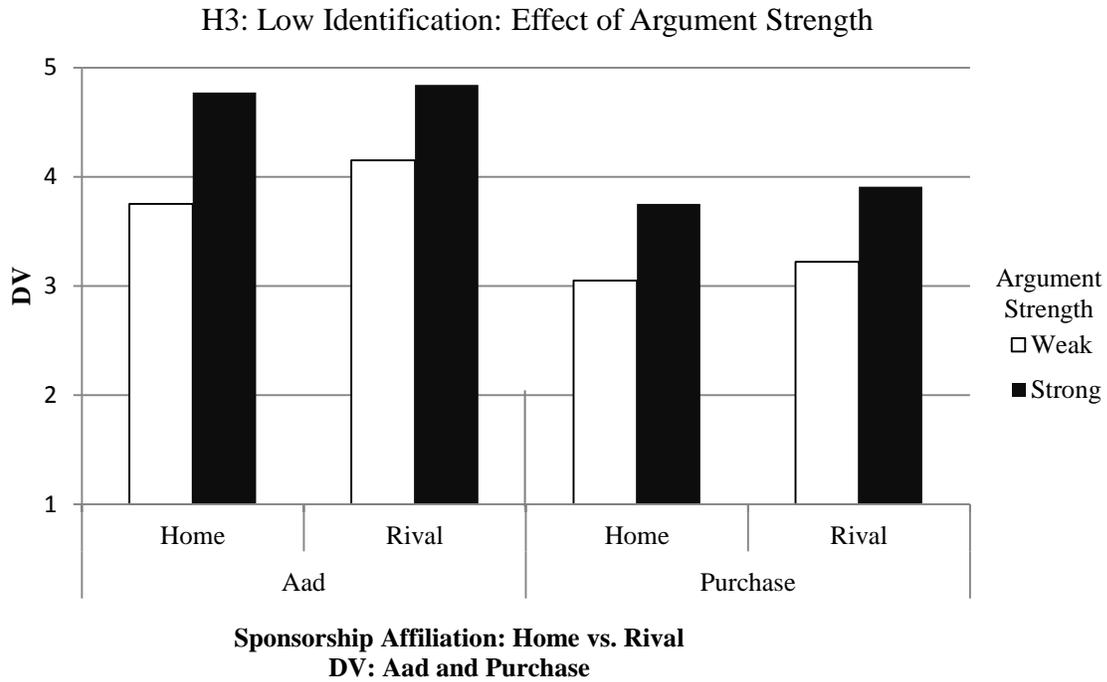


Figure 2. Test of H3 & H4: Effect of argument strength and sponsor affiliation on attitudes and intentions for low and high identification fans



Appendix: Stimuli

Favored Team/Weak Argument

We do it all for you!



The answer to your problems  
Simply great!

Proud sponsor of the *insert favored school and mascot name.*

insert school logo

Favored Team/Strong Argument

We do it all for you!



Recommended by Consumer Reports  
Customer Satisfaction Award by J.D. Power and Associates

Proud sponsor of the *insert favored school and mascot name.*

insert school logo

Rival Team/Weak Argument

We do it all for you!



The answer to your problems  
Simply great!

Proud sponsor of the *insert rival school and mascot name.*

insert school logo

Rival Team/Strong Argument

We do it all for you!



Recommended by Consumer Reports  
Customer Satisfaction Award by J.D. Power and Associates

Proud sponsor of the *insert rival school and mascot name.*

insert school logo