

# **Sponsorship-Linked Marketing: Using Social Media Brand Affinity Data to Determine Sport Sponsorship Effectiveness**

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## **Abstract**

The importance of understanding the sponsorship-linked marketing platform as a means of accomplishing organizational objectives cannot be overstated. IEG projects \$57.5 billion in global sports sponsorship spending in 2015, up \$8.9 billion over the past five years, and more than double what it was a decade ago. Global marketers have increased overall sponsorship spending to 23% of their budgets (compared to 16% a decade ago). Sports sponsorship-linked marketing acts as a mechanism for interorganizational exchange between a sports property and corporate sponsors which enhances each entities success.

Leveraging sponsorship through digital media has steadily risen to become one of the most important forms of activation for many marketers. Although that fact is widely recognized throughout the sponsorship industry, much of the marketing rationale behind it is less well known, especially by sports properties that might be able to provide more meaningful assets and promotional ideas if they had a better understanding of what digital marketing accomplishes for their corporate partners (Andrews, 2010).

Social media marketing is a process that involves leveraging social interactivity among consumers in open social media environments with fast-paced flows of information (Stephen and Bart). Historically sports marketers considered social media marketing to primarily encompass “owned media”, because these media encompass what sports properties do in their social media channels, such as posting game content and pictures on official team Instagram and Snapchat accounts. More recently, sports marketers are recognizing the importance of directing and harnessing organic fan social interactions on social media. Such “earned media” can broadly be thought of as a powerful form of word of mouth advertising.

Brands utilizing sports sponsorship as part of their marketing strategy are increasingly pressuring sports properties to activate the sponsorship relationship with fans in the social media environment. Such efforts are directed at generating earned media for the sponsor brand by the fan base. Examples would include, contests during the game encouraging fan tweets mentioning the sponsor’s brand or Facebook videos of fans using the sponsor’s brand.

Sponsorship measurement has historically centered on cognitive and behavioral categories (Cornwell, Weeks, Roy 2005; Cornwell & Coote, 2005). Common cognitive measures include unaided and aided recall of the sponsor brand in the sporting environment. Behavioral outcomes of sponsorship include purchase, recommendations or trail. Importantly, the actual behaviors are not measured, rather behavioral intentions (Cornwell 2008, 2014).

This paper proposes a new approach to measuring sponsorship effectiveness based on actual fan behaviors (as opposed to behavioral intentions) by examining the earned media a sponsor achieves with the team’s fan base in the social media environment. An effective sponsorship should generate increased affinity for the brand, defined as social interactions and brand interactions, by the fan base.

Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Fans will demonstrate higher affinity in the social media environment for brands that sponsor their team than for competing brands.

H2: Fans will demonstrate higher affinity in the social media environment for a brand that only sponsors their team than the affinity demonstrated by rival fans for the same brand.

H3: Hardcore fans will demonstrate higher affinity in the social media environment for brands that sponsor their team than will moderate fans of the team.

### **Methodology**

Affinio, a social media consumer insights firm in Canada, was commissioned to produce a social network graph for the sixty-three Power Five college football teams. The analysis will be run during the 2017 football season on the sixty-three official Twitter accounts for the schools' football teams. A total of 10,034,555 followers of the sixty-three accounts will be included in the analysis. The study will focus on the official sports apparel sponsor since all schools have long-term multi-million dollar sponsor relationships with Nike, Under Armour or Adidas. In addition, all three companies spend millions of dollars activating the sponsorship with the various fan bases. Affinio's proprietary model analyzes billions of interactions in the social media environment to produce a social network graph for all followers of each team. In addition, it produces an "affinity" metric for each of the three brands, from 0 – 100, based on relevance (how many times more likely the audience is to follow a given account compared to all of Twitter), audience size and the number of audience members who already follow the particular account.

### **References**

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**Keywords:** *sponsorships, digital marketing, social media marketing, activation, fan behavior*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** For traditional marketing approaches such as advertising, there are universal, agreed-upon metrics that can be readily utilized for return on investment analyses, such as gross ratings points (GRPs). However, there are as of yet no metrics that are universally utilized across various industries for investment in sponsorship. To that end, this paper proposes a new approach to measuring sponsorship effectiveness based on actual fan behaviors (as opposed to behavioral intentions) by examining the earned media a sponsor achieves with the team's fan base in the social media environment.

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