

Exploring Unexplored Territory: A Study of Sports Sponsorship Effectiveness in the Saudi Football League

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Abstract:

This study examines the effects of sports sponsorship on consumer behavior within Saudi Arabia's football scene, focusing on Al Hilal FC and Tania sponsorship agreement. Utilizing a cross-sectional design with 190 participants collected via convenience sampling and social media, the data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. Findings indicate that team identification and performance significantly enhance sponsorship awareness, which positively influences brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This research provides new insights to sports sponsorship literature by exploring its effectiveness in an unexplored context. The findings offer practical implications for brands, suggesting deeper integration with team narratives and leveraging the collectivist culture of Saudi Arabian fans to build emotional connections. By fostering meaningful engagements and supporting initiatives that resonate with the fan base's values, brands can maximize the impact of their sponsorships.

Keywords: Sports sponsorship, Marketing strategy; Consumer behavior, Team Identification, PLS-SEM

JEL Classification codes: L83; M31; M37; M39; Z2

1. Introduction

Recently, Saudi Arabia has been drawing significant attention in the world of football, thanks to significant support from the country's Public Investment Fund (PIF). The PIF, a cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification strategy, has become a major player in global sports investments (D'Urso, 2024). In June 2023, the PIF made an influential move by acquiring 75% stakes in four prominent local football clubs: Al Ittihad, Al Ahli, Al Nassr, and Al Hilal (Kunti, 2023). This step has not only enhanced the stature of these clubs on the global stage but also transformed the international transfer market dynamics. With Saudi Pro League (SPL) clubs investing heavily during the transfer window, they have managed to attract football legends like Neymar and Cristiano Ronaldo, amplifying the appeal of Saudi football to a global audience. This surge in global recognition underscores the strategic need for clubs to diversify their financial sources beyond the PIF. Suggested alternatives include club-branded merchandise, selling seasonal tickets, and signing sponsorship contracts (Lawrence, 2018).

Sponsorship is a business agreement, or alliance, between sporting entities and brands to achieve mutual benefits (Meenaghan, 1983). For sports entities, it serves as a vital source of income, and for brands, it is an efficient tool to achieve marketing objectives (Nickell *et al.*, 2011) such as boosting brand image, raising brand awareness, and increasing sales (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998). While these benefits are well-documented through studies conducted predominantly in North America, South America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific (e.g., Biscaia and Rocha, 2018; Herrmann *et al.*, 2016; Hohenberger and Grohs, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Zaharia, Mayer, *et al.*, 2016), research on the effectiveness of sponsorship in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, is notably lacking.

The gap in the literature is significant due to the unique market context of the Middle East, which may influence sponsorship impacts differently compared to other regions. Research indicates that market dynamics in regions like Saudi Arabia, with its rapidly evolving economic landscape, require specialized marketing strategies that consider local nuances (Melewar *et al.*, 2000; Youssef and Teng, 2021). The exploration of sponsorship effectiveness within Saudi Arabia's emerging market contributes vital insights into the adaptability of global marketing strategies.

While replication of research models in new contexts may be viewed by some as a routine extension, it is essential for testing the universality and adaptability of existing theories (Easley *et al.*, 2000; Fabrigar *et al.*, 2020; Fletcher, 2021; Lehmann and Bengart, 2016). Conducting this study in Saudi Arabia provides a critical test of the applicability of global sponsorship models, particularly those developed in Western contexts, within a Middle Eastern setting, which has been notably underrepresented in existing sponsorship research. This study is pioneering in its focus on how well-established Western-centric sponsorship models perform in the Saudi context, offering new insights into their applicability across diverse cultural landscapes. Understanding specific regional dynamics is crucial for the effectiveness of sponsorship and marketing strategies, and this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics (Mandler *et al.*, 2021; Zhu and Zolkiewski, 2016).

Additionally, an incidental yet insightful aspect of this research is the examination of a low-tier sponsor's role in sponsorship effectiveness. While not the primary focus, this perspective provides a unique vantage point on the potential reach and impact of sponsors that are often overshadowed by higher-tier sponsors (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007).

The anticipated insights from this study are expected to inform marketing strategies that effectively leverage cultural nuances, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of sponsorships in sports and beyond. The practical implications of this research are projected to extend to marketers, sports management teams, and policymakers, who can utilize these prospective insights to foster more culturally attuned and strategically sound sponsorship practices.

2. Literature review

2.1 Team identification

Social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) is widely employed in the field of sporting team sponsorship to study individuals' emotional links to their favorite teams and sponsorship effectiveness (Kural and Özbek, 2023; e.g., Lin and Bruning, 2024; Ngan *et al.*, 2011; Silva, 2024). SIT hypothesizes that "individuals classify themselves into various social categories in order to facilitate self-definition within their own social environment" (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003, p. 276). Accordingly, individuals cognitively group themselves and others into two distinct groups: the in-group (the group of 'us') and the out-group (the group of 'them'). In-group members—in the eyes of sports team fans—may include not just other fans of the team but also the team's sponsor/s (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Lee *et al.*, 2023), leading them to favor said sponsor/s (Hickman and Lawrence, 2010; Palau-Saumell *et al.*, 2022).

Team identification represents an aspect of an individual's (i.e., a soccer team fan's) social identity (Lee *et al.*, 2023; Trail *et al.*, 2024; Underwood *et al.*, 2001), and it has a significant role in sponsorship success (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Lin and Bruning, 2024). This is because highly identified fans are willing to allocate more cognitive effort when receiving and evaluating information related to their favorite team's/event's sponsors (Deitz *et al.*, 2012). Hence, highly identified fans are more likely to correctly identify the sponsor of their team (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Zhang, 2023). That is, considering the sponsor as one of 'us' is likely to lead fans to be aware of what brands are the sponsors of their favorite team. Supporting this, recent findings by Mohammadi *et al.*, (2024) confirm that enhanced team identification correlates with increased responsiveness to sponsorship initiatives.

In collectivist cultures, such as those prevalent in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, team identification may exert a significant influence on sponsorship awareness. This is due to the tendency of individuals in collectivist cultures to form strong affiliations with their groups (Gouveia *et al.*, 2002; Morand and Walther, 2018). Such in-group identification can lead them to be highly attuned to news and information related to the group (Vaidyanatha and Charness, 2020). Therefore, fans who strongly identify with a team are likely to be well-informed about any information related to their team, including sponsorship agreements. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

H1: Team identification positively affects fans' sponsorship awareness.

2.2 Team performance

The ‘basking in reflected glory’ (BIRG) phenomenon (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976) has been widely used in the literature of sports psychology to understand how fans emotionally react to the success of their beloved sporting entity (e.g., a team or an athlete). BIRG, which is grounded in balance theory (Heider, 1958), suggests that fans tend to associate more with their favorite sporting entity when that entity is winning or performing well (Jensen *et al.*, 2016). BIRG has been found to affect various aspects of fan-related behavior. Previous studies have found that on-field performance affects fans’ relationship with their team (Lee *et al.*, 2019) and their conative loyalty (e.g., intention to attend matches) (Harrolle *et al.*, 2010). The positive effects of good on-field performance are not limited to sporting entities but also extend to sponsoring brands (Dong *et al.*, 2023). Such positive effects include, for instance, positive image spillover (Pope *et al.*, 2009), high levels of sponsorship awareness (Reese and Bennett, 2011), increase in intentions to buy sponsors’ products (Ngan *et al.*, 2011; Yuan and Gao, 2022), and even positive changes in sponsors’ share prices (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001).

High levels of team performance (or winning) could play a significant role in the success of achieving high levels of sponsorships awareness for two reasons. First, good performance would help brands to gain higher levels of exposure to the public. It has been found that brand exposure increases because high performance is linked to high media exposure (Jensen and Cobbs, 2014). Second, good team performance could motivate fans to associate themselves more closely with the team (i.e., BIRGing) and therefore respond more positively to sponsorships. Pan and Phua (2021) have found that team performance has a positive effect on fans’ connections with their favorite team’s sponsor. Accordingly, the association between the brand and its sponsored team will be established and/or further strengthened in fans’ minds.

In collectivist cultures, good team performance is likely to influence sponsorship awareness, where communal information sharing and relational processing enhance the impact of sports victories. Studies conducted in these contexts indicate that team victories significantly enhance the positive word-of-mouth about sponsors’ products among fans (Koronios *et al.*, 2016). This trend of communal sharing, characteristic of collectivist orientations, correlates with increased sharing of product-related information on social networks (Pezzuti and Leonhardt, 2020), which could result in broader sponsor visibility. Furthermore, the relational processing inherent to collectivist mindsets (Kwon *et al.*, 2015) means that fans are likely to consider the sponsorship in relation to the team itself, affecting their memory and perception of both. As a result, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Team performance positively affects fans’ sponsorship awareness.

2.3 Sponsorship Awareness

Awareness can be defined as an individual’s ability to identify (i.e., recall or recognize) a brand in various situations, an essential measure of a brand’s visibility in the consumer’s mind (Keller, 1993). Effective awareness strategies ensure that a brand remains a top consideration during the consumer’s decision-making process (Konstantoulaki *et al.*, 2021). This is particularly vital in cluttered marketing

environments (Rosengren, 2008). In marketing communications, establishing robust brand awareness is often the first step in successful advertising and promotional campaigns, setting the stage for deeper consumer engagement and conversion (Bergkvist and Taylor, 2022).

In the realm of sponsorship, brands strategically enter into agreements to boost the target market's awareness of the association between the brand and the sponsored entity (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Zhang, 2023). Achieving this awareness is crucial because it lays the foundation for fulfilling other strategic objectives, such as enhancing the brand image and increasing consumer purchase intentions (Biscaia *et al.*, 2014; Zhang, 2023). Failing to establish strong sponsorship awareness can significantly hinder these broader goals (Zhang, 2023), making it a vital performance indicator for sponsors to evaluate the returns on their investments in sponsorship activities (Meenaghan and O'Sullivan, 2013). Understanding the role of sponsorship awareness is essential for appreciating its impact on both affective and behavioral consumer outcomes.

Research demonstrates that sponsorship awareness acts as an antecedent to affective outcomes, such as brand attitudes. Balance theory (Heider, 1958) suggests that individuals seek cognitive consistency in their relationships and attitudes. Hence, when a fan's favorite sports team is associated with a sponsoring brand, fans strive to maintain balance by aligning their positive sentiments towards the team with their attitudes towards the sponsor (Wang *et al.*, 2022). This cognitive and emotional alignment leads to the transfer of positive feelings from the team to the sponsor (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005). This process is not isolated from the broader cultural context in which these fans operate, which brings into play varying cultural dimensions.

Research indicates that cultural values, particularly individualism and collectivism, significantly influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors towards marketing communications (e.g., Gregory *et al.*, 2002; Lee and Choi, 2005; Wang, 2014). Studies show that consumers high in individualism tend to respond more positively to promotions that emphasize self-maximization, while collectivistic consumers are more influenced by consociality and collective promotions (Mai *et al.*, 2020). In collectivist cultures, such as Saudi culture, where group harmony and interdependence are emphasized, the effect of sponsorship awareness may be even more pronounced. Fans in these societies may experience a stronger transfer of positive sentiments due to their heightened emphasis on group loyalty and relational interdependence (e.g., Hornsey and Jetten, 2005; Liu *et al.*, 2020). This alignment is pivotal, as research shows that sponsorship awareness significantly boosts fans' attitudes toward the brand of their favorite sporting entity (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013). Given this foundation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Sponsorship awareness positively affects fans' attitudes toward the sponsoring brand.

Moreover, the influence of sponsorship awareness extends to behavioral intentions, affecting fans' purchase decisions. Elevated levels of sponsorship awareness significantly increase fans' intentions to purchase products from the sponsoring brand, as evidenced by studies by Choi and Yoh (2011), Khuong and Chau (2017), and

Koronios *et al.*, (2016). This increase is largely attributed to the psychological bond that develops when fans see sponsors actively supporting their favorite teams, which directly enhances the perceived value of the sponsor's products (Koronios *et al.*, 2016).

In collectivist cultures, communal endorsements significantly influence consumer purchasing behaviors. This effect is vividly illustrated on social media platforms where influencers align their endorsements with the cultural and emotional values of their audiences (Silva *et al.*, 2023). Within sports communities, this dynamic is evident as fans perceive purchasing sponsor products not just as consumer choices but as acts of loyalty and support for their team, thereby enhancing the communal bonds and identity shared among them (Ay and Kaygan, 2021). This interconnectedness underscores how sponsorship awareness not only shifts how fans view a brand but also directly influences their purchasing behavior. When fans are aware of a sponsorship, their emotional connections to the sponsor are strengthened, leading to increased purchasing of the sponsors' products (Lee and Jin, 2019). Consequently, we hypothesize:

H4: Sponsorship awareness positively affects fans' purchase intentions from the sponsoring brand.

2.4 Brand attitude

Attitude can be defined as “an individual's overall evaluation of an object, issue, or person” (Rodgers, 2003, p. 68). In sponsorship, improving positive attitudes toward sponsoring brands among the target market is one of the primary objectives that brands seek to accomplish via sponsorship engagement (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998). The meta-analytic review of Kim *et al.*, (2015) reveals that brand attitude is one of the most examined constructs in sponsorship academic research. To study sponsorship effectiveness, several previous studies have utilized brand attitude as a dependent variable (e.g., Boronczyk and Breuer, 2020; Kim and Kaplanidou, 2014). Other studies have employed brand attitude as an antecedent of purchase intention (e.g., Dees *et al.*, 2010; Koo and Lee, 2019; Koronios *et al.*, 2022).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (RTA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) explains that an individual's behavior is influenced by their intentions, which are shaped by their attitudes. This theoretical framework supports the established finding in sports sponsorship research that fans' favorable attitudes toward sponsoring brands positively influence their intentions to purchase products from those brands (e.g., Dees *et al.*, 2010; Koronios *et al.*, 2022). This relationship has been consistently demonstrated across various contexts, including sporting teams and events (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013; Koronios *et al.*, 2022), and in cross-cultural studies (Byon *et al.*, 2014; Zaharia, Mayer, *et al.*, 2016). For example, Zaharia *et al.*, (2016) found that in both individualistic (US, UK) and collectivistic (India) cultures, fans' attitudes toward sponsoring brands significantly impacted their purchase intentions. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H5: Brand attitude positively affects fans' purchase intentions from the sponsoring brand.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context, data collection and sampling

The context of this study includes Al Hilal FC, one of the most prominent and successful Saudi football clubs, known for its achievements and large fan base (Alkandi, 2021). Al Hilal FC is among the four clubs recently acquired by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), highlighting its strategic importance in Saudi football (Kunti, 2023). Additionally, the study includes Tania, a reputable water bottling brand in Saudi Arabia. At the time of data collection, Al Hilal FC and Tania had just announced their sponsorship agreement. It is important to note that the data used in this study is one wave of a larger longitudinal dataset collected by the first author for a broader research project. For this specific research, a subset of the longitudinal data relevant to the Al Hilal FC and Tania sponsorship agreement was selected and analyzed.

For data collection, the convenience sampling approach was used, and social media networks were utilized to distribute the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of seven parts: (1) a yes/no filtering question to identify Al Hilal FC fans; (2) demographic questions; (3) a question about level of identification with the team; (4) a question that asks fans to rate their team's performance in the last match; (5) a list of brands and a question about which brands the participants recognized as sponsors of Al Hilal FC; (6) a question about attitude toward Tania; and (7) a question about intention to purchase from Tania.

A total of 190 subjects participated in this study. The majority were male (86%), between the age of 18 and 35 years old (68%), earn more than SAR 10,000 a month (48%), and hold a bachelor degree or above (76%). The detailed demographic breakdown of the sample is presented in Table 1.

3.2 Measurements

Several measurement scales were employed to assess the variables of interest in this study's model. All measures originally developed in English were translated into Arabic using the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970). For team identification, the six-item Likert scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) was utilized (anchors: -3 = strongly disagree, +3 = strongly agree). To evaluate team performance, a single-item scale was administered; participants were asked to rate their team's performance in the most recent match (anchors: -3 = extremely bad, +3 = extremely good). For sponsorship awareness, participants were shown 12 brand logos, some of which were actual sponsors, including Tania, and some of which were not. They were then asked to identify all the sponsoring brands. Responses were dummy-coded (1 = if the participant recognizes Tania as a sponsor, 0 = otherwise). To gauge brand attitude, the single-item measure developed by Bergkvist and Rossiter (2009) was employed (anchors: -3 = I think it is extremely bad, +3 = I think it is extremely good). Lastly, to assess purchase intention, the well-known probabilistic single-item 11-point measure developed by Juster (1966) was used.

Table 1: Demographics

| Demographics | N = 190 | | |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| | N | % | Graph |
| Gender | | | |
| Male | 164 | 86.3% | |
| Female | 26 | 13.7% | |
| Age group | | | |
| 18–25 | 57 | 30% | |
| 26–35 | 73 | 38.4% | |
| 36–45 | 45 | 23.7% | |
| 46–55 | 13 | 6.8% | |
| Over 55 | 2 | 1.1% | |
| Education level | | | |
| Secondary School | 29 | 15.3% | |
| Diploma | 17 | 8.9% | |
| Bachelor | 117 | 61.6% | |
| Postgraduate | 27 | 14.2% | |
| Income range | | | |
| Not working | 28 | 14.7% | |
| Below SAR 5,000 | 32 | 16.8% | |
| SAR 5,000 - SAR 10,000 | 38 | 20% | |
| SAR 11,000 - SAR 15,000 | 50 | 26.3% | |
| Above SAR 15,000 | 42 | 22.1% | |

4. Analysis and results

4.1 PLS-SEM analysis

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen as the analytical approach for this study due to its alignment with several key characteristics of our research. First, PLS-SEM is particularly well-suited for research with a prediction-oriented focus (Hair *et al.*, 2019), which aligns with our investigation of sponsorship effectiveness within the dynamic Saudi Arabian market. Second, our model incorporates several single-item measures, a practice that PLS-SEM readily accommodates due to its flexibility in handling different measurement scales (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2021). Third, given the exploratory nature of our study, which seeks to extend established Western-centric sponsorship models to the under-researched Middle Eastern context, PLS-SEM's strength in theory adaptation and exploration makes it a fitting choice (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, PLS-SEM is robust to deviations from normality (Hair *et al.*, 2019), making it suitable for our data, which lacks normal distribution. The analysis was conducted using the SEMinR

package in R (Ray *et al.*, 2022). We used a PLS algorithm to estimate the path coefficients of the structural model and applied the bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 re-samples to test their statistical significance.

4.1.1 Measurement model assessment

The reliability and validity of the measurement model were evaluated using several key metrics. As shown in Table 2, indicator loadings for team identification ranged from 0.383 to 0.887. Although items TI2 (0.383) and TI6 (0.456) had loadings below the recommended threshold of 0.70, they were retained due to their theoretical relevance and minimal improvement in model fit upon removal. Indicators with weaker factor loadings can be retained if other indicators possess high loadings, and the overall construct should explain at least 50% variance ($AVE = 0.50$) (Hair *et al.*, 2022). The Cronbach's alpha for team identification was 0.818, composite reliability (ρ_C) was 0.855, and average variance extracted (AVE) was 0.516, indicating acceptable levels of internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair *et al.*, 2022). Team performance, sponsorship awareness, brand attitude, and purchase intention were measured using single items, and therefore, internal consistency and convergent validity could not be assessed for these constructs.

Table2: Constructs

| Construct | item | Scale item | Loading | α | AVE | ρ_C | ρ_A |
|-----------------------|------|--|---------|----------|------|----------|----------|
| Team Identification | TI1 | I am very interested in what others think about Al Hilal FC. | .728 | .818 | .516 | .855 | .928 |
| | TI2 | The successes of Al Hilal FC are my successes. | .383 | | | | |
| | TI3 | When someone criticises Al Hilal FC, it feels like a personal insult. | .832 | | | | |
| | TI4 | When I talk about Al Hilal FC, I usually say 'we', rather than 'they'. | .887 | | | | |
| | TI5 | When someone praises Al Hilal FC, it feels like a personal compliment. | .856 | | | | |
| | TI6 | If a story in the media criticises Al Hilal FC, I feel embarrassed. | .456 | | | | |
| Team Performance | TP | How would you rate Al Hilal FC performance in the last match? | - | - | - | - | - |
| Sponsorship Awareness | AW | From the list of brands below, please select all the brands, if any, that you believe they sponsor Al Hilal FC | - | - | - | - | - |
| Brand Attitude | ATT | Thinking about bottled water, how would you describe the brand Tania? | - | - | - | - | - |
| Purchase Intention | PI | Thinking about bottled water, how would you describe the brand Tania? | - | - | - | - | - |

Discriminant validity was assessed using two complementary methods: the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. As presented in Table 3, the square root of the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) for each construct was greater than its correlations with any other construct, confirming discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This method ensures that each construct is distinct from others in the model, providing a basic test for discriminant validity. On the other hand, Table 4 presents the HTMT ratio, which offers a more stringent assessment by examining the ratio of heterotrait-heteromethod correlations to monotrait-heteromethod correlations. This method is considered a more robust measure of discriminant validity, particularly in situations where constructs are theoretically expected to be similar. The HTMT values were all below the critical threshold of 0.90, further confirming discriminant validity (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). These complementary results confirm the reliability and validity of the measurement model, supporting the robustness of the constructs used in this study.

Table 3: Fornell–Larcker criterion matrix

| Construct | Team Identification | Team Performance | Sponsorship Awareness | Brand Attitude | Purchase Intention |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Team Identification | 0.719 | | | | |
| Team Performance | 0.094 | 1 | | | |
| Sponsorship Awareness | 0.265 | 0.180 | 1 | | |
| Brand Attitude | 0.264 | 0.094 | 0.389 | 1 | |
| Purchase Intention | 0.248 | 0.108 | 0.403 | 0.625 | 1 |

Table 4: Discriminant validity – HTMT ratio

| Construct | Team Identification | Team Performance | Sponsorship Awareness | Brand Attitude |
|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| Team Performance | 0.107 | | | |
| Sponsorship Awareness | 0.231 | 0.180 | | |
| Brand Attitude | 0.256 | 0.094 | 0.389 | |
| Purchase Intention | 0.243 | 0.108 | 0.403 | 0.625 |

4.2 Results

The PLS-SEM analysis yielded the following results regarding the hypothesized relationships and model fit, as presented in Table 5, and illustrated in Figure 1.

Hypothesis H1, positing that team identification positively affects fans' sponsorship awareness, was strongly supported ($\beta = 0.251$, $SE = 0.069$, $t = 3.648$, $p < 0.001$). This finding suggests that stronger identification with a sports team significantly increases awareness of that team's sponsors. In contrast, the results for H2, which proposed that team performance positively affects fans' sponsorship awareness, were less conclusive. While the path coefficient was positive ($\beta = 0.157$, $SE = 0.080$, $t = 1.945$), indicating a

potential positive association, it was only marginally significant ($p < 0.1$). This suggests that while some evidence supports a positive effect of team performance on sponsorship awareness (e.g., Koronios *et al.*, 2016), the relationship is not as strong or consistent as initially hypothesized.

Moving on to the remaining hypotheses, the results provided robust support. The effect of sponsorship awareness on brand attitude (H3) was significant and substantial ($\beta = 0.389$, $SE = 0.068$, $t = 5.764$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that increased awareness leads to more favorable brand perceptions. Similarly, sponsorship awareness was found to significantly predict purchase intention (H4; $\beta = 0.188$, $SE = 0.066$, $t = 2.864$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that heightened awareness of a sponsorship can translate into a higher likelihood of purchase. Finally, the relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention (H5) was the strongest among the tested hypotheses ($\beta = 0.552$, $SE = 0.047$, $t = 11.808$, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing that positive brand attitudes are a powerful driver of consumer purchasing behavior.

The R^2 values indicate the amount of variance explained by the independent variables in each endogenous construct. Notably, brand attitude ($R^2 = 0.151$) and purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.42$) were well-explained by their respective predictors. The R^2 for sponsorship awareness ($R^2 = 0.095$) was relatively low.

Table 5: Hypothesis testing

| Hypothesis | Path | β | SE | t | CI | | Decision |
|------------|---|---------|-------|--------|--------|-------|----------|
| | | | | | 2.5% | 97.5% | |
| H1 | Team Identification → Sponsorship Awareness | 0.251 | 0.069 | 3.648 | 0.151 | 0.405 | Accept |
| H2 | Team Performance → Sponsorship Awareness | 0.157 | 0.080 | 1.945 | -0.006 | 0.309 | *Accept |
| H3 | Sponsorship Awareness → Brand Attitude | 0.389 | 0.068 | 5.764 | 0.251 | 0.514 | Accept |
| H4 | Sponsorship Awareness → Purchase Intention | 0.188 | 0.066 | 2.864 | 0.057 | 0.315 | Accept |
| H5 | Brand Attitude → Purchase Intention | 0.552 | 0.047 | 11.808 | 0.456 | 0.638 | Accept |

* Accepted at the 90% confidence level.

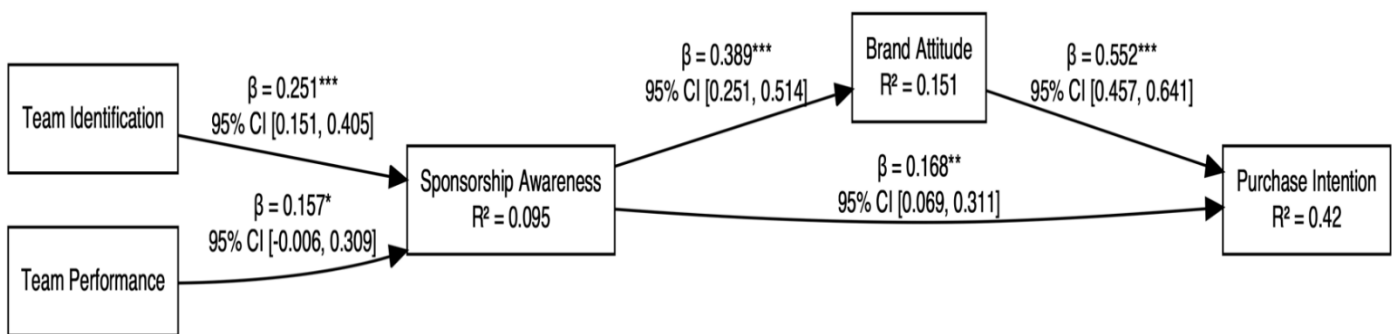


Figure 1: Model and results

5. Discussion and theoretical implications

This study sought to assess the effectiveness of well-established Western-centric sponsorship models within the unique context of Saudi Arabia, a rapidly evolving market that necessitates a nuanced understanding of local consumer behavior. Our findings contribute to the existing literature on sports sponsorship by examining the applicability of these models in an under-researched Middle Eastern context, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of sponsorship effectiveness across diverse cultural landscapes.

Our results provide robust support for the role of SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) in the Saudi Arabian context. The strong positive relationship between team identification and sponsorship awareness aligns with the premise that individuals who strongly identify with a group (in this case, a sports team) are more likely to be aware of information relevant to the group, including its sponsors (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). This finding extends the applicability of SIT to lower-tier sponsors, a segment often overlooked in prior research, suggesting that strong team identification can drive awareness even for less prominent sponsors.

The marginally significant positive relationship between team performance and sponsorship awareness warrants further investigation. While this study's results are still in line with the BIRG phenomenon (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976), the weaker effect observed here suggests potential cultural nuances in how Saudi Arabian fans respond to team performance compared to other cultures. Future research could study these potential cultural differences, exploring, for example, how collectivist values and social norms might influence the relationship between team performance and sponsorship awareness.

Our findings strongly support the positive effect of sponsorship awareness on brand attitude, consistent with balance theory (Heider, 1958). This suggests that in the Saudi Arabian context, where group harmony and social connections are emphasized, the transfer of positive affect from the team to the sponsor is particularly salient. This underscores the importance of developing culturally relevant sponsorship strategies that resonate with the values and beliefs of the target audience in collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 2001).

Furthermore, our results confirm the significant positive relationship between sponsorship awareness and purchase intention, aligning with prior research (Choi and Yoh, 2011; Koronios *et al.*, 2016). This finding highlights the potential of sponsorship as a strategic tool for driving consumer behavior in this market.

Finally, our results solidify the well-established link between brand attitude and purchase intention, demonstrating the universality of this relationship across diverse cultural contexts (e.g., Biscaia *et al.*, 2013; Dees *et al.*, 2010). This finding reinforces the applicability of the TRA (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) in the Saudi context, suggesting that attitudes directly influence behavioral intentions. This reinforces the importance of building positive brand attitudes through sponsorship activities as a means to increase the likelihood of consumer purchase, a principle that holds true in both Western and Middle Eastern markets.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of considering cultural factors when applying established sponsorship models to new contexts. While some relationships, like the link between team identification and awareness, seem to hold across cultures, others, like the impact of team performance, might require a more nuanced understanding in specific cultural settings. This research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of sponsorship effectiveness and highlights the need for further exploration of cultural influences on consumer responses to sponsorship initiatives.

5.1 Practical implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for brands contemplating sports sponsorship, particularly within the largely untapped market of Saudi Arabia.

First, the significance of team identification highlights the necessity for brands to integrate more deeply with the team's narrative. By moving beyond superficial branding exercises and focusing on aligning the brand's identity with the team's story, values, and traditions, brands can foster a more meaningful and lasting connection with fans. This could involve tailoring marketing messages to reflect the team's unique characteristics or supporting initiatives that resonate with the fan base's passions and interests.

Second, team performance stands out as a crucial factor in sponsorship success. High-performing teams attract increased media coverage, social media engagement, and a more energized fan base, which can translate into greater brand exposure and positive image transfer (Jensen and Cobbs, 2014; Pope *et al.*, 2009). Brands should therefore consider investing in partnerships with successful teams, particularly those with a consistent record of achievement or those experiencing a current winning streak, to maximize their return on investment in sponsorship.

Third, and importantly, our study underscores the power of leveraging the collectivist nature of Saudi Arabian culture. In such cultures, fans often form deep emotional bonds with their teams, viewing them as symbols of community and shared identity. Brands can capitalize on this by designing campaigns that tap into these emotional connections and foster a sense of shared purpose. This could involve organizing events that allow fans to interact with players, creating co-branded merchandise that celebrates the team's achievements, or supporting local initiatives that resonate with the community's values. For instance, a sponsoring brand could organize 'Meet and Greet' events (Piland, 2020), where fans can interact with their favorite players, thereby strengthening their affinity for both the team and the brand. By activating sponsorships in ways that are culturally relevant and emotionally engaging, brands can build stronger and more lasting relationships with their target audience in Saudi Arabia.

5.2 Limitations and future research

This study, while offering valuable insights into sports sponsorship effectiveness in Saudi Arabia, has certain limitations. Primarily, the research context was confined to one team and one low-tier sponsoring brand (i.e., official bottled water). This specificity limits the generalizability of our findings to broader settings or diverse sponsorship contexts. Future research should expand to include multiple teams across different

sports and examine the effects of varying sponsorship tiers (e.g., major vs. minor sponsors) and types (e.g., on-shirt vs. off-shirt sponsors). Such comparisons could reveal differential impacts on fan outcomes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of sponsorship effectiveness.

Furthermore, this study relied on a single-item measure to assess purchase intention, which may be susceptible to social desirability bias. Fans might have overstated their purchase intentions due to social desirability bias (Adamsen *et al.*, 2013; Zaharia, Biscaia, *et al.*, 2016). This potential bias could have inflated the observed relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention. Future research should explore alternative measurement approaches, such as best-worst scaling (Louviere *et al.*, 2015), to mitigate potential biases and offer a more accurate gauge of fans' actual purchase intentions (Almaiman *et al.*, 2024).

Additionally, the use of convenience sampling, while practical for data collection in this exploratory study, may have introduced potential biases in the sample. The sample might not be fully representative of the broader population of Saudi Arabian sports fans, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings. Future research could benefit from employing purposive or judgmental sampling techniques to enhance the representativeness of the sample and provide a more comprehensive understanding of sponsorship effectiveness across different segments of the population.

Finally, the sample's predominantly male composition might introduce biases, as the findings may not accurately reflect the perspectives and behaviors of a more diverse audience. Subsequent studies should aim for a more balanced gender distribution in the sample and investigate potential gender-specific effects in sponsorship outcomes, such as differences in the impact of team identification and performance on awareness or brand attitude.

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