

Exploring Managers' Perceptions on Sponsorship Relations and Decision Making in the Malaysian B2B Context

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ABSTRACT

In a post-pandemic environment, businesses face new challenges in sustaining stakeholder interest due to the ever-changing consumer behaviour trends and a more fragmented media landscape. Achieving sponsorship contracts within this tumultuous financial period due to limited sponsor budget raises uncertainty in a potential or existing sponsorship relations due to competition with other organisations for the support of targeted sponsors. The objective of this study is to understand sponsorship relations and decision making from sponsors' point of view and to explore approaches deployed by sponsored properties in drafting their proposals. In doing so, the study implemented semi-structured interviews with thirteen (13) corporate communication and marketing managers in Malaysia who were directly associated with sponsorship or sponsorship-seeking exercises through the marketing and branding programmes of their organisations. Through a thematic analysis, our study discovered three main findings on establishing sponsorship relations which included prioritising stakeholders, upholding current policies and developing value-added collaborations for growth. The need for accountability, compliance with organisation standards and linkages to government initiatives provided sponsored properties with the awareness of the evolving B2B sponsorship and media environment. The study emphasised the significance of ethical business practices when making strategic decisions on sponsorship. Further to this, the study outlined implications from the selection of sponsored properties in the business-to-business (B2B) community to continue fostering trust and inspire confidence from the public through strategic media and enduring partnerships.

Keywords: *Sponsorship, sponsorship relations, business-to-business, media, marketing mix.*

INTRODUCTION

For over three decades, sponsorship has been one of the fastest growing and preferred approaches in marketing communication. The growth of sponsorship is higher than other forms of marketing communication, such as traditional advertising and promotional tactics in new media (International Event Group, 2018). The sponsorship growth at 7.5 percent is projected to reach an estimated USD 112.2 billion in 2030 (Statista, 2022). However, making

sponsorship decisions for an organisation involves a great deal of complexity and ambiguity. Organisational decisions frequently involve a large number of stakeholders, both inside and outside the business, which causes managers to have a propensity to ignore those about whom there is less knowledge or to work around those who make a decision more difficult. Further to this, managers frequently do not receive immediate feedback on the results of their sponsorship, and would need to wait for return of investments (ROI) from these marketing and branding efforts to bear fruit.

Additionally, organisational decision-makers may encounter conditions that are quite dynamic, such as the COVID-19 global outbreak in 2020 that has significantly affected the economic sector. Hertz Global Holdings Inc., one of the biggest car rental businesses in the United States reportedly filed for bankruptcy and laid off 16,000 workers (Kelly, 2020). Meanwhile in Malaysia, award-winning low-cost airlines AirAsia fired more than 300 workers that included flight attendants, pilots, and engineers that were imperative to its branding experience (Aroff, 2020). The movement control order (MCO) imposed by the local government further halted business operations and created a void in the pool of income that contributed to downward spiral annual profits. Borders were shut down and limited marketing and business activities contributed to the decline of funding in sponsorship, leaving businesses on survival mode through the implementation of online activities via virtual channels (Sigala, 2020). Therefore, it may be a factor in the shortage of sponsorship funding in the future. In such contexts, missing information and trouble interpreting data are frequent, making it challenging to decide on the best course of action. Aside from multinational corporations, small medium enterprises (SME) also have to deal with such challenges in innovation, encouraging local employment, and social inclusion through engagement (Auzzir et al., 2018). Thorgren and Williams (2020) posited that SMEs make up over 90% of all businesses globally, making them the foundation of both the formal and unofficial business sectors of the global economy. Henceforth, the said SMEs are seen to be among the most susceptible sectors due to their low financial and resource capabilities when compared to large corporations (Auzzir et al., 2018; Juergensen et al., 2020; Pedauga et al., 2022).

Surviving the pandemic, the ongoing instability of the economic situation finds itself receiving stimulus from financial institutions and government funding (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). However, this manifestation can take months or years to regain stakeholder trust, henceforth brand owners and marketers cannot depend on this to sustain its marketing efforts. It is challenging to discover what works because of this volatile period where managers and other organisational decision-makers challenge themselves from experience. Most marketing, advertising and promotion plans typically result from issues, opportunities, or crises. In the context of sponsorship, Rousseau (2018) highlighted the importance of the "decision frame," or the decision maker's perception of the issue to be resolved, opportunity to seize, or crisis to address, is crucial at the commencement of a decision. The rest of the decision-making process is informed by active search, which makes it simpler to decide how to make the decision and what steps to take to put it into practice. With regards to this, decision-makers in an organisation frequently can't rely on outcomes to determine whether their choices were "good" ones.

A number of studies highlighted the importance of relationships among stakeholders in sponsorship. For instance, relationships between sponsor-sponsored properties require initial decisions to determine the sponsorship partnership (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). van Rijn et al. (2019) posited the importance of the partnership between sponsors and sponsored

properties in determining sponsorship success. Meanwhile, Jensen and Cornwell (2021) added that sponsor-sponsored properties need to have mutual understanding to avoid relationship issues between both parties. As discussed earlier, these factors then posed significant challenges in the sponsorship field such as financial turbulence and economic downturn among sponsors. The competition of sponsorship funding is even worse especially for the post Covid-19 era, and most of the sponsors have a limited budget.

Considering these elements, the current study aims to understand the important criteria determined in sponsorship from sponsors' point of view. It could be argued that sponsored properties experience a competitive sponsorship selection of sponsorship funding (Sharipudin, Hassim, Ayub, Fam, & Mohammed, 2022; Toscani & Prendergast, 2021), especially for the post pandemic era. In addition, there is a need to study sponsor selection criteria in different cultural contexts (Toscani & Prendergast, 2021). This study intends to understand the motivations of sponsor selection in sponsorship programmes. It is also imperative to further understand approaches deployed by potential sponsees, or known as sponsored properties in establishing relationships with their future sponsors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have highlighted the dynamics of sponsorship relations and decision making from sponsors' point of view. Additionally, approaches deployed by sponsored properties in drafting their proposals from a global to local context relevant to this study were also outlined in the following sections.

Sponsor and Sponsored Property Relationship in a Sponsorship

Sponsors generally refer to firms or brands (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002); meanwhile, sponsored properties could be sport events or charitable organisations (Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2017). Lin and Bruning (2021, p. 214) define sponsorship as "a purposeful exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity and a separate sponsored entity in support of a tangible activity, event or dialogue engaged by the sponsored entity". International Events Group (IEG) defined sponsorship as a monetary or charitable payment for property (mainly entertainment, sports, non-profit activities or organisations) in return for a potential commercial connection to the property (IEG, 2019). In other words, a brand provides support for the sponsored property in terms of money, affairs or labour services, while these properties take intangible assets such as advertisements, titles and patents as their return that make both equal and mutually beneficial. In terms of relationships, sponsorship is more complex than other forms of marketing communication (such as advertising) since it requires a tripartite partnership between sponsors, sponsored sites, and consumers (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010; Sherry, Schulenkorf, & Phillips, 2016). Hence, sponsorship is defined as a kind of marketing communication related to planning and implementing marketing initiatives to establish and convey a sponsorship relation.

Sponsorship growth is higher than the other marketing communication channels like advertising and promotion (International Event Group, 2018). The growth in sponsorship can be translated into the estimated amount of sponsorship expenditure to reach USD 112.2 billion in 2030 (Statista, 2022). Despite the growth in sponsorship, sponsors experienced challenges in sponsorship due to several factors such as economic uncertainty especially for the post Covid-19 era. For instance, most of the sponsored properties were financially affected

during the Covid-19 (International Event Group, 2020), particularly in Malaysian context (Sharipudin et al., 2022).

Scholars discovered the importance of mutual relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties in sponsorship. Discontinuing a sponsorship and managing a sponsorship successfully are the key outcomes of the relationship between sponsors and sponsored properties (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Morgan, Taylor, & Adair, 2020; van Rijn, Kristal, & Henseler, 2019). Jensen and Cornwell (2021) suggested that the mutual understanding between sponsors and sponsored properties will prevent a conflict in the relationship between the two parties. Initial decisions to establish the sponsorship partnership appear to be made in the relationship between sponsor-sponsored properties (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), and will determine the sponsorship success (van Rijn et al., 2019). Understanding the breakdown of contractual partnerships, such as marketing communication agreements is frequently overlooked. Longer-running campaigns result in higher rates of brand recall, according to research on transactional marketing that looked at the length of outdoor and television advertising campaigns (Dunlop, Cotter, Perez, & Wakefield, 2013). This suggests that long-term, communication-based partnerships should also be valued. Longer-term marketing partnerships improve the likelihood that customers would view the alliance as a good fit and the firm's motivations as positive, according to research (Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Woisetschlager, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of "relationship marketing" encompasses the integration of all marketing activities, and it is directly aimed at establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This definition gel and aids our study which serves as a theoretical framework accordingly. It is vital to employ relationship marketing in sponsorship since it entails a tripartite interaction between sponsors, sponsored properties, and consumers (Madill & O'Reilly, 2010; Sherry, Schulenkorf & Phillips, 2016). As mentioned earlier, our study focuses on sponsors and sponsored properties relationships. In sponsorship, relationship marketing describes cooperation and understanding in sponsorship activities between sponsors and sponsored properties (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017; van Rijn et al., 2019). Establishing, growing, and maintaining connections between both parties through marketing efforts is the goal of relationship marketing (Sharipudin et al., 2022).

Previous studies discovered the importance of relationships between both sponsors and sponsored properties. For instance, Sharipudin et al. (2022) found relationship marketing gives the corporate sponsorship network as a whole a relational perspective to facilitate seamless transactions during ambiguous situations like COVID-19. The collaboration and agreement between sponsor-sponsored properties concisely aid in all activities concerning sponsorship (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017; van Rijn, Kristal & Henseler, 2019) insofar the sponsorship context is concerned which our theoretical framework specifically anchored. As a matter of fact, Jensen and Cornwell (2021) add that there have been renewed interest in the sponsorship studies which postulate the importance of dynamic relationship between sponsor-sponsored properties and B2B decision making factors including sponsorship discontinuation, sponsorship dissolution, successful and effective sponsorship management (Morgan, Taylor, & Adair, 2020; van Rijn et al., 2019). As discussed, the study employed relationship marketing as the theoretical framework in our study. We focus on the relationship

between sponsors and sponsored properties, especially in establishing sponsorship relations from sponsors' perspective.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objectives, semi-structured interviews with brand managers and marketers who handle corporate communication specifically branding and marketing were undertaken. In total, thirteen informants were contacted through purposive sampling and the informants were identified based on; i) the requirements of their job scope that communicate with various stakeholders, and, ii) their role in consultation and the decision making of sponsorship within their organisation. The informants were selected from; i) small to medium-sized businesses, ii) corporate organisations, as well as ii) government-affiliated companies. The selection of informants was appropriate to compare the variations in sponsorship practices among companies with different stakeholders and aims. In order to approach the same problem moving forward, the data would offer various frames of reference and analytical units after the data had saturated. The informants will be referred to throughout the study by their informant numbers and tags, which are listed below and based on their affiliation, respectively.

Table 1: List of informants

No	Informant ID	Category
1.	INC1	Corporate
2.	INC2	Corporate
3.	INC3	Corporate
4.	INC4	Corporate
5.	INS5	SME
6.	INS6	SME
7.	INS7	SME
8.	ING8	GLC
9.	ING9	GLC
10.	ING10	GLC
11.	ING11	GLC
12.	ING12	GLC
13.	ING13	GLC

The interview instrument was derived from the aforementioned research objectives and literature. In so doing, five main sections served as guidelines for the interview questions; i) definition of sponsorship, ii) objectives of establishing sponsorship relations, iii) types of sponsorship participation, iv) determinants of sponsorship selection or participation, and v) evaluation or feedback on sponsor relationship established. The instrument is relevant and applicable to both sponsor and sponsored property informants. Out of these five categories, a total of sixteen questions were further developed. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, spontaneous follow-up questions were also included in the transcripts.

During the interviews, the informants revealed their history, interests, work scope as well as their involvement in the organisation they are affiliated with. The informants provided insightful feedback on firm sponsorship selection and gave a comprehensive account of their careers as public relations specialists and advocates for corporate social responsibility. All

interviews were recorded using a smartphone, and the recordings were afterwards transcribed accordingly. Atlas.ti software was used for coding during the analysis. Due to the fact that the collected materials were primarily in Malay, the bilingual primary researcher, an experienced translator, first coded the materials before simultaneously translating the selected nodes from Malay to English during data analysis. Each transcript was examined to determine whether it met the requirements of the study. This means that the information should (a) deal with the practices of sponsorship relations by Malaysian organisations, and (b) relevant to sponsorship approaches proposed by the sponsored properties interviewed. Based on the coding exercise, several themes were developed during the analysis. The coding process also included emerging themes. The researcher's observations were strengthened and validated during each coding session.

RESULTS

It was insightful to compare what was being said by representatives of small medium enterprises (SMEs), corporate organisations as well as government linked companies per se on what they have determined as “sponsorship relations”. There are contrasting yet similar outlooks on their decision to sponsor or partake in activities of corporate social responsibility (CSR) or seek sponsorship in the Malaysian context. The findings saw the significance of brand managers in organisations to establish brand visibility through their decision making. In comparison to SMEs, corporate organisations and government-linked companies ensure that they follow policies and regulations set by authorities, hence one of their set criteria is a strong and credible proposal from external parties that would please their stakeholders. Our study discovers three main themes for sponsorship relations from sponsors' perspective namely, stakeholders, policy and collaboration; and three sub-themes (i.e. accountability, compliance, government)



Figure 1: Sponsorship relations framework

a) Stakeholders

The study found that it is very important for sponsors to first establish their own *criteria of sponsorship* and adhere to them prior to receiving applications and providing approval to include collaborating companies in a sponsor relationship of an organisation. For ING8, a GLC which sponsorship programme that is more concentrated to education, sponsorship will be given to schools that fall under the poverty line and for students who are eligible for

sponsorship are those who fall under the category of the poor whilst does those who are orphans will be shortlisted for “*zakat*”. There is a defined target audience for the sponsorship by the corporate organisation that aims to give back to the community based on their demographic and income level, thus responsible to report to the stakeholders.

...We try to have some, how do you say, a win-win situation if the university can do research and extend the current knowledge of our firm. At the same time, we can update our BOD [board of directors] of the latest findings. So, the BOD can also increase their body of knowledge (Informant ING8).

However, despite the undefined criteria by INC1, a corporate organisation that belongs in the pharmaceuticals and health care sector, more care needs to be given on what type of possible sponsorship that the company could participate in and what can be achieved from it that could benefit the community. These findings further elucidate the significance of criteria of sponsorship from the perspective of sponsorship objectives where financial gain may not necessarily be the case. Cornwell (2019) added that sponsorship has the ability to concurrently create an authentic engagement between sponsor and the sponsee, where emotional bond and satisfaction triumph over commercial objectives.

Yes...on a monthly basis, I have seen 300 letters. Every month there are maybe 30-40 letters. So, first I would say, don't send thick proposals. I have seen students send thick ones filled with unnecessary details such as the committee members, meeting minutes, in the proposal. [...] Thickness is not sufficient. The most important is that it must be clearly stated that uh what is your proposal about, what is the target audience, what is it you want to achieve (Informant INC1).

b) Policy

Upholding and referring to ethical policies and standards were among the preferred criteria cited by several informants. This can be further observed from discussions with INC3, whose company background is also corporate, similar to INC1 and INC2. From the interview, INC3 posited that their sponsorship approvals are mostly based on proposals aligned with national policies. For the company, their priorities fall under the National Key Results Areas (NKRA) of Malaysia which is aligned with the “*Penjana programme*” and the 11th Malaysia Plan. Whichever proposals received would look into the mission and vision of the said programmes so it will be parallel to that of the company’s. In the case of INC11, a GLC, mission and vision of stakeholders play a big role in terms of how they determine their sponsorships. Its multifaceted business that also collaborates with key players of the health and oil and gas companies of the nation states of the East Coast who are their stakeholders and plan to circle back to its mission of the 3Ps, the people it serves, the environment and also profit.

For example, one of our corporate company panels [...] Kuantan near Gebeng, an industrial park that is one of the biggest there, Alliance Steel is one of our panels. They have like six thousand workers so they partner with us even though other healthcare groups are there, they still partner with us. [...] They

look at three things, 'people - planet - profit'. For us, we like to look at 'people'. We see the profit from things like that (Informant INC11).

c) Government

Government-affiliated proposals are also influential in driving sponsorship decisions. According to informant INC3, most international companies gather their sponsorship and particularly CSR ideas from government policies and shared visions (b - policy).

[...] how CSR should be utilised and how the CSR should be driven. It's more towards a sustainable kind of thing, social impact kind of thing, but the MNC, the multinational company, GLC also have the same kind of thing because GLC it's more towards them being involved by the government. For example, the government introduced a shared prosperity vision and the shared prosperity vision is being translated into the GLC direction. So, one of the elements of shared prosperity is collective social and economic empowerment applied in CSR practice (Informant INC3).

Implementing sponsor relations in a communication plan by strengthening efforts to educate and inform the public, give consumers better information, and place them in a more educated and self-assured position to make decisions and act in accordance with government-led initiatives would create credibility and visibility for participating organisations.

d) Collaboration

Collaborations in a sponsorship decision and sponsor relationships are commonly established through shared goals. Through the interviews conducted with the informants, representatives of SMEs and government-linked companies are firm believers of contributing to progress and developments in the local socio-economy. The brand managers contacted believed that while having facilities and bigger budgets for such CSR programmes, they feel that keeping a good rapport with their consumers through collaboration with other firms as it provides two-way incentives for both parties and the community.

However, in terms of companies that seek sponsors such as INC10, sponsorship does not come easy for them even though there are general perceptions that they could possibly obtain easy access to funds; as the organisation is a large government-linked company focused on matters and productions in regards to promoting local art and culture. The company actually has to seek out collaboration for sponsorship that should be related to their cause in order to function and sustain their agency. Should the efforts be insufficient then they are driven to seek multitudes of e fund-raising initiatives.

For example, Yamaha Music or Bentley, so our sponsorship unit will approach them and discuss collaborating to uplift our music arts scene and offer them the incentive of tax exemption. But even then sometimes we don't sponsor it even though we approach them so we then have to go commercial via ticket sales. [...]. So, let's say we have an orchestra concert, we ensure that we feature famous celebrities like Jacqueline Victor that can sing in the orchestra. And we try to get new Malay artists to get ticket sales and possible sponsorship after announcing the line [...] (Informant INC10)

Similarly, despite seemingly having a bigger infrastructure and funding facilities for a GLC, ING9 belongs to an organisation that structures itself around its football team which is relatively a small outfit and is managed on a smaller scale as a private and commercial. Hitherto the guidelines in funding the team are also different where their efforts to seek sponsorship on an ad-hoc basis. There is a mutual business understanding that they help to fulfil for their potential sponsors.

For sponsorship in the scope of football itself, aside from depending on funds, we are driven to find other initiatives to collaborate and approach others to cover the expenses of the club. So, if our parent company allocates RM10 million for our expenses but it is actually RM15 million in total, we are to seek additional funds. [...] but when we have business-to-business (B2B) collaborations such as with companies to market their products in our facilities, they would be assured of their partnership with us (Informant ING9).

As marketers and brand owners, it is imperative to scrutinise sponsor relations in order to achieve mutual benefits and marketing objectives from collaborations made in a business-to-business (B2B) perspective. By gathering facts to grasp the need, opportunity, or crisis, questions begin the conscious search for understanding the advantages and disadvantages of working alongside like-minded agencies that seek to engage with its target audiences (Rousseau, 2018).

e) Accountability

As for informants who represent government agencies, criteria on collaborations with sponsors and the act of sponsorship itself need to have much deliberation in terms of organisations the ministry works with as the outcome will be scrutinised by the stakeholders, namely citizens or the *rakyat* as it involves spending their funds.

[...] like I said, it's the taxpayers money. So, we have to be accountable. We cannot do programmes just because somebody has, you know what, despite what people said about cronyism and what not, we don't choose based on that. We choose whatever programme that can help us achieve our KPI. And in terms of bureaucracy this is not something that I've learnt to appreciate the bureaucracy and red tapes because we have to be accountable for what we spend but the good thing is that for the ministry we have a very good system. We have a very good check and balance system. I cannot choose, I have got a lot of proposals on my tables, but I cannot choose on my own *lah* (Informant INC13).

f) Compliance

In its capacity to provide sponsorship, INC2 as a corporate organisation of Property Investments Company finds that in order to increase their investments, they need to win the trust from its potential customers, henceforth with the majority of Muslim investors. The sponsorships they provide should uphold the respect for the national religion, therefore, their guide on sponsorship would include considering matters of compliance to religious beliefs and regulations.

We will look for *Sharia* compliance, it will be easy for us to inject funds at “*Amanah Saham Bumiputera*”. We have one building, *CIMB, Menara Bumiputera Commerce in Jalan Raja Laut*, we bought that. But we did not inject in “*Amanah Hartanah Bumiputera*”, because CIMB does banking is a conventional so it is not *Sharia* compliance (Informant INC2).

For a medical board of institution, INC11 finds that it is important for especially large corporate organisations to comply with deductions that they have allocated on an annual basis to ensure smooth financial operations by spending the funds allocated to them via sponsorship efficiently.

I think it is important to instil the culture of CSR from the early beginning of the company. When I was in a property developer company, we were the first corporate communication department that wanted to do that as they had never done it before. Here at our company since its inception they ensure CSR compliance on a big scale. In an example, they have to finish RM 1 million zakat deduction within one year of allocation. To the point that we run out of ideas of how to spend it, but it is compliance (Informant INC11).

INC4 opined that as a financial institution, due diligence is important to ascertain the sponsorship for parties that seek to be funded for any projects. This is evident based on definition of sponsorship itself where Sleight (1989, p.4) stated that it is a business relationship where the provider (sponsor) offers funds, resources or services whilst the receiving party; event or organisation (property) would then offer to return either rights or association for a mutually beneficial commercial advantage. This goes on to show the importance for both parties to know and perform marketing intelligence activity where the most crucial information on the potential sponsor or sponsored could be obtained. It is obvious that for the organisation to sustain, there must be an effort to instil a specific process in order to sustain a trusted image as well as trust from its stakeholders.

We need to study and do our due diligence. The bigger the commitment, more stringent due diligence needs to be done to ensure that the sponsorship money is for its intended purpose. [...] We have an internal SOP which helps us to screen projects and beneficiaries and processes to facilitate payments and our commitment towards the project (Informant INC4).

DISCUSSION

The findings aptly summarised the study from three prescribed themes (stakeholders, policy and collaboration) as main determinants to strategic decision making through sponsorship in order to establish brand visibility. With three emerging sub-themes, accountability, compliance and government, the main themes were further reinforced in setting the accountable to condition both corporate organisation and government-linked companies inasmuch policies and regulations are concerned. Despite some varying degree of opinions, the density of each theme, stakeholders, policy and collaboration revolved around the conducive ecosystem wherein the criteria of sponsorship take the central role. This coincides

with the study by Tsiotsou (2011) which noted that when assessing the importance of the sponsorship effectiveness, stakeholders must be taken into consideration as these groups' sentiment determine the decision of the corporation. Similarly, Mavi and Standing (2018) posit that stakeholder is one of the important factors for project managers to ensure a balance between sponsor support and imposed restrictions by regulators wherein each of these interrelated to one another. Further, this also corroborate on the strategic alliances between stakeholders, policy and collaboration which then according to Arpaci, Tosun, and Küçükcivil (2022) allow for corporations to instil confidence and loyalty among stakeholder through honest, reliable, socially sensitive and participatory profile. Whether more than one alternative is taken into consideration is a crucial choice success predictor. The process of looking for alternatives is sped up in instances where managers impose their preferences for a desired option. One misses vital information if they just take into account one alternative. Even though such a short cure may seem timely and effective, the results would not achieve expected outcomes predicted by marketers and brand owners.

The study has been able to understand the key issues pertinent to determining sponsorship decisions from the perspective of sponsors in Malaysia which is instrumental at the proposal development stage. It is obvious to denote that the understanding how the mechanics of the policy work will evidently increase the opportunities to collaborate between and among sponsor-sponsored entities. With three sub-themes complimenting each of the derived themes in the study, it solidified the informants' perspective which reign on the fact surrounding sponsorship relations. In regards to this, the findings also highlight in a direct manner where integrity, accountability and social responsibility make up the constructions of any successful sponsorships endeavour. Whilst the issue of ethics may not necessarily reflect directly in the findings, it is however imperative to recognise its all-encompassing influence when sponsorship relations are constructed.

As a matter of fact, when designing the sponsorship relations, the study concisely provided an advantageous admonition based on the prescribed themes for sponsors in avoiding costly ill-fated decisions. This is so because sponsorship activities yield in huge financial gain and misdirect focus or guidance must be avoided. For example, Jensen and Cobbs (2014) state that an astounding 70% of the total operating budget in organising the Formula One (F1) Race are solely generated from corporate sponsorship. Meanwhile, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) (2016) in its report mentioned that more than 34% of the IOC revenue between 2008-2012 quadrennial came from sponsorship related activities.

The study continues to advocate for sustainable sponsor-sponsored relationships through effective deployment of sponsorship criteria. Cornwell et al. (2001) explained that a longer-term sponsorship relationship will potentially increase its position as a source of competitive advantage among other key players in the same industry. This means that the duration of the sponsorship will essentially become the key factor for stronger association between the brand and its desired target audiences' memory (Cornwell & Humphreys, 2013). By that, a comprehensive guideline on sponsorship takes the central stage to ensure this long-lasting relationship where stakeholders, policy and collaboration factors must be embedded when designing such sponsorship relations.

CONCLUSION

The central idea that sponsorship relations play an effective decision-making process is evidently crucial to determine sustainable relationships between sponsee and the sponsor. While the guided policies become of the greatest importance in ensuring smooth communication and negotiation, various stakeholders yield in the facilitation of sponsors in creating good rapport. In fact, past studies also highlight on the towering needs for better engagement between sponsors and its audiences in order to achieve favourable result and positive exposure (Woisetschläger et al., 2017) wherein transformative sponsor engagement would be able to exponentially grow within the context of acceptable criterion.

Thus, our study concludes that in order for an effective sponsor-sponsored engagement, a comprehensive guideline with metamorphic ideals which include stakeholders, policy and engagement should be constructed. The validation of this will usher in a sustainable relationship that is mutually beneficial not only between two parties but most importantly the whole ecosystem that it comes into contact with. Studies in various industries also identify the need for effective sponsorship management as Cornwell and Kwon (2019) state that it serves as an all-important stream of revenue for organisations in sport industry as well as integrated marketing activity alongside sponsoring companies.

Moving forward, our study could delve further into constructing an inclusive sponsorship model that could be employed across industries through the incorporation of systematic sponsorship relations. After all, sponsorship is an ecosystem where all parties are expected to benefit from the exchange of resources (McCarville & Copeland, 1994). Further, Takamatsu (2022) added that the term mutual and beneficial return would then make a clear distinction between sponsorship and non-commercial activities, such as philanthropy and patronage. Hitherto, our findings will benefit the research framework development for investigating the perceptions of sponsors to correlate and mediate the expectations of the sponsors in a holistic manner.

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