

Understanding fans' reactions to sponsorship in the Saudi pro league: Effects of sponsor type and integration cues

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Abstract: This research comprises two complementary studies examining how fans evaluate sponsorships in the Saudi Professional League (SPL). Study 1 employed a quantitative survey ($n = 563/600$, 93.8% response rate) to investigate how processing fluency and perceived fan benefits influence fans' evaluation of sponsorships. Both variables positively affected fan attitudes toward sponsors. Building on these findings, Study 2 utilized a 2×2 between-subjects experimental design ($n = 374$) to examine how sponsorship type (naming rights vs. jersey sponsorship) and integration level (high vs. low) influence fan responses. The results indicated that naming rights (vs. jersey) sponsorships generated higher processing fluency and perceived fan benefits, while high integration cues further reduced these effects. Collectively, the two studies demonstrate that fans interpret sponsorships through both cognitive ease and relational value, showing that integrated, long-term partnerships foster stronger, more favorable attitudes toward sponsors within the Saudi sports context. For practitioners, the findings suggest that SPL sponsors should prioritize arrangements that are easy for fans to process while contributing meaningfully to the fan experience.

Keywords: Jersey sponsorship, Naming-rights sponsorship, Processing fluency, Saudi Professional League, Sponsorship effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Companies use sponsorships as tools to communicate brand values and reinforce their relationships with customers. As trust in advertising declines and people engage more with digital content and social media, firms find it increasingly helpful to utilize sponsorships to reach their goals and strengthen consumer ties [1, 2]. In the sports context, the impact of sponsorship is enhanced by fans' emotional attachment to their favorite teams [3]. For many fans, sponsor messages are part of the overall fan experience. Previous research highlights the importance of sponsors' ability to build genuine cognitive, emotional, and behavioral connections with the audience [4, 5].

To understand the effect of sponsorships on fans' behavior, it is helpful to consider the underlying psychological processes affecting responses to such sponsorships. One important mechanism is processing fluency, which refers to the ease with which people can interpret a stimulus. People tend to respond positively when information is simple, coherent, or familiar [6, 7]. Relational perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes how fans evaluate a sponsor's added value to their overall experience. Fans tend to evaluate a sponsor more favorably when they feel that it improves their experience through better facilities, community initiatives, promotional activities, or contributions to the team's success [5, 8]. These reactions are in line with both Social Exchange Theory [9], which emphasizes reciprocity in relationships, and Service-Dominant Logic [10], which emphasizes the co-creation of value between brands and consumers. In addition, sponsorship effectiveness also depends on the extent to which a sponsor is integrated into the club's environment. When integration is clear and consistent, fans are more likely to view the sponsorship as authentic and mutually beneficial [5, 11, 12].

In the context of professional sports sponsorship, naming rights and jersey sponsorships are among the most visible and financially significant types. Naming rights deals usually last for many years, with the sponsor's name embedded into the identity of the stadium or arena. For example, Al-Hilal FC's stadium in Riyadh (Kingdom Arena) keeps the Kingdom Holding Company present in fans' minds, as the sponsor's name is used every time the stadium is mentioned. This repeated use increases the brand's accessibility and recall [13, 14]. On the other hand, a jersey sponsorship connects the sponsor with the players on the field, as the sponsor's logos appear on match kits, merchandise, and social media posts [15, 16].

Naming-rights sponsorship research has mainly focused on sponsor–team fit, public approval, and brand recall [17]. Research consistently shows that naming-rights deals are more effective when the sponsor's image is consistent with the club's identity, whereas fans tend to ignore the association when congruence is weak [8]. Jersey sponsorship research, on the other hand, mainly focuses on advertising clutter, logo clarity, and the placement of brand symbols on team apparel [18]. Despite the widespread use of both types of sponsorships, few studies have systematically compared the effects of naming rights and jersey sponsorships, leaving a critical gap in the literature. Scholars have recently highlighted the need for studies comparing the two types of sponsorships [4].

Moreover, different psychological and relational mechanisms, such as processing fluency and perceived fan benefits, have not been fully examined within one model. To address these research gaps, we examine sponsorship in Saudi Arabia's developing sports environment, where different types of sponsorship coexist. In recent years, major investments in Saudi sports have attracted international players and stars and have encouraged the construction of new stadiums and enhanced global collaborations. Sponsorship has been an important part of Saudi sports transformation, aligning with Saudi Arabia's strategic vision for becoming a global sports hub. Al-Hilal's partnerships with their naming-rights sponsor, Kingdom Holding Company, and with their jersey sponsor, Savvy Games, illustrate how different sponsorships can operate together with the same club.

We conducted two studies to explore how fans respond to sponsorship in the Saudi Professional League (SPL). Study 1 examines how naming-rights sponsorship influences fans' cognitive and relational responses through mechanisms such as processing fluency and perceived fan benefits. Study 2 extends the investigation by comparing naming-rights and jersey sponsorships, incorporating the moderating effect of integration cues on both types. This sequential design provides a more comprehensive approach to understanding how sponsorship structures shape fans' evaluations.

2. Integrated Theoretical Framework

2.1. Cognitive Processing Fluency in Sponsorship Evaluation

Sponsorship has become an impactful marketing communication strategy for companies in pursuing their goals. Sponsorship effectiveness depends not only on visibility but also on how fans process sponsor information. It is therefore important to examine how fans mentally process sponsorships. According to the Processing Fluency Theory, people respond more favorably to stimuli that are easy to interpret [6]. As such, fluency arises when the sponsor–team connection is seen as natural and contextually appropriate [7]. For example, a financial services company sponsoring a major stadium may appear fitting because of the company's perceived stability and prestige, whereas a brand from a mismatched sector might seem harder to relate to, leading to lower fluency [19]. Prior research shows that higher processing fluency positively affects brand evaluations and increases persuasiveness [20]. Within sports sponsorships, fluency helps transfer fans' positive emotions from the team to the sponsor [21]. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H₁: Processing fluency positively influences fans' attitudes toward a sponsor.

2.2. Fan Benefits as Psychological Leverage

Beyond cognitive processing, a relational view suggests that fans actively evaluate the benefits gained from a sponsorship rather than receiving messages passively [5, 8]. Fans respond positively

when a sponsor improves their experience through facility development, promotions, or support for team success. Such responses fit within Social Exchange Theory [9], which argues for the importance of reciprocity in relationships. In addition, these positive responses are consistent with Service-Dominant Logic [10], which emphasizes the co-creation of value between brands and consumers. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H₂: Perceived fan benefits positively influence fans' attitudes toward a sponsor.

2.3. Sponsorship Type and Integration Cues

In professional football, naming rights and jersey sponsorships are among the most common types of sponsorship. The former integrates the sponsor's name through repetition, which keeps the sponsor relevant and prominent, even outside match days [13]. In jersey sponsorships, on the other hand, the sponsor's name and logo only appear on players' kits and on digital media [15, 16]. These differences mean that naming rights sponsorships produce stronger brand awareness and more perceived benefits than jersey sponsorships. Prior research suggests that naming rights tend to increase both brand recognition and consistency, since the stadium's name is repeatedly mentioned across broadcasts and social media [22]. In Saudi Arabia, the term "Kingdom Arena" has become part of Al-Hilal FC fans' everyday vocabulary, making the Kingdom Holding Company a familiar name. This leads us to the following two hypotheses:

H₃: Naming-rights sponsorship generates higher processing fluency than jersey sponsorship.

H₄: Naming-rights sponsorship generates higher perceived fan benefits than jersey sponsorship.

While the sponsorship type shapes fans' first impressions, a sponsor's integration into the club's communication and match-day experience also plays an important role in their evaluation. Prior studies indicate that, when a sponsor is meaningfully integrated within the sports ecosystem, sponsorship becomes easier to evaluate [7, 11, 19]. In addition, integration signals enhance fans' sense of benefit by clearly illustrating the sponsor's added value to the experience [5, 8, 12]. Therefore, the relationship between the brand and the team becomes natural and effortless, strengthening both processing fluency and perceived fan benefits when integration cues are strong. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

H₅: High (vs. low) integration cues are associated with higher processing fluency.

H₆: High (vs. low) integration cues are associated with higher perceived fan benefits.

We expect that the role of integration is not limited to its direct effect on processing fluency and perceived fan benefits; rather, it likely extends to moderating how different sponsorship types influence fan perceptions. Previous studies show that naming-rights sponsors are perceived as more integrated and visible than jersey sponsors [13]. Therefore, a higher level of integration is expected to reduce the gap between naming rights and jersey sponsorships in both processing fluency and perceived fan benefits. As such, we propose the following hypotheses:

H₇: The difference between naming rights and jersey sponsorships in processing fluency is larger (smaller) under low (high) integration.

H₈: The difference between naming rights and jersey sponsorships in perceived fan benefits is larger (smaller) under low (high) integration.

To test the conceptual framework, we conducted two complementary studies. The first was a survey investigation examining how processing fluency and perceived fan benefits affect fans' attitudes toward the sponsor. Drawing on the findings of Study 1, Study 2 employed a 2 × 2 between-subjects experimental design that manipulated sponsorship type (naming rights vs. jersey) and integration level (high vs. low) to examine how these cues shape fan responses.

3. Study 1: Survey Examination of Sponsorship Type Effects

3.1. Research Design and Sample

The study employed a survey-based quantitative design targeting Saudi Al-Hilal FC fans. Out of 600 questionnaires distributed, 563 usable responses were retained for analysis, representing a response rate of 93.8%.

3.2. Measurement Instruments

Processing fluency was assessed using four items measuring how easily participants recognized the sponsor and mentally connected the sponsor with the team [6, 7, 20].

Perceived fan benefits were assessed using six items evaluating the extent to which respondents felt that the sponsor enhanced their experience, improved facilities, supported the team, and contributed to the community [5].

Attitude toward the sponsor was measured using three items adapted from prior research [23, 24].

All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree).

3.3. Analysis

The statistical analyses were performed using AMOS, applying a covariance-based structural equation modeling framework. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR), while convergent validity was determined using average variance extracted (AVE). Finally, discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT).

3.4. Results of Study 1

3.4.1. Respondent Profile

The final sample included 563 Al-Hilal fans. Among the respondents, 70.3% were men and 29.7% were women. Regarding age distribution, 35.7% were between 18 and 34 years old, 21.1% were 35–44, and 43.1% were 45 years or older (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Respondent profile (Study 1).

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	396	70.3
	Female	167	29.7
Age	18–34	201	35.7
	35–44	119	21.1
	45 and above	243	43.2

3.4.2. Measurement Model

As shown in Table 2, all items loaded strongly on their intended factors. For each construct, composite reliability (CR) exceeded the recommended value of 0.85, and the average variance extracted (AVE) also exceeded the recommended value of 0.50, indicating good internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 2.
Construct reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Processing Fluency	4	0.87	0.88	0.59
Perceived Fan Benefits	6	0.90	0.91	0.66
Attitude Toward Sponsor	3	0.89	0.89	0.73

Discriminant validity was confirmed using both the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT). The square root of each construct's AVE was higher than its correlations with other constructs (Table 3), and all HTMT (Table 4) values were below the recommended threshold of 0.85, indicating adequate discriminant validity.

Table 3.

Fornell–Larcker criterion.

Construct	Processing Fluency	Perceived Fan Benefits	Attitude Toward Sponsor
Processing Fluency	0.770		
Perceived Fan Benefits	0.540	0.810	
Attitude Toward Sponsor	0.620	0.660	0.850

Table 4.

Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Construct	Processing Fluency	Perceived Fan Benefits	Attitude Toward Sponsor
Processing Fluency	—		
Perceived Fan Benefits	0.64	—	
Attitude Toward Sponsor	0.70	0.73	—

3.4.3. Hypothesis Testing

As shown in Table 5, the measurement model demonstrated a good fit to the data. $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.81$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, GFI = 0.959, AGFI = 0.946.

Table 5.

Structural model results.

Path	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	<i>p</i>	Supported
Sponsor Type → Fluency	0.206	0.061	3.389	***	Yes
Sponsor Type → Benefits	0.230	0.061	3.776	***	Yes
Fluency → Attitude	0.488	0.070	6.981	***	Yes
Benefits → Attitude	0.298	0.059	5.076	***	Yes

Note: Model fit: $\chi^2(130) = 235.592$, $\chi^2/\text{df} = 1.812$, CFI = 0.960, TLI = 0.953, GFI = 0.959, AGFI = 0.946. Note: *** $p < 0.001$.

Consistent with H1, processing fluency exerted a positive effect on fans' attitudes toward the sponsor ($\beta = 0.488$, SE = 0.070, CR = 6.98, $p < 0.001$). This result confirms that when fans perceive the sponsor–team relationship as natural and easy to understand, they tend to have more favorable attitudes toward the sponsor.

Consistent with H2, perceived benefits showed a positive influence on fans' attitudes toward the sponsor ($\beta = 0.298$, SE = 0.059, CR = 5.08, $p < 0.001$). This result confirms that when fans recognize tangible or emotional benefits associated with a sponsorship, they develop more favorable attitudes toward the sponsor.

3.4.4. Discussion

The findings of Study 1 illustrate that processing fluency and perceived fan benefits play important roles in forming attitudes towards the sponsor. Both constructs were found to function as essential psychological mechanisms through which fans evaluate sponsorships. Fans' evaluation depends on the cognitive ease of processing and the perceived value provided. Consistent with Processing Fluency Theory [6], the findings regarding the relationship between processing fluency and attitudes towards the sponsor show that fans tend to favorably evaluate a sponsor when the sponsorship is perceived as natural, congruent, and easy to interpret. Thus, when the association between the sponsor and the team is perceived to be natural, fans experience a smooth cognitive process that translates into a positive effect. In addition, the findings support the influence of perceived benefits on fans' attitudes toward the sponsor. When fans perceive that the sponsor enhances their experience by improving facilities, supporting the team, or contributing to social initiatives, they tend to have positive attitudes towards the sponsor. This finding is consistent with Social Exchange Theory [9] and the Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing [10], which emphasizes value co-creation between fans and sponsors. As such, fans tend to reward sponsors perceived as contributors to their community and club. Study 1 provides evidence that positive attitudes toward sponsors are driven by both cognitive and relational

mechanisms. Sponsors that are easy to associate with the team and perceived as improving fans' experiences enjoy positive outcomes. These findings establish the empirical basis for the experimental extension in Study 2, which examines how structural sponsorship type and integration levels influence these psychological processes.

4. Study 2: Experimental Examination of Integration Cues

Extending the results of Study 1, which showed that processing fluency and perceived fan benefits independently and positively influence fans' attitudes toward the sponsor, Study 2 examined the effects of sponsorship type and integration levels on these relationships.

4.1. Design and Participants

Study 2 used a 2×2 between-participants design that manipulated two factors: sponsorship type (naming rights vs. jersey) and integration level (high vs. low). A total of 387 Al-Hilal fans participated in the study and were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. Data were collected through online participation links shared via social media.

4.2. Stimuli and Manipulations

Each participant read one of four short scenarios (around 130 words) describing a fictional partnership between Al-Hilal FC and an imaginary sponsor. These scenarios varied in two factors: sponsorship type and integration level. The scenarios specified whether the agreement involved stadium naming rights or a jersey sponsorship, as well as the extent to which the sponsor was involved in the club's communications and fan-related activities. In the low-integration scenario, the sponsor was portrayed as largely visual and surface-level, with no enhancements to the fan experience. Conversely, the high-integration version depicted the sponsor as engaging across several fan touchpoints: the team's app, ticketing, social media channels, and enhancing fan experience.

4.3. Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental groups after giving their informed consent. After reading the assigned scenario, participants completed survey items that measured processing fluency, perceived fan benefits, and attitudes toward the sponsor. They then completed manipulation checks and answered demographic questions.

4.4. Measurement Instruments of Study 2

Study 2 used the same multi-item measures as Study 1.

4.5. Manipulation Checks

Participants were asked to assess, on a seven-point Likert scale, the extent to which the sponsor was highly integrated with the club. The purpose of this question was to ensure that, compared to the low-integration condition, the high-integration condition led to a higher perceived association between the sponsor and the club. The second manipulation check was to verify that participants correctly recognized the type of sponsorship (naming rights versus jersey sponsorship) used in their assigned scenarios.

4.6. Results of Study 2

4.6.1. Respondent Profile

A total of 387 participants completed the experiment. A manipulation check was conducted to determine whether participants had correctly identified the type of sponsorship, with thirteen participants failing to do so. The data from these participants were excluded from subsequent analyses, resulting in a final sample of 374 valid responses. The majority of the participants were men (60.2%),

with women representing 39.8% of the participants. In terms of age, 39.6% were 18–34, 24.8% were 35–44, and 35.6% were over 45 (see Table 6).

Table 6.
Respondent profile.

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	225	60.2
	Female	168	39.8
Age	18–34	148	39.6
	35–44	93	24.8
	45 and above	133	35.6

4.6.2. Manipulation Check

The integration level manipulation was successful. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) results revealed a statistically significant effect ($F(1, 372) = 57.66, p < 0.001$). Participants in the high-integration (vs. low-integration) group perceived a stronger relationship between the sponsor and the club (M high integration = 4.90, $SD = 1.15$; M low integration = 4.00, $SD = 1.14$; $F(1, 372) = 57.66, p < 0.001$).

4.6.3. Hypothesis Testing

The model was significant for processing fluency ($F(3, 370) = 77.86, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.39$). The results showed that the main effects of both factors were statistically significant. Specifically, naming rights were processed more easily than jersey sponsorships ($F(1, 370) = 97.67, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.21$). Processing fluency was higher in the high-integration than in the low-integration condition ($F(1, 370) = 121.05, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.25$). The interaction between the two factors was also significant ($F(1, 370) = 14.40, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$). However, the advantage of naming-rights sponsorship on processing fluency over jersey sponsorship was lower when the sponsor was highly integrated with the club. This means that integration improved processing fluency for both sponsor types but narrowed the difference between them. These results thus provide support for H3, H5, and H7.

In terms of perceived fan benefits, the overall model was statistically significant ($F(3, 370) = 78.62, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.39$). The results indicated that the main effects of both factors were significant. Specifically, perceived fan benefits were higher in the high-integration condition compared to the low-integration condition ($F(1, 370) = 137.16, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.27$). Additionally, participants in the naming-rights sponsorship condition reported greater fan benefits than those in the jersey sponsorship condition ($F(1, 370) = 82.63, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.22$). The interaction effect between the two factors was also significant ($F(1, 370) = 15.58, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.04$). The advantage in perceived fan benefits associated with naming-rights sponsorships was less pronounced when the sponsor was highly integrated with the club. This suggests that integration increased perceived benefits for both types but reduced the difference between them. These findings support hypotheses H4, H6, and H8.

4.6.4. Discussion

The findings of Study 2 illustrate that, compared to jersey sponsorships, naming-rights sponsorships generate higher cognitive fluency and higher perceived fan benefits. These results are consistent with prior research, which found that integrated sponsorship formats, such as stadium naming, make brand processing easier than more peripheral arrangements [22]. High-integration cues, such as those highlighting a sponsor's collaboration with and visible contribution to the club, increase both processing fluency and perceived benefits. The data offer causal support for the fluency advantage of naming-rights sponsorships becoming less pronounced when the sponsor is highly integrated with the team. Moreover, perceived fan benefits were influenced by both sponsorship type and integration level. Fans perceived more benefits when the arrangement involved the prominence of stadium naming

rights and when the sponsor was highly engaged with the club. This outcome is consistent with prior evidence suggesting that long-term, deeply involved sponsorships foster stronger feelings of authenticity and added value among fans [1]. Taken together, the findings demonstrate that fans assess sponsorship value based on both visibility and relational depth.

5. General Discussion

5.1. Integrating the Findings

Using two complementary methods, the results from the two studies offer a consistent understanding of how fans evaluate sponsorship based on both its type and the strength of the company's relationship with the club. The Study 1 survey revealed that processing fluency and perceived fan benefits are significant predictors of fan attitudes. Processing fluency refers to the ease with which fans associate the sponsor with their team, while perceived fan benefits refer to the degree to which fans believe the sponsor enhances their experience. Building on these findings, Study 2 experimentally tested how these psychological mechanisms operate with different sponsorship types and integration levels. Manipulating these variables (naming rights vs. jersey sponsorship, high vs. low integration), Study 2 demonstrated that, compared to jersey sponsorship, naming rights sponsorship led to higher processing fluency and more perceived fan benefits. In addition, the study showed that processing fluency and perceived fan benefits increased when the sponsor was highly integrated. Moreover, the gap between naming rights and jersey sponsorships became smaller under high integration. Consequently, the two studies reveal that these cognitive and relational processes work in an integrated way. When sponsorship is perceived as beneficial and easy to process, fans tend to have more positive attitudes toward the sponsor. These results highlight the need for strategies that take into account the structural form of the sponsorship and its relational value. Such a balance leads to more positive evaluations by fans, enhancing the long-term value of the sponsor in competitive sports markets.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The current study makes several contributions to sponsorship theory. First, it extends the Processing Fluency Theory [6, 7] to the field of sport sponsorship, demonstrating that sponsorship type can affect processing fluency, which, in turn, affects fans' evaluations. Second, it shows the importance of exchange and relational perspectives [5, 9]. We found that fans' perception of sponsor-provided benefits represents a fundamental psychological mechanism that affects the sponsor's value. Third, it shows that the cognitive and relational paths can operate together and sometimes interactively, deepening our understanding of sponsorship effects and helping to link the two theoretical perspectives.

5.3. Practical Implications

The results presented herein can help sports organizations by demonstrating the importance of long-term naming-rights partnerships. Such sponsorships are characterized by greater processing fluency, whereby the sponsor's identity is integrated into the fan experience. For sponsoring companies, the results highlight that structural prominence alone is insufficient; brands need to enhance relational engagement through initiatives that improve the fan experience. In highly competitive sports markets like the SPL, it is critical to recognize the importance of pairing structural presence with effective contributions to the fan experience.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this research has some limitations, which offer opportunities for future research directions. First, both studies focused on the fans of a single club in a single country. Subsequent research could test these dynamics in other leagues and sports. Second, although Study 2 used an experimental design, it was based on hypothetical scenarios. Future research could evaluate sponsorship effects in real-life situations based on actual sponsorships. Finally, it would be valuable to

conduct longitudinal studies that examine how fans' perceptions of processing fluency and perceived benefits evolve as their familiarity with the sponsor increases.

Transparency:

The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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