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**Article**

## Rationality and Emotionality of Sponsorship Negotiations - Managerial Approaches to Sponsorship Decision-Making

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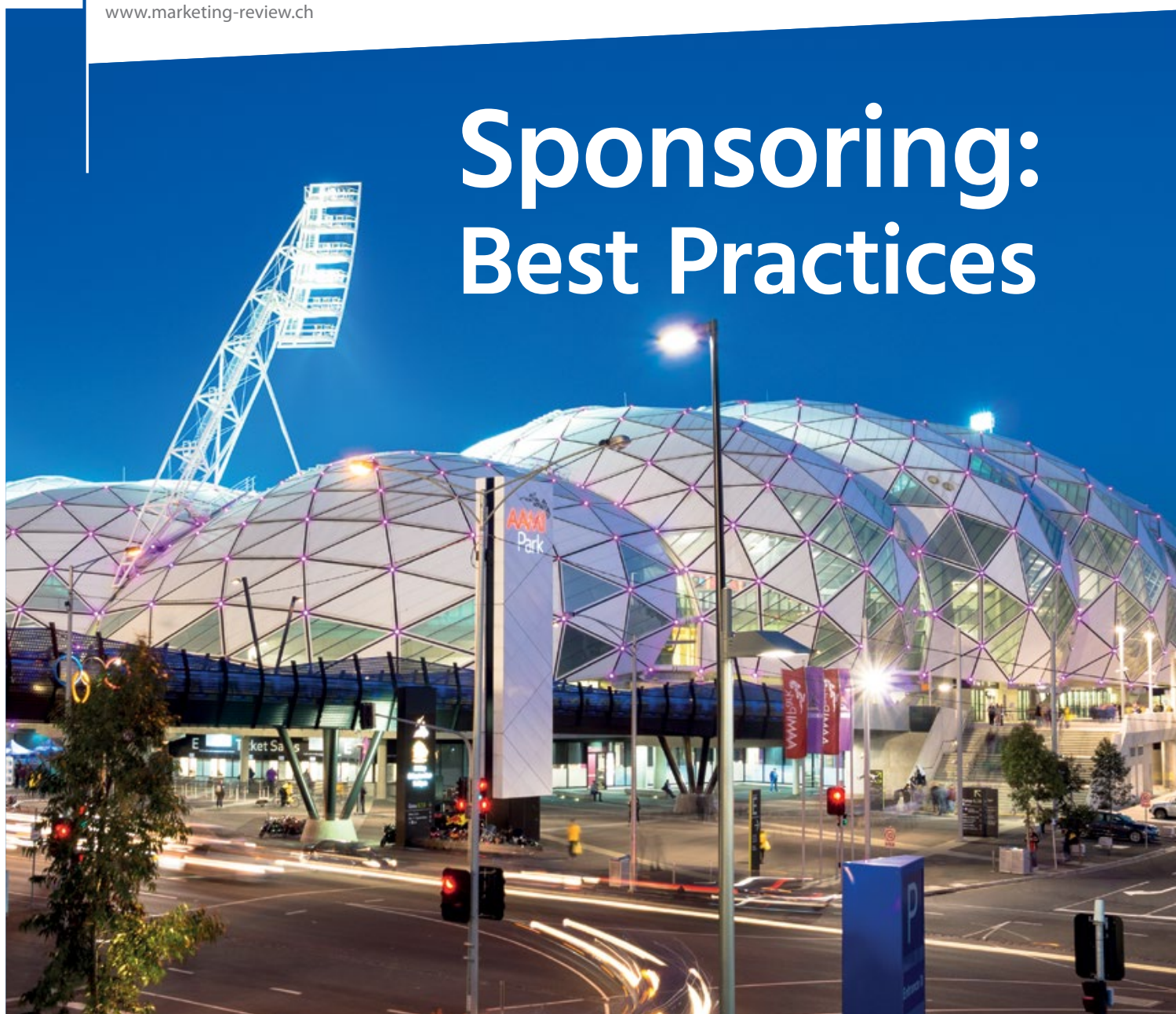
# Marketing Review St. Gallen



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## Sponsoring: Best Practices



# Rationality and Emotionality of Sponsor- ship Negotiations

## Managerial Approaches to Sponsorship Decision-Making

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In this article, we investigate how rationality and emotionality influence sponsorship negotiations and relationships between sponsors and sponsees. A total of 33 semi-structured interviews with sponsors, sponsees and sponsorship agencies shed light on these processes from three different perspectives. Our results indicate that managers appreciate and value emotionality inherent to sports for marketing purposes, but attempt to reduce the effect of emotions during the decision-making process.

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**M**arketing academics invariably claim that sponsorship decisions should be based on “return on investment”, and many marketing managers agree. At the same time, property managers know how important it is to literally walk marketing managers through their event to get a buy-in. Do the properties lure brand managers into sponsorship agreements based on the emotional impact of events? Or do brand managers really make rational decisions based on hard facts? How can managers use this knowledge on rationality and biases in the negotiation process?

Although the results of sponsorship negotiation process appear in the press – for example, Arsenal London just made a £200 million shirt sponsorship deal with Emirates Airlines until 2024 (Wilson, 2018) – very little is known about the negotiation process. In this paper, we explore the decision-making process in the field of sport sponsorship from a practitioner perspective.

## Literature Review

The sponsorship decision-making process typically comprises three stages:

- In the first phase, sometimes termed “approach”, the potential partners engage in goal-setting, market screening, selecting potential partners and writing proposals (Walliser, 2003).
- Stage two in the process includes negotiations, decision-making and contractual agreement. In this stage, negotiation is crucial, because the key elements of the future collaboration are discussed (Athanasopoulou & Sarli, 2015).
- In the third stage, the post-decision phase, the sponsor and the sponsee bring the sponsorship to life through leveraging activities and subsequently evaluating them. This stage comprises the delivery of assets, active management of the relationship and evaluation of the sponsorship (Cousens, Babiak & Bradish, 2006).

Table 1 summarizes selected findings regarding sponsorship negotiation models and relationship building.

While prior research provides a basis for understanding the framework of sport sponsorship negotiations, very little is known about how partners move from one stage to the next. We hypothesize that the negotiation stages may be of crucial value for successful sponsorship relationships. Negotiations may determine the success of any future collaboration between the two parties.

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Research on negotiations in general has shown that early phases of the negotiation process are important for the outcome in later stages.

As strong emotions are a unique characteristic of the sports context, emotions are likely to influence decision-making in sport sponsorships. The emotional attachment of a CEO who strongly influences the decision-making process is a prominent narrative in sport sponsorship (Amis, Slack & Berrett, 1999). The literature from the fields of social psychology, organizational psychology and the psychology of emotions on the role of emotions in negotiations draws a more fine-grained picture. From this perspective, emotions unfold their effect in negotiations in three ways: emotions as a predictor of negotiation outcomes, emotions as a consequence of social interaction, and the strategic use of emotions during negotiations (Barry, Fulmer & Goates, 2006). Negotiators are especially influenced by their opponent’s emotions when they are motivated and able to consider them (Thompson, Wang & Gunia, 2010).

These questions lead to two related objectives in our empirical study: Firstly, and most importantly, we explored how decision-makers in the field of sport sponsorship negotiate. Secondly, we determined how and when emotional and rational elements are used in sponsorship negotiations and how they influence subsequent relationship quality between sponsors and sponsees.

## Methodology

We regard the knowledge and emotions embedded in such negotiations as situational, contextual, and interactual. Hence, we decided to use qualitative interviewing techniques which offer the greatest potential for generating contextual knowledge (Mason, 2018). The semi-structured interviews with experts from the field consequently included questions that were situational rather than abstract, and addressed personal experiences rather than merely asking for post-hoc rationalizations of strategies and tactics used.

For sampling, we attempted to ensure heterogeneity by selecting experts across different industries, company sizes

and levels of work experience. The final sample consisted of 14 sponsorship managers of sponsors, 12 agency employees and 7 experts from rights holders as sponsoring intermediaries. Especially the latter play a major role in the sponsorship decision-making process (Cornwell, 2008). Sample selection was based on three criteria: direct involvement in sponsorship negotiations, active participation in the final decision on sponsoring deals, and seniority (> 3 years of experience) as a criterion for familiarity with the negotiation context. The Germany-based experts and their affiliations are listed in Table 2. In total, we conducted 33 qualitative semi-structured expert interviews (interview duration: 20–90 minutes). Interviewees were asked to focus on the negotiation situati-

**Table 1: Overview of Selected Studies Regarding Sponsorship Negotiation Models and Relationship Building**

Source	Type of Study	Sample	Focus of the Study
Lund & Greyser (2016)	qualitative	Case study: interviews with UEFA and EURO personnel, 2 sponsors, 5 independent experts	More effective sports sponsorship – combining and integrating key resources and capabilities of international sports events and their major sponsors
Athanasopoulou & Sarli (2015)	qualitative	4 case studies: 2 professional, premier league football clubs and 2 sponsoring organizations, 1 major sponsor for each club (one brand new sponsorship deal and one renewal)	Stage model of the development of new sponsorship deals through the lens of new service development
Morgan et al. (2014)	qualitative	19 interviews with personnel from an Australian National Sport Organisation (NSO)	Relationship management in sport–sponsorship alliances
Daellenbach (2012)	qualitative	10 cases: sponsoring company and arts organization	Sponsorship decision-making process in arts sponsorships deals
Lee & Ross (2012)	quantitative	35 sponsors of clubs across different leagues	Identification of decision-making factors of sport sponsorships
Farrelly (2010)	qualitative	24 in-depth interviews	Sponsorship termination
Lund (2010)	qualitative	Case study of the Royal Swedish Opera	Co-creation of value in sponsorship relationships
Farrelly, Quester & Burton (2006)	qualitative	28 managers from different industries and countries over a 4-year period	Evolution of sponsorship value and sponsorship success factors
Farrelly & Quester (2005)	quantitative	46 sponsors of the Australian Football League (AFL)	Identification of important relationship constructs
Hartland, Skinner & Griffiths (2005)	mainly quantitative	9 sponsors of a Welsh rugby club	Investigation of relationship-marketing objectives
Long, Thibault & Wolfe (2004)	qualitative	Single case study in the athletics department of a Canadian university	Funding decisions
Amis, Slack & Berrett (1999)	qualitative	28 Canadian national and multinational companies	Sponsorship as a source of competitive differentiation

Source: Own Representation.



on, the respective context, the process dynamics, and their own experiences, cognitions, and feelings. In a second step, we asked them to provide us with their views on the strategies and tactics employed by the people around the table. We analyzed the data following the guideline of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Results and Discussion

Table 3 summarizes the results of our thematic analysis using the framework developed by Daellenbach (2012) to structure the different aspects of sponsorship decision-making. Here, we condensed and merged the themes that emerged from the

thematic analysis in order to characterize the two extreme poles of the negotiation process. In practice, a sponsorship decision-making process is rarely solely emotionally driven or rationality-driven. Rather, the process will be a mixture of both types, for example, an emotionally driven approaching phase is followed by a very rational evaluation process.

On the one hand, managers well understand emotions involved in sport sponsorship. They view sport sponsorship as a very important platform for marketing communication. On the other hand, emotionality can hinder a more distanced and rational evaluation of the decision-making process. Decisions based on ego involvement of the decision-makers are viewed with skepticism, because they have no strategic di-

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### Important Findings for Sponsorship Decision-Making

Key capabilities to create value through sponsorship relationships: collaborative, absorptive, adaptive and learning capabilities.

New service development involves three main phases: information collection, proposal preparation and presentation or receipt and analysis, negotiation, and contract signing. All four firms in the sample use a semi-formal and flexible process.

Informal governance is critical to the relationships underpinning the sponsorship alliances. Partner satisfaction and alliance stability stem from relational constructs and the balance between formal governance mechanisms.

Three decision paths: (1) high-level and intuitive, (2) lower-level, (3) initially instigated by a third party. The following key elements determine the path selection: existing relationships, fit between both parties, commercial or philanthropic goals, role of individual informed intuition.

Sport-team factors are the most important decision-making factors, followed by country and environmental factors. Media exposure is the most influential factor, but sponsorship fit, team image and fan base strength also exert a significant influence.

Problems that might lead to sponsorship termination involve strategic vs. tactical intent, commitment asymmetry, and sponsorship capability.

Four stages of value co-creation: strategy-setting, partner identification, optimization, evaluation.

Sponsors view sponsorships as a strategic tool, in particular as a corporate image and brand-positioning platform. The core competences of sponsorship-specific activities include reciprocal commitment, brand-building capabilities and collaborative capabilities.

The authors find commitment to be an antecedent of economic satisfaction, whereas trust is an antecedent of both economic and non-economic satisfaction.

A deeper understanding of the sponsors' relationship-marketing objectives could improve their success. As a result, their relationships with the sponsoring organization are reinforced.

Structural factors (positional power, coaching high-priority sports) exert the greatest influence on the funding decision. Additionally, personal factors (expertise, personality, seniority) have an influence on the decision.

Successful firms develop their sponsorship into a distinctive competence by turning sponsorship into an intrinsic part of their overall marketing and communication mix. In contrast, unsuccessful firms enter into a sponsorship agreement without even thinking about building a coherent marketing image.

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**Table 2: Overview of the Study Participants**

<b>Expert No</b>	<b>Domain</b>	<b>Property</b>	<b>No. of Employees/ Members</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Work Experience</b>
S1	Sports goods manufacturer	Sports goods manufacturer	229	Director Sports Promotion (Germany)	4 years
S2	Sports goods manufacturer	Sports goods manufacturer	215 (worldwide: 650,000)	Sports Marketing Manager	11 years
S3	Sports and health goods manufacturer	Sports and health goods manufacturer	1400	Head of Marketing	> 15 years
S4	Health care equipment company	Health care equipment company	2070	Marketing/Sponsoring Manager	7 years
S5	Health care equipment company	Health care equipment company	2070	Director of Sports Marketing	> 20 years
S6	Furniture manufacturer	Furniture manufacturer	55	Executive Board Assistant/Marketing	3 years
S7	Insurance company	Insurance company	28,487	Executive Director of Regional Head Office	10 years
S8	Transmission system operator	Transmission system operator	2,950	Director Public Relations	18 years
S9	IT-Consulting	IT-Consulting	300	Executive Director	30 years
S10	IT-Consulting	IT-Consulting	400	Director Public Relations	22 years
S11	Automobile Group	Automobile Group	122,244	Project Manager "Running"	15 years
S12	Automobile Group	Automobile Group	280,000	Director Global Sport Sponsorships	6 years
S13	Technology Company	Technology company	10,086	Marketing/Sponsoring Manager	15 years
S14	Mechanical engineering	Mechanical engineering	900	Head of HR	5 years
I1	Sponsorship agency	Sponsorship agency	100	Consultant	5 years
I2	Sponsorship agency	Sponsorship agency	100	Executive Director	> 15 years
I3	Sponsorship agency	Sponsorship agency	100	Executive Director	> 15 years
I4	Sports rights agency	Sports rights agency	1700 (worldwide)	Sales Manager, core area: Sponsoring	5 years
I5	Sports rights agency	Sports rights agency	1700 (worldwide)	Marketing Associate	6 years
I6	Sports rights agency	Sports rights agency	1700 (worldwide)	Sales Associate	6 years
I7	Sports rights agency	Sports rights agency	1500	Executive Director	15 years
I8	Sponsorship agency	Sponsorship agency	10	Executive Director	10 years
I9	Agency	Agency	5	Business Development and Sponsoring	8 years
I10	Agency	Agency	2	Executive Director	25 years
I11	Agency	Agency	45	Executive Director	19 years
I12	Agency	Agency	3	CEO	22 years
R1	1st league football club	1st league football club	21,500 club members	Director Brand Management	17 years
R2	World Team Tennis (WTT) team	World Team Tennis (WTT) team	3000	Freelancer Sponsoring Acquisitions	5 years
R3	1st league football club	1st league football club	150,000 club members	Director Sales (Marketing Division)	15 years
R4	Professional Triathlete	Professional Triathlete	-	Professional Athlete	4 years
R5	2nd League football club	2nd league football club	60,000 club members	Sales Manager, core area: Sponsoring	6 years
R6	1st league football club	1st league football club	14,000 club members	CEO	11 years
R7	1st league basketball club	1st league basketball club	500 club members	Executive Director	6 years

Source: Own Representation.

**Table 3: Summary of the Empirical Results**

<b>Characteristics of a Pure Emotionality-Oriented Approach</b>	<b>Stage of the Negotiation Process</b>	<b>Characteristics of a Pure Rationality-Oriented Approach</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A preset tendency to invest in certain platforms or sports</li> <li>• Selection criteria biased</li> <li>• Lack of clear sponsorship goals</li> </ul>	Pre-approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screening of potential platforms in a systematic manner</li> <li>• Sport sponsorship is treated as any other marketing communication tool</li> <li>• Every platform has the same chance to be selected according to the marketing goals</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach through personal contacts</li> <li>• Faster approaching phase due to personal contacts</li> </ul>	Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official sponsorship requests</li> <li>• Distanced approaching process</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of the alternatives is biased towards sport sponsorship</li> <li>• Evaluation criteria unclear</li> <li>• Key sponsorship or platform characteristics are over- or underrated</li> </ul>	Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of the alternatives in an unbiased manner using transparent criteria that do not favor sport sponsorship</li> <li>• Fully transparent results of the evaluation process</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotions at the negotiation table may impact the result in favor of the engagement on a sport sponsorship platform</li> </ul>	Decision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objectively best alternative makes the deal</li> </ul>

Source: Own Representation.

mension. We find that a strategic long-term orientation is especially relevant for managers.

Regarding the emotionality theme, we observed that managers regulate their emotions towards a more rational view of negotiations. There is abundant research investigating the role of emotions in negotiations. However, our study differs significantly from this approach, as we did not directly investigate negotiation situations through experimental manipulation, but focused more on the broader context of sponsorship decision-making.

Our results show that the sports context and its unique feature of strong emotions has an impact on how managers negotiate. The results of our qualitative study also show that the emotional context of sports has an impact on managers' approach to negotiations. We find a pattern of decision-makers aiming to reduce the impact of emotions and tending to prefer a more rational approach which is similar to crisis negotiations (Taylor, 2002).

A large part of our results points to a rationally based approach to sponsorship negotiation. This approach is driven by the expectation that sponsorship should yield a calculable positive return. The long-term orientation of sponsorship as a marketing/communication tool may favor such an approach. It does, in any case, foster future-oriented behavior. Many managers believe that respectful and credible communication will lead to mutually beneficial agreements. Trust built during the negotiation process will carry over into the actual contractual agreement which has a much longer life span than most other marketing tools.

### Management Summary

Sport is emotional – purely rational sponsorship negotiations do not exist. The extent to which emotional elements influence the negotiation process depends on the individual approach of the negotiators, not on company characteristics. All partners involved in sponsoring negotiations should be aware of the emotional components of sport sponsoring in all stages of the negotiation process to avoid potential biases.

Despite these rational elements, the influence of emotions on the negotiation process is evident. First, the sport context is so emotionally loaded that it would be very surprising if this essential quality did not spill over into the negotiation process. Certain actors may have an interest in riding the emotional wave more than others. Rights holders can gain the most from bringing the emotions of their properties to the negotiation table. It seems as though they strategically use their emotional asset at a very early stage. Intermediaries, too, are aware of the strength of this asset. In some cases, event emotions seem to have the power to shorten the negotiation process. Companies – or situations – in which sponsorship decisions are ego-driven may be most prone to such emotional, intuitive reactions. The data provides weak support for the assumption that this kind of behavior tends to happen more frequently in small rather than in large companies. The difference is, however, far from



## Main Propositions

1. Emotional elements present in the early phase of the negotiations are valuable indicators for the quality of future sponsorship collaboration.
2. Strong ego involvement of the main negotiators ultimately leads to less satisfying sponsorship results.
3. Managers on both sides of the negotiation table need to identify the emotional components of the negotiations in order to prevent biased results of the process.
4. Successful management of the rational side of sponsorship requires a sound preparation of the initial negotiation phase, a strong future orientation, and awareness of the risks inherent to sponsorship.

## Lessons Learned

1. Sponsors and sponsorship rights holders should be aware that sponsorship negotiations have both emotional and rational elements which influence and potentially bias the outcome of the negotiations.
2. As a consequence, negotiation partners should strive to identify these emotional elements, thus allowing for less biased decisions.
3. Both partners have to establish transparent decision criteria.
4. Any deal or event needs to be measured against preset sponsorship decision criteria, acknowledging that emotionality may well be one of these criteria.
5. Agencies which sell sport sponsorship rights can take advantage of the higher emotionality of sports as compared to other communication forms to attract clients.

systematic. In these cases, the decision is usually made in the pit lane or on the golf course, where soft factors rule, not hard facts or numbers. Whenever this happens, the rest of the process will follow one of two possible general patterns: either the ensuing negotiations turn largely into a “sense-making” exercise, or the emotional impact of the approaching phase is largely filtered out.

In the first situation, negotiation teams try to make the “emotional” deal look rational. They may argue that the

choice is financially sound and in line with company requirements and strategy, without providing all the hard facts. In the second situation, negotiation teams filter out the emotional bias introduced by a higher-level decision taker through processes imposed by the organization, or by their rational personal orientation.

The fact that the impact of sponsorship is difficult to isolate in the overall marketing effort of a brand does open the door – to a certain extent – to emotional rather than rational sponsorship decisions. The attitude of the individuals responsible for the negotiations allows for correcting such a potential bias. In sum, rationality and emotionality cohabitate in sponsorship negotiations in a way which is unlikely to prevail in many other negotiation settings.

## Managerial Implications

Our results show that sponsorship negotiations combine rational and emotional elements in a very specific way. A personal preference for emotional rather than rational decision-making can be found in any negotiation context. But in sports, it is to a large extent the emotional context of the object of negotiation – events, activities, sports people – which brings negotiators together. This emotional context tends to spill over into the negotiation process. Thus, the recommendations for the negotiation partners differ:


- Rights holders and agencies representing them have an interest in using the emotional context to their own advantage. They should take advantage of the emotional nature of any sports event to attract partners and to shorten the reaction time of the other party.
- In contrast, potential sponsors should not forget their strategic goals and not get overwhelmed by the emotional appeal of the event if it does not perfectly fit their objectives. The proposed event has to measure up against their preset rules and criteria; emotionality of the event may well be one of these criteria, but there should be many others besides.

Ultimately, the extent to which the emotional assets influence, or even shorten, the negotiation process depends on the individual approach of the negotiators. Our results do not follow any systematic pattern in this regard. Company characteristics do not explain negotiation approaches; neither did any clear-cut differences between sponsors, sponsees and agencies become apparent. Sponsorship decisions based on ego involvement of the decision-maker do occur, but our data shows that these decisions are less preferred by mana-

gers in the field and especially by those who have to implement the sponsorship over a long period. However, our findings by no means indicate that negotiations should completely ignore the emotional aspects. Most managers tend to view a rational approach to negotiations as a success factor. Those managers often can be characterized by three traits: they give great importance to the preparation phase of the negotiation process, they possess a strong future orientation (favoring deals which go beyond three years), and a high risk awareness. These findings engender a second set of recommendations:

- Rights holders should use emotionality as early as possible during the negotiation process to ideally get an initial agreement with the main (top management) decision-takers on the other side of the table. In later phases, rights holders are well advised to yield to the possibly more rational approach of the managers on the client side who are responsible for the implementation of the deal.
- On the other hand, potential sponsors, if they really value a rational approach, should never commit to an event before the pros and cons of all relevant deal characteristics have been weighed.

The present study gives sponsorship managers a „shortcut“ to understanding and navigating the interplay between rational and emotional elements in their negotiations. The unsuccessful sponsorship negotiations between the car manufacturer BMW and the football club Bayern Munich in 2019 may provide a good example in this respect: Although the deal with BMW was reportedly better than the current deal with car supplier Audi, the deal failed as late as in the decision phase: Bayern Munich officials interpreted BMW's last-minute request for an exit clause as a lack of trust. This interpretation ultimately led them to the emotion-driven reaction to terminate the negotiations, as they viewed trust as the basis for a successful sponsoring collaboration throughout the 12 years of the negotiated contract. Managers in the field of sport sponsorship should be aware of the opposite party's propensity towards negotiations – a competence that might have been lacking in the latter example. Being mindful of the interplay between rationality and emotionality enables negotiators to prepare for (e.g., through training in emotional intelligence skills), use or counter such approaches.

In sum, this article should help sponsorship managers to prepare for negotiations, to conduct them more successfully, and to appreciate the importance of the negotiation phase for the subsequent collaboration. 

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