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Exploring children's reactions to sponsorship transition: a study of interpersonal and pro-social demands.

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Exploring children's reactions to sponsorship transition: a study of interpersonal and pro-social demands.

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to evaluate children's perceptions and attitudes toward sponsorship transition, specifically the change from Nike to PUMA as kit sponsors for Manchester City Football Club (MCFC) in July 2019.

Design/methodology/approach – A sample of 368 children, aged between 7 and 16 were recruited for the study. Utilising electronic diaries, 1,577 diary entries were captured between February 2019 and March 2020.

Findings – Data reveals that children conceptualise sponsorship as a social exchange, with sponsoring brands seen as human entities and interaction with them reflecting the dynamism of social and familial relationships. Consequently, children in this study demanded prosocial and interpersonal behaviours from sponsors and sponsee during the transition period.

Research limitations/implications – The research has an immediate and direct application for brand managers and the sponsee when considering terminating long-term sponsorship. Both the departing and incoming sponsors can maximise their relationships with these younger fans through an orchestrated departure, arrival, and dedicated handover.

Practical implications – The findings enable marketing brand managers to effectively evaluate sponsor transition to maximise opportunities to maintain, and indeed start, brand relationships with younger fans.

Originality/value – This is the first study that has examined sponsorship children's responses to sponsorship transition.

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Keywords – Children and Brands, Brand Management, Sponsorship, Brand Relationships, Event Diaries.

Paper type – Research paper

Exploring children's reactions to sponsorship transition: a study of interpersonal and pro-social demands.

Introduction

Sponsorship has been declared a 'huge' industry (Lee and Suh, 2020). It has found resonance in the world of sport (van Rijn *et al*., 2019) as it has the capacity to exact significant commercial leverage (Toscani and Prendergast, 2018), reach substantive audiences (Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012), enhance brand awareness and reputation (van Rijn *et al*., 2019), and promote fans' identification (Lee *et al*., 2020). Moreover, sponsorship represents a sophisticated means of inciting consumption (Dos Santos *et al*., 2019 and benefits from fans' affective relationships with their team (Velicia Martín, Toledo and Palos-Sanchez, 2020). It is this relationship between sponsor and team that is the catalyst for the sponsor and the fan developing a long-term, strategically essential relationship (Thomas, 2014). But despite fan engagement with sponsorship being categorised as a "behavioural phenomenon" (Chadwick and Thwaites, 2006), what is known about fan behaviour during sponsorship transition is limited. This is problematic, as Thomas (2015) indicates that teams within the English Premier League (EPL) make an almost arbitrary switch from kit sponsor to kit sponsor every 3–5 years, with at least five teams a season making a transition from one sponsor to another (www.scoreandchange.com). Adidas and Nike dominate as favoured brands in these transitional periods, collectively sponsoring 10 of the available 20 teams that make up the EPL, and the current transition under investigation (Nike to PUMA) is representative of this continuous shift.

However, given the almost constant transition in the league, Thomas (2015) suggests that what we currently know about the transition period between sponsorships is limited and should be

considered "insufficient" (p. 240). Such is the paucity that much of the research has been established to investigate the discontinuation of sponsorship (Chadwick and Thwaites, 2006; Farrelly, 2010; Kruger *et al*., 2014; Jensen and Cornwell, 2017; van Rijn *et al*., 2019) and how to manage that process (Dick, 2018). Little or nothing is known about the physical, emotional and strategic transition from the fans' perspective, and what has been considered has invariably focused on attitudes toward a new sponsor (Carrillat and Grohs, 2019), sponsor exit (Ruth and Strizhakova, 2012), and how consumers recall former sponsors (Edeling *et al*., 2017). To date, only Thomas and Roeseler (2013) and Thomas (2015) have explored this transition. Their studies incorporated the DFL Deutsche Fußball Liga or Bundesliga and the EPL, incorporating leading clubs (Dortmund and Tottenham Hotspur), and concluded that adult fans viewed this period with cynicism (Thomas, 2015), questioning the "overarching positivity associated with sponsorship" (Thomas and Roeseler, 2013, p. 188) and the notion that fans engage volitionally with transition. The paucity is far greater when it comes to children. To date no research has been undertaken with this key group. This is a significant theoretical gap, as when it comes brands, children are said to be a "critical constituent group" (Bergstrom and Blumenthal, 2001, p. 23) with distinct views which lay the ground work for future brand engagement (Drake-Bridges and Burgess, 2010). Importantly, children are said to collate distinct brand ideas (Daems *et al*., 2019) and can articulate and rationalise why they like or dislike a brand (Lopez and Rodriguez, 2018) from an early age (Jones and Glynn, 2019). Pertinent to this reach, children are said to be deeply affected and influenced by sponsors brands (Grohs *et al*., 2012), and particularly sponsoring brands in sport (Bestman *et al*., 2015). Like their adult counterparts, children have a strong propensity to purchase club merchandise (Bauer et al., 2008) borne out of an affective bond with the sponsor and team with a sponsors offering considered a key product for children aged between 7-15 when it comes to their own independent spending (Mintel, 2018, Mintel,2019). However, we know nothing about their

emotions, feelings, and opinions when it comes to sponsorship transition and given the above

the work seeks to explore children's perceptions of sponsorship transition.   Adopting a

qualitative approach, the following broad research question was derived to address the research

aim:

RQ1: How do children react to sponsorship transition?

Given the above RQ, this research yields four contributions. Firstly, utilising a unique

methodological approach, we further the theoretical understanding of children's relationships

with sponsors. Secondly, we reveal that children's engagement with sponsors during transition

is fundamentally different to that exhibited by adults. Thirdly, this study offers insight for brand

managers as to how they might interact with children during sponsorship transition , and finally

the study contributes to the literature by providing a solid theoretical foundation for future

research into the sponsorship transition period.

Review of the literature

Sponsorship/sports sponsorship

A major predicate for engaging in sponsorship is the opportunity for brands to "create brand

meaning" (Toscani and Prendergast, 2018, p.339) in what is an ever-changing, cluttered, and

capricious business environment (Yuan *et al*., 2019). Gwinner and Swanson (2003) suggested

that the field of sports is a suitable area for sponsorship as sponsoring brands provide fans with

a collective identity. Thus, fans across a myriad of sports, leagues and countries are theorised

as those with the greatest predilection to volitionally engage with, consume and become

attached to a sponsoring brand (Thomas, 2015). It is this capacity to purchase club merchandise

and, ultimately, become brand resonant in the most lucid of ways that drives sponsorship in

this sphere. Fans, then, are "the supreme authority" (Dionísio and Leal, 2008, p.18), and without them, games, leagues, sports and, indeed, sponsors potentially perish. However, Doyle *et al*. (2013) advocated that that fan behaviour and fan identification are not fixed entities, and work by Thomas and Roeseler (2013) found fans to be fickle, capricious entities, wary of sponsors and reticent in relation to loyalty and commitment. This echoes work by Thomas (2018), who suggested that sponsorship does not always deepen bonds with fans, and we posit that these behaviours need to be explored in the context of children, as children make their own knowledge of the world around them (Agante and Pascoal, 2019).

Sponsorship transition

Grey and Skildum-Reid (2001) indicated that when sponsorship does end, it has the capacity to personally and collectively damage those involved. This is echoed by Ruth and Strizhakova (2012), Kruger *et al*., (2014), Jensen and Cornwell (2017) and Dick (2018), who all suggested that saying 'goodbye' is a distinct process that needs to be managed properly. More emotively, Cornwell (2014) posited that sponsorship termination and transition can manifest in perceptions of abandonment by what he refers to as "customers". Interestingly, and writing more recently, Grohs *et al*. (2016) found that in a footballing context incorporating one club, sponsorship duration could impact on this negative perception of the departing sponsor. Dick and Uhrich (2017) looked at fans' perceptions of forced versus volitional sponsor exit, concluding that volitional exit can create intense negativity. Capitalising on this contribution, and again utilising the lower German football leagues, Dick (2018) evaluated gradual versus entire sponsorship termination, with the data advocating a sequential departure to avoid censure and enmity. Outside of the football sphere, Delia (2017) evaluated termination in the context of a Spanish professional cycling team and the end of the 20-year relationship with its major

sponsor, Euskaltel, and found gratitude to be the overwhelming emotion expressed. Hence, the nominal body of literature reveals significant paradox and suggests that fans, dependent on sport and context, can be enigmatic and unpredictable. However, it is apparent that the literature has become fixated on termination rather than on the schematic process that occurs during transition, and it is this that drives the current research.

Children, brands, sponsorship, and fandom

Brand preferences are said to form in early childhood (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). Brand engagement is a normative feature of young lives (Jones and Glynn, 2019) in which sociocultural and a myriad of contextual experiences drive engagement (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). Early relationships with brands are predicated on perceptual cues such as tangible form, colour and taste, while the more advanced analytical stage is a time when children, invariably between the ages of 7 and 11, start to assign subjective meanings to brands (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). By 11 years of age, these choices are fully developed, and children can express their preferences and articulate their relationships with brands in a critical and competent manner (Grønhøj and Gram, 2020). These preferences extend to sport and, as football fans, children are said to have "powerful" connections to their teams (Tamir, 2019), with football a predominant factor in their young lives. Fandom provides identity, bonds, immediate friendships (Thomson and Williams, 2014), popularity and social status (End *et al.*, 2004), and for children, being a fan is said to satisfy the intrinsic need for "belongingness and acceptance" (Gardikiotis *et al.*, 2014). In terms of sponsorship, empirical investigations dating back over nearly four decades have established that children understand the purpose and intent of sponsorship from an early age (Aitken *et al.*, 1986) and have the ability to recall sponsors' brands in a sports context (Bestman *et al.*, 2015).

Ledwith (1984) was among the first to recognise that for children, exposure to sponsorship, particularly televised sponsorship, was a powerful communications tool. This seminal work concluded that such exposure could result in a positive image being created and a heightened capacity to recall the sponsoring brand. Building on Ledwith's (1984), Simões and Agante, (2014) suggest that children constitute "new targets" when it comes to sponsorship (Simões and Agante, 2014). Children are regularly exposed to professional sport (Kelly et al., 2014), and are, therefore regularly exposed to sponsorship messages. O'Brien and Vandenburg (2020) referred to this as an initiation given the centrality of sport, particularly football (Thomson and Williams, 2014) in children's lives resulting in children being regarded as highly susceptible (Pettigrew et al., 2013) to the messages provided by sponsors. Sponsoring brands, then, become part of the child's lived experience and are to be considered as significant relational partners for children (Simões and Agante, 2014). To that end, this study seeks to explore children's responses to a transition between these relational partners.

Context of the research

MCFC is a UK-based Premier League football team. It was taken over by 'The Abu Dhabi Group' in 2008, making it the sixth richest club in the world, worth $2.688 billion (Obiero, 2020). It has enjoyed extraordinary success in recent years, winning the Premiership in 2018 and 2019 and the League Cup in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (www.mancity.com). Its current deal with PUMA will earn the club up to £65 million a season over the next decade (Ducker, 2019), representing a significant increase in revenue from their previous six-year deal with Nike, which was worth £20 million a season.

Method

Pilot study

After obtaining institutional ethics clearance in September 2018, a pilot study undertaken with 18 participants (11 male and 7 female) in January 2019. Schools were selected in the Manchester area via official statistics utilising non-probability sampling. Schools were contacted in an open letter outlining the rationale, and with a specific request for MCFC fans. 46 parental acknowledgements were received with 18 children participating. Parents, guardians, or responsible adults were fully informed of the nature of the research via an information pack which also contained ethics documentation. Prior to the actual data collection potential participants were asked to categorise themselves as either 'Casual' fans (C) who attend 1–9 games per season, 'Regular' (R) who attend 10–18 games, or finally 'Fanatics' (F) who attend more than 18 games. Of the 18 children taking part, 14 declared themselves F and 4 as R.

The main data collection utilised electronic event diaries. This approach offered the opportunity for participants to provide more accurate insights (Radcliffe, 2013) into their "opinions, feelings and emotions" (Siemieniako and Kubacki, 2013, p.299) in real time, and remove the necessity of recalling experiences, situations, or past motivations (van Erde et al., 2005). To facilitate this 'real time' opportunity, respondents were asked to record in their diary each time they considered the sponsorship transition. An email address was set up to receive diary entries and participants were asked to send all entries to it.

Main data collection

The main data collection commenced in February 2019 using the same method as the pilot study. Altogether 368 children took part (249 male, 119 female) between the ages of 7 and 16. Of the 249 male participants, 83% (206) declared themselves as F and 16% (43) R, while 51% (60) of female participants F, 41% (49) were R and 8% (10) were C.

During the 13-month data collection period, 1,642 individual entries were received. Entries invariably came in blocks, reflecting media coverage, player transfer stories, build-up to the new season and game days. The approach generated an average of 97 entries per month, 24 per week, equating to 3 entries per day. Word count varied from a minimum of 15 to a maximum of 128. Of the 1,642 entries, 4% (65 entries) were deemed to be unconnected and, consequently, 1,577 entries were included in the analysis.

Analysis

73 codes were derived supporting three dominant themes of 'Involvement', 'Gratitude' and 'Incumbent Responsibility'. The analyses were authenticated through intercoder agreement, consisting of the use of an independent coder from faculty who was familiar with the major theoretical lenses and context of the research. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa for the resultant codes. Kappa for the initial coding was 'very strong' (0.76) (Hassan et al., 2019). Both coders subsequently agreed the identification of the above three themes.

Findings

Involvement

What was apparent from the initial diary entries was the desire for children to be involved in the transitional process. Pertinent to the central RQ, there was a deluge of initial entries that revealed children's disdain for the two sponsors involved for not cementing and facilitating their relationships with them. The need for personal involvement in the process was palpable, and children in this study saw transition as very much a personal domain. This was captured in the following diary entry, which is representative of the major theme:

I'm really sad that nobody wanted to talk to us about this. I go to the fanzone every home game, but nobody wanted to tell us anything. I think were [sic] *the most important City fans as well* [sic] *be there for a long time, we should have nown* [sic] *first. Me and my friends really wanted to have the big picture. We would have been chuffed* [slang for 'happy'] *with that.* [P121, male, aged 12]

This type of entry was replicated for several weeks during the initial stage of data collection. In analysis, it was considered that this might simply be a case of football's personal salience to the individual, but it became clear that this was situationally specific and distanced from the game itself. It was considered, therefore, that when it came to sponsorship transition, children in this study had a narrow latitude of acceptance for change without a 'big picture' dialogue. The next extracts again capture the personal relevance of this sponsorship shift and the need to be involved:

I've gone to every single game since I was 4 and this [is the] *first big change, but it didn't feel special to me as it wasn't like a special announcement. I wanted to know personally because I love the club.* [P246, Male, age 12]

I don't understand it. If I go to every game at the Etihad [MCFC's stadium] *and they know I do, why wasn't I told about this months ago? It's my club, my players, my team, and my little bit of history. I'm gutted* [colloquial term for disappointment] *to find out second hand.* [P10, Male, age 13].

Children arguably saw this period in the club's history as pivotal, and anomalous to them as fans, and the situational element caused significant intrinsic motivation to be involved. This is potentially good news for any non-incumbent brand as there is the opportunity to capitalise on this articulated desire for involvement. However, in analysis it was considered that there may be a strong 'maven' element to this viewpoint, and such a viewpoint may well have been

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disseminated more generally through brand publics associated with MCFC. Nevertheless, the desire to be involved in any capacity was part of a personal value system and very much a personal goal.

Incumbent Gratitude

Pertinent to RQ1, coding revealed gratitude as a major theme. 273 extracts demanded this and indicated a degree of incredulity that Nike had gone without saying thank you. The following two extracts capture this:

Nike have just gone! Cheers for that! What about a little bit of "thanks a million you lot, you've been awesome as fans and thanks for buying a home and away shirt and getting down to Ashton New road [Etihad Stadium address] *to spend all your money"? They should have thanked us big time for that. It's the right thing when you've been there that long.* [P36, Female, age 12]

Is it too much to expect a thank you when you've given a company so much? No, its [sic] *not! I feel like they've* [Nike] *cadged from us* [local term for stealing] *and run off. I'm gutted* [colloquial term for disappointment] *by that*. [P147, Female, age 12]

It was apparent in the diary entries that there was disappointment toward the departing sponsor for a perceived lack of gratitude. However, 301 entries indicated that this could be ameliorated for if Nike had considered distinct event to mark their departure. This is represented in extracts from participants 219 and 300:

… why can't they have a party for us [?] *It would make us all feel a bit more wanted and show how important we are to them* [Nike] *even though they're going, and we'd talk about that for a long time*. [P219, Female, age 13]

We've been Kings of English football for three years and Nike should have a mint [colloquial term for good] *party for all the young supporters ….*[P300, Male, age 14]

Nonincumbent Gratitude

Data also revealed that similar expressions of gratitude should be given by the new sponsor. 213 diary extracts indicated that PUMA should take the opportunity express gratitude for the opportunity of being at Manchester City. This is captured in the extracts below:

We're one of the best teams in the World and PUMA aren't the best manufacturer, so I really think we're doing them a favour and they should acknowledge that. Where's our big HELLO [emphasis in original extract] from PUMA? That's tight [local slang for a lack of generosity] of them. [P9, Male, age 14]

Where are the flags, gifts, and party from PUMA? It doesn't have to be dramatic, but I think it would work with us. What they've done so far is pitiful and they should be ashamed. [P237, Female, age 13]

What we see in the above is a continuity in thinking regarding sponsorship and transition. These demands for gratitude didn't diminish during data collection, and the data indicates that these perspectives, attitudes and indeed, needs may not evolve until they experience several sponsorship transitions.

Gratitude and Incentives

Participants also indicated that both Nike and PUMA should express their gratitude through incentives. 198 entries advocated this such acts foster a relationship with the Nike after departure and begin a relationship with PUMA. The entries from below capture this data stream:

I've been thinking that Nike should contact us all with a discount code as a thank you and then we'll probably remember them in 10 or 15 years when lots of companies [sponsors] *have come and gone.* [P14, Male, age 14]

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It would have been buzzing [colloquial term for exciting] *if they could have sent some vouchers or a money off code to say cheers* [colloquial term for thank you] *for the last 5 years. It would cost them NOTHING* [emphasis in original extract]. (P254, male aged 15)

Despite this, however, there is no definite indication in the data that there would be an immediate impact on sales, and while that was not the sole purpose of the paper, there is a clear indication that attitudes toward both Nike and PUMA as brands could through reciprocity.

Incumbent Responsibility

There was a unique data stream where children, exclusively girls, wanted to see Nike and PUMA engage into a strategic handover. This topic generated 142 extracts: with the two below capturing this train of thought:

Its [sic] *been weeks now since they'd announced this, but wouldnt* [sic] *it be so much better if they had 10 minutes before a big game the next game to hand over control like they do at the Olympics. Everybody likes that and everybody gets on board with it; the Liverpool game on the 9ᵗʰ would be perfect* [Premier League fixture on November 9ᵗʰ , 2019]. [P53, Female, age 15]

Big game in December against the Reds [local name for Manchester United] *so we get Nike and PUMA to shake hands and show what a different club we are to all the rest when it comes to behaving well and respecting each other.* [P19, Female, aged 13]

This theme also generated 42 instances where participants felt that Nike should assist PUMA with the transition given the relative size of MCFC and the task of replacing Nike. This element is captured in the extract below:

Nike should go out of their way to support PUMA and give them a helping hand so PUMA can understand City [local term for MCFC] *better and get the most from us like Nike did.* [P64, Female, age 10]

This highly personalised desire to see harmony between the sponsors was unique within this data set. It was analysed as being part of an intrinsic value system, honed at home , where the individuals may have witnessed individuals offering one another support. In these extracts then, we again see how human interactions are encoded and transferred onto the sponsor by children.

Discussion

The findings overall indicate that children see their relationships with sponsors as they do human ones. Domestic lessons, observations, and parental conditioning impact on how children view relationships with sponsors and consequently children give sponsors, a nonhuman entity, human traits and therefore demand very human interactions with them. Such behaviours can prove "useful when consumers need help making sense of uncertain situations" (Yang et al., 2020, p. 4), and we believe that this is the reason why children in this data have demanded communication, reciprocity, respect, understanding and a need to be at the heart of the transition process. Furthering this proposition, and borrowing from Kefr's (1981) Priority Theory, children demanded to be acknowledged in this transitional period by the sponsors (s) with this we believe reflecting the dynamics of their familial settings. We believe to make sense of the transition children were drawing on their own social knowledge to understand an anomalous event in their relatively young lives.

The full 'Goodbye' (gratitude)

This efficacy in evaluating sponsors as a human entity was manifest tin the extracts that demanded the departing sponsor (Nike) to 'goodbye' officially. To that end, the demand for this seemed predicated on observed behaviours that when a relationship ends there is a formality that precedes finality. It implies that for children, responding to sponsorship change is viewed in the same way as responding to relational change. The 'goodbye' then almost seemed to act an explicit conversation where comfort could perhaps be taken, as for many

participants it was clear that this this was the first experience of sponsorship transition. We believe the 'goodbye' was necessary for children as they cleary felt the sponsors departure as a loss rather than traditional football occurrence. For brand managers, then, this type of ritualised 'goodbye' could be transformative. Such an event would allow the sponsor to leave with their reputation intact and leave a lasting impression on this key group. Although the sponsor is not obligated to conform to such a role, brand managers should be mindful of the heightened emotions of departure, particularly for those developing a social lens and such a 'goodbye' would be seen as supportive and ultimately affirmative in the mind of a child.

The full 'Hello' (reciprocity)

Very much like the demand on Nike to say 'goodbye', there was also an onus on PUMA to say 'hello'. It was palpable that an open, sincere, and very public affirmation would not only be welcomed by children but also reciprocated by them. Very much like the 'goodbye' the call for an official 'hello' is indicative of the proposition that children perceive of sponsorship interaction like human interaction, and sponsors should act in a manner that reflects social cordiality and the social knowledge children have at that given time. Saying 'hello' is cleary something that all children have been conditioned to do when meeting new people and that is a minimum expectation from the sponsor. Consequently, the new sponsor has a defined role in the mind of the child and that extends beyond match day and simply being on a shirt. To that end, we do not believe that this sentiment should be dismissed as superficial. It should be considered as a focused, reflective, and indicative understanding of how children perceive the problems sponsors face and should therefore address when arriving at a new club.

Incentives

From older participants (14+), 143 accounts suggested that after consideration, Nike should be providing a parting gift or an incentive to maintain a positive mental evaluation of the brand.

This was conceptualised as Nike exhibiting gratitude. The sponsorship literature suggests that gratitude is commonly used as a mediating construct (Kim et al., 2010) between fan and sponsor, but in this instance, fans saw it as an integral part of the brand's continuing function with them, and part of a continued emotional bond, with the element of reciprocity reversed. Interestingly, this was not predicated on a sense of deal proneness or avarice, but, again, connected indelibly to this notion of gratitude. It seemed to be conceptualised as a symbolic gesture rather than something distinct and to be acted upon, and consequently the symbolism contained within that act was enough to retain the bond. It seems paradoxical to utilise these ingratiation tools at the end of a relationship, but it was indubitable in the data that such a simplistic act could be used as a substantive vehicle to reinforce Nike's brand, inject significant vigour into its perception and assist with WOM and eWOM going forward.

Empathy

Of additional interest in the extracts above are the inferences and nuanced dictums of expressions of sympathy for PUMA as a new sponsor entering an agreement where the incumbent had had an extended and successful tenure in terms of on-field success and contract extensions. Multiple readings indicated that children in the sample group were exhibiting high levels of emotional intelligence in this context. To be able to conceptualise the potential malaise of entering an arrangement where there might be significant reciprocity is problematic, and it showed a remarkable insight and represented an unexpected addition to the data set. Given the interpretation of these events, a subsequent review of the literature found that no other research had revelated or tested this ability to sympathise with new sponsors.

Mutual support

It seems a strategic paradox that the incumbent brand would actively facilitate the arrival of another, but the outcome of such a paradox could enhance the transference of positive emotion

and recall of the incumbent brand. It doesn't seem ideologically coherent but is indicative of a child's understanding of football and sponsorship. In analysis it was considered that these statements were evidence of a new football fan who perhaps has a more socially constructed lens that doesn't reflect the vehemence of previous generations. We say this as the extracts relating to this do not reflect any known theoretical insight, nor do they support any models that relate to sponsorship and are therefore indicative of new thinking within this generation. The application of emotional intelligence to sponsorship is certainly anomalous, and so is a physical transfer, but given the sentiment behind this, the benefits for Nike 'post-mortem' and PUMA 'adventu' are clear.

Managerial implications

The first thing to note managerially is that children are a unique cluster when it comes to sponsorship transition, and the behaviours manifest are very different from those of their adult counterparts. They have a distinct competence and seem to relate to brands as they would to other people, and social perception is transferred onto brand perception. Sponsor relationships are evaluated against expected interpersonal gestures and behaviours that have been witnessed and encoded outside of sport. To that end, children are not judgemental about leaving or arriving sponsors and we therefore see none of the traditional enmity or tensions that pervade the literature. Given this uniqueness, the overriding issue is that of managing expectation and demands. However, the possibility of acquiescing to children's needs and wants in this transitional period could pay dividends for both the incumbent and new entrant.

Simple social psychology

The recurring theme within the data, regardless of the period, was the necessity of exhibiting gratitude for the opportunity to have developed a relationship with the fans, or, indeed, gratitude for the opportunity to develop a relationship. For brand managers, this does require a

level of performance on the part of the brand that perhaps has not been considered, but in terms of generating consumer joy or delight in this transitional period, creating what might be an unprecedented event, given the complexity of developing brand relationships, could be beneficial. Brand managers must consider the relative cost against the impact of inducing a positive psychology at the point of departure and under any circumstance the transference of involvement and ultimately brand trust and loyalty to a competitor. Therefore, the possibility of a club-controlled or fanzone-controlled open welcome – or, indeed, goodbye – could be beneficial for sponsor and sponsee. This may have far more impact than standardised PR and allows sponsors to become part of social structures far beyond the club. To that end, such elements can help bridge the abstraction of a brand as a team-based phenomenon and take on a more dynamic, relevant role, taking advantage of the children's need for proactive knowing about brands through these expressions of gratitude. This data indicated that children are clearly relationally dependent, and brands are very much seen in that context. However, these processes of gratitude do not need to be complex and most certainly should not reflect a dominant sponsor 'faking it' to elicit a positive response. To that end, this represents an opportunity for the brand itself to become socialised rather than preoccupied on immediate ROI. Consequently, the following might be considered to minimise cost and maximise impact:

- Micro targeting through the club, fanzones and kids' fanzones

- Targeting family ticket holders

- Competition winners

- An exclusive offer

- Ticketed event on general sale

- Enhanced social competence.

Such initiatives might also allow the incoming sponsor to manage the perception that they have simply selected a global marketing vehicle without consideration of the fan base. This, in turn,

could enhance brand attachment and the actual purchase behaviours of these younger, highly impressionable consumers. To that end, it is feasible that sponsorship deals with this age group may not be temporal (van Rijn *et al*., 2019). There is the distinct possibility that a brand manager might continue with a relationship reflective of what Huber *et al*. (2015) referred to as a friendship.

Incentives

The data relating to the outgoing sponsor suggested that an affective relationship could be maintained through incentives. These need for incentive; we believe also reflected social norms. Children has quite possibly been rewarded for being good and had perhaps been incentivised to be good within their familial surroundings. This expectancy from sponsors reflected their own lived experiences and factored into how they believed they should be rewarded for engagement. However, should incentives be considered managerially, a range of questions emerge, the primary question relating to what constitutes a fair incentive when departing. A myriad of characteristics could influence this, including age, education, parental socio-economic status, culture, siblings, expectancy, and a plethora of situational factors. There are undoubtedly ethical concerns and there is inherent complexity in simply handing out 'money off' opportunities for brands to possibly to maintain a relationship. But it is considered that children see this as simple a transaction, very much like getting pocket money for doing something positive, or an expected allowance. What we do know is that offering a low-value incentive can have the reverse effect and reduce behavioural intentions – and that is problematic. But the choice of proper incentives is a critical step in strategic planning, and unsuitable in this context, and frankly, volitional incentives could reduce intrinsic motivation to engage anyway. Given this we posit that shared knowledge is a far better incentive to maintain a relationship as this reflects the overall desire to be involved. Hence, to mitigate the need to ostensibly reward good behaviour, in transition, personalised communications could

be created to manage departure, and we believe this would be a much more powerful tool for managing the transition.

Incumbent Responsibility

While seemingly at odds strategically, the data revealed that children, predominantly female, wanted evidence of a smooth transition between the incumbent and non-incumbent sponsor. With a strong focus on social harmony, children did not see this type of obeisance as conflicting or a competition, but as a responsibility to enhance and ease the transitional period. But it is indicative of a focus not seen previously in the sponsorship literature: this constant narrative did indicate that children are predetermined to want to accept and facilitate sponsorship relations under the right conditions, with many of those being off the field. Consequently, participants indicated that they wanted a visible, tangible handover that represented their values and indicated the rarefied opportunity being afforded to the non-incumbent brand (PUMA). Consequently, data indicated that a symbolic handover would be appreciated. However, as a decision-making scenario and given levels of competition in the professional football leagues, this does seem something of a dilemma. Thus, the tasks here are to address firstly the positive and secondly the negative impacts. Positively, the following are considerations:

- Impact on perceptual and conceptual development of child consumers

- Relational development/PR opportunity

- Novelty

- Exposure (local, national, international)

- Heightened brand awareness/brand perception

- Enhanced social competence

- Enhanced reputation

- WOM/eWOM.

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There would be some negativity, as such cordiality may provoke fans – older fans with more established values and a more traditional lens when it comes to rival clubs and sponsoring brands. Such a handover may not be relevant and could be perceived as a gimmick and be met with resistance from more established fans.

Dilemma

As stated above, the issue is that any strategic 'hello' or' goodbye' can generate several interactional dilemmas for both brands and possibly also the sponsee. This represents a dilemma relating to the ability to really neutralise any pre-existing relationships with the outgoing brand and maximise self-interest. Dealing with this group of fans, then, is undoubtedly a complex process and the transition period between sponsorships beginning and ending is seemingly pivotal. Each action has the possibility to enhance or diminish brand interaction with fans, but it means moving away from conventional and traditional approaches and maximising the weeks and months between announcement and the new season beginning in order to capitalise and cement relationships with this key group. To conclude this section and conceptualise the above, we present a gestalt of potential benefits of engaging with the elements outlined in the data set. We see the three major themes as interconnected and present them as such.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The role of the club

Pivotal in this potential shift is the sponsee. We advocate that the club themselves should play an active part in facilitating and orchestrating the elements outlined above, As key decision makers , the clubs will actually be aware of a timeline, will hold fan data and will have the capacity to hold official 'hellos', 'goodbyes' and symbolic handovers, as demanded in the data. The sponsee is the quintessential gatekeeper and, given children's evaluation of sponsorship as

an interpersonal phenomenon, the sponsee, in this instance MCFC, needs to manage the personal, psychological, and social experience of long-term sponsorship transition. However, when simplified, the data aligns with the rudimentary tenets of events management and, to that end, should not be foreign practice to clubs of this size and with almost unlimited resources.

Limitations

The transitional period under investigation reflects a period of unprecedented success on the pitch for MCFC, and that may have influenced the diary entries. Additionally, given the timeframe of the study, it is conceivable that children had the opportunity to consider the transition and therefore not all entries may have been spontaneous. Moreover, friendships and contact between participants cannot be discounted, and neither can peer influence, social pressures and, indeed, parental influence. MCFC is a global entity and this study did not incorporate children from outside of the UK who may follow the club. Also, in terms of fan typology, casual fans – that is, transient fans – were underrepresented in the sample.

Future research

There should be a continuation of this work to see whether children who support MCFC outside of the local area share similar attitudes and express the same demands. Additionally, there a myriad of opportunities to explore this paradigm within football and, indeed, other major sports across the globe.

Conclusion

The work provides revelatory insight into how children encode, feel and experience sponsorship transition. Data indicates that children see themselves as central actors in this crucial period, demanding dialogue, acknowledgment and more viscerally genuflect and obeisance from all parties. Beyond that, data cleary demonstrates that children view transition in the context of their own human relationships. They apply social norms and collective

representations of what is acceptable behaviour when one relationship ends, and another begins and project this onto the parties involved. This offers new insights for brand managers and reveals how children want sponsors to work together to facilitate their expectations, enhance experience and maximise opportunity.

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Figure 1: Potential sponsor benefits

Involvement
(Potential Sponsor Benefits)
Recall, Reciprocity, Sympathy,
Longer Relationship, Empathy,
Acceptance of transition,
Self-Awareness, Connectivism,
Contentment, Mitigate Enmity,
Emotional Connection, Greater
Congruence, Greater Influence,
Maintain Image, WOM/eWOM

Harmony
(Potential Sponsor Benefits)
Positive Recall, Enhanced Brand Reputation,
Enhanced Perception, Potential Fan Compliance,
Predicator of Positive Relationship,
Commitment Continuance, Emotional
Connection/Response, Cultural Impact, Stronger
Identification, Build Brand Image, PR Coverage,
WOM/eWOM

Gratitude
(Potential Sponsor Benefits)
Greater Influence, Enhanced Understanding, Data
Mining, Enhanced Brand Experience, Enhanced
Brand Reputation, Sympathy, Empathy,
Integration, Reciprocation, Reflection,
Consideration, Enhanced Loyalty, Enhanced
Consumption, Immediate Recall, Enhanced
Knowledge, Greater Brand Resonance, Volitional
Support, Stronger Interaction/Partnership, Greater
Congruence, WOM/eWOM, Long-Term Orientation