Effects of sponsorship quality and quantity on employee brand behavior

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Revised: 8 May 2021 / Accepted: 3 June 2021 / Published online: 14 June 2021
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Abstract

Over the past three decades, corporate sponsorship has evolved into a key element in the marketing communications mix. More recently, the concept of “sponsorship-linked internal marketing” has attracted interest among scholars who study how sponsorship can build corporate identity and increase employee involvement. However, existing knowledge about the effects of sponsorship on employees is still sparse, despite the prevalent rationale that an employer’s sponsorship activity may influence employees’ perceptions of their employer and their behavior within the organization. This research responds to calls to investigate the strategic application of sponsorship within the firm (Farrelly et al. in *J Sport Manag* 26(6):506–520, 2012). Grounded in signaling theory and prior sponsorship research, we develop and empirically test a sponsorship effectiveness model among employees of a Swiss retail company. Our findings demonstrate that a high level of sports, cultural, and ecological sponsorship quality, as well as a high level of sports and ecological sponsorship quantity, positively impacts employees’ brand commitment and brand behavior through their perception of the brand image and brand understanding. Furthermore, the effects of sponsorship quality are stronger than sponsorship quantity.

Keywords Branding · Sponsorship-linked internal marketing · Sponsorship · Brand behavior · Brand commitment

Introduction

Corporate sponsorship has evolved into a highly noticeable, multibillion-dollar element in the marketing communications mix over the past three decades (Y. Kim et al 2015; Schwaiger et al 2010; Wakefield et al 2007). According to Cornwell and Kwak (2015), sponsorship has become a

worldwide communications platform and an omnipresent aspect of customer experience that evolves as a part of indirect marketing. The enduring popularity of sponsorships can be traced back to the effectiveness that is attributed to sponsorships in communicating brands (Alexandris et al 2007). Since the early 1980s, worldwide sponsorship expenditures have increased from only US\$500 million (Nickell et al 2011) to more than US\$65 billion in 2018 (Venturoli 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the global sponsoring market, creating a \$10 billion value gap with 120,000 sponsorship agreements and 5,000 brands impacted due to the massive closure of sports, entertainment, events and arts facilities (Aziz 2020). Sports sponsoring is the largest category accounting for two-third of the overall sponsoring market. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 sports sponsorship was expected to rise 5% in 2020 to more than US\$48 billion worldwide. More recent industry reports predict that sports sponsoring will increase to nearly US\$90 billion in 2027 (Brandessence 2021). Arts sponsoring remains a small but growing category, reaching US\$1 billion in 2018 for the first time (IEG 2021).

Sponsorship is primarily aimed at customers, that is, at external audiences. Hence, there are numerous studies that

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deal with the impact of sponsorship on customers' brand perceptions. For example, there is strong empirical evidence that sponsorship strengthens consumers' brand awareness (e.g., Mason and Cochetel 2006; Rowley and Williams 2008), brand image (e.g., Cornwell et al 2001; Grohs et al 2004), and brand attitude (e.g., Gwinner and Bennett 2008). Furthermore, research shows that sponsorship leads to positive brand behavior, such as positive word of mouth and brand loyalty (e.g., Martensen et al 2007; Mazodier and Merunka 2012).

In addition to achieving external objectives, sponsorship also affects internal audiences, such as an organization's current employees (Cunningham et al 2009). Sponsorship activities enable companies to develop a positive organizational culture and improve their corporate and employer images from the perspective of employees (Karjaluo and Paakkonen 2019). For example, some studies find a positive relationship between sponsorship projects and organizational culture and identity (e.g., Karjaluo and Paakkonen 2019; Meenaghan et al 2013). However, extant literature that focuses on the impact of sponsorship on employees is still sparse. Cornwell (2014) argues that "one of the areas where sponsorship has the largest unrecognized potential to contribute is in addressing internal audiences" (p. 141). Research has shown that employee-related brand-focused behaviors play a central role in the success of brands (De Chernatony 2002; Devasagayam et al 2010; Harris 2007). Brand behavior refers to the contributions of employees to their company's branding efforts (Morhart et al 2009). Employees can strongly influence customers' perceptions of the brand through their customer-oriented behavior (Löhn-dorf and Diamantopoulos 2014). On the one hand, they are responsible for building and strengthening the brand and its products; on the other hand, they act outside the company as brand ambassadors. Thus, it is important to understand the spillover effects of sponsoring on audiences that have not been intentionally targeted, such as employees (Hickman et al 2005). This research responds to calls to investigate the application of sponsoring within the organization (Cunningham et al 2009; Karjaluo and Paakkonen 2019; Walraven et al 2012).

Our research makes several theoretical and managerial contributions. First, we contribute to the "sponsorship-linked internal marketing" (SLIM) literature (Farrelly et al 2012; Inoue et al 2016) by developing and empirically testing a model to measure the effects of sponsorship on employee brand behavior. Specifically, this study unpacks the influence of different types of sponsorship (sports, cultural, and ecological) on the commitment and behavior of the internal audience. Second, we also contribute to the growing field of mediation research in internal branding (Ngo et al 2020) by investigating the mechanism underlying sponsoring effects on employee brand behavior. From a managerial perspective,

our research provides the potential for practitioners to manage SLIM activities. For example, our findings indicate that sponsorship quality is an important variable for developing employee brand behavior. Thus, managers should ensure that employees positively evaluate the company's sponsorship engagements.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. First, we review the literature on sponsorship as it relates to internal marketing and brand-related variables and develop our conceptual model. We then describe our research methodology and present the results of our study. Next, we discuss the contributions to the literature and provide managerial implications. We conclude with the limitations of the study and future research directions.

Literature review

The topic of sponsoring has received much attention in the management and marketing literature (for a recent meta-analysis on sponsorship effectiveness see Y. Kim et al 2015). Sponsorship refers to "the provision of assistance either financial or in-kind to an activity by a commercial organization for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives" (Meenaghan 1983, p. 9). In the past, much of the sponsorship literature has focused on analyzing the effects of sponsoring on external audiences (e.g., D. Kim et al 2020; Ko et al 2008; Levin et al 2001). However, firms have started to treat sponsorship as an internal marketing tool to engage with their employees (e.g., Khan et al 2013; Wagner et al 2019; Zepf 2008).

Hickman et al. (2005) examine the effects of sponsorship on employees. Drawing on social identity theory, the authors demonstrate that employees who have a greater affinity with the sport teams that are sponsored by their employer exhibit greater identification and commitment to their company and are more willing to satisfy customers. The results underline the capacity of sponsorship to affect employees' attitudes and behavior. The authors do not, however, consider the instrument's impact on brand-related variables. In addition, their focus is only on sports sponsorship. The authors did not include other forms of sponsorship, such as cultural or ecological sponsorship.

Demirel et al (2018) examined how team identification and sponsorship-related factors influence employees' organizational commitment. The context of the study is only focused on sports sponsoring, that is, an organization that sponsors a National Football League team. The authors found that employees with higher identification tended to perceive the sponsorship as more beneficial to their organization. Wagner et al (2019) studied how employees perceive and evaluate a sponsorship that is designed with the purpose of improving customer services. Focused on

sports sponsoring in Denmark, the authors found that the campaign had positive effects on communication, personal performance, and teamwork. Furthermore, employee commitment to the campaign showed a high degree of correlation with manager commitment.

In recent years, the strategic application of sponsorship-linked internal marketing—SLIM—has received more attention among scholars. SLIM can be defined as “all activities associated with the conceptualization and leveraging of sports sponsorship to better satisfy employee needs as a way of preparing them to service customers more effectively” (Farrelly et al 2012, pp. 506–507). Two studies are noteworthy that have investigated sponsorship in the context of SLIM. Farrelly et al (2012) conducted a qualitative study among 22 companies to examine the use of sponsorship as an internal marketing tool to drive employees’ corporate identity and performance. The authors identified three levels at which to use sponsorship to engage employees, namely at the individual, team, and organizational levels. Furthermore, the results show that the strategic application of SLIM involves four areas: strategy conceptualization, communications, programs, and evaluation. While the study contributes to a better understanding of sponsorship as an internal marketing tool, it does not explore quantitatively what the effects are on employee behavior. The authors conclude that “[at] the individual level more can be done to explore how sport (via sponsorship) stimulates employee identification with the firm” (Farrelly et al 2012, p. 519). Inoue et al. (2016) also applied the lens of internal marketing, but they focused more narrowly on cause-related sports sponsoring. The authors investigated the role of employees’ involvement with: (i) the sponsored sport, and (ii) the sponsored cause. The study results indicate that employees evaluate cause-related sports sponsorship differently from traditional sports sponsorship without cause affiliation, diverging from prior studies on SLIM (Hickman et al 2005; Zepf 2008).

Other studies focus on advertising and its influence on employees, that is, scholars examine employees’ reactions to specific characteristics of advertising. In this regard, aspects such as the advertising’s accuracy, value congruence (congruence between employees’ values and those highlighted in the ad), ad promise exaggeration, and employees’ behavior featured in an ad are considered (Gilly and Wolfinbarger 1998; Wentzel et al 2010; Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2005, 2010). The studies demonstrate that the specific characteristics of advertising mentioned above influence variables such as positive organizational attitudes (trust, organizational identification, and customer focus) and employee pride. Some authors take a more general approach to the topic of advertising. They shed light on perceived advertising quality, employees’ attitudes toward advertising (Acito 1980; Hughes 2013), and perceived advertising quantity (Hughes 2013). While the quality concept relates to the global

evaluation of the brand’s advertising campaign, advertising quantity relates to employees’ perceptions of the quantity of brand advertising present in the market. Hughes (2013) reveals that advertising quality and quantity increase salespersons’ brand identification and the outcome expectancy related to selling the brand.

In sum, past research on the impact of external communications on employees provides strong evidence that communications activities that primarily target consumers also affect employees. Furthermore, the literature review discloses that, with the exception of Hughes (2013), brand-related variables, such as the consequences of external communications activities, have not been considered so far. Moreover, the only study that deals with the impact of sponsorship on employees solely considers sports sponsorship.

Based on the insights gained from the literature review, this study proposes to adapt the current view of SLIM beyond its focus on sports sponsorship. We consider SLIM as all sponsorship-related activities that influence employees’ brand behavior. We develop and empirically test a conceptual model (see Fig. 1). Following previous research, we integrate sponsorship quality and quantity as independent variables in the model (e.g., Hughes 2013). This allows us to make a global assessment of employees’ sponsorship perceptions. Besides sports sponsorship, we include the perception of cultural and ecological sponsorship to provide a more holistic view of an organization’s sponsorship engagements (International Events Group 2015). Industry reports indicate the importance of arts and culture for society. According to the first European cultural sponsorship market survey, three quarter of European cultural institutions acknowledge the increasing importance of sponsorship (Just et al 2015). Recent research shows that nonprofit arts sponsorship (e.g., spending on art museums, performing arts venues, etc.) offers unique benefits compared to profit driven sports sponsorship. Toscani and Prendergast (2019) argue that nonprofit arts sponsorship is able to mitigate limitations of conventional profit driven sponsorship in terms of market targetability, audience loyalty, and high engagement level. Furthermore, the topics of sustainability and climate change have gained continuously importance in society, and organizations have increased their spending in the area of environmental sponsorship. For instance, Coca-Cola recently announced to become a major sponsor of the National Recycling Week (Page 2019).

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

The purpose of our study is to develop and empirically test a sponsorship effectiveness model to examine the relationships between sponsorship quality and quantity and employees’ brand commitment and behavior. The following discussion

Fig. 1 Conceptual model

presents our theoretical rationale for the theoretical model and our hypotheses.

Signaling theory

In the present study, we adopt the lens of signaling as the theoretical approach. Signaling theory (Spence 1973) is useful for describing behavior when two parties (individuals or organizations) have access to different information (Connelly et al 2011). Signalers in management literature generally represent a person (e.g., managers, recruiters), product, or firm. Some strategy studies have explored signaling in a branding context. For example, Chung and Kalnins (2001) studied the signaling mechanism of hotel chain (i.e., brand) affiliation, referring to brand managers as signalers and consumers as receivers. They conclude that more signals increase signaling effectiveness. In our context, the signalers are brand managers and/or communication directors, who are considered to be an ‘insider’ with information about the brand. Receivers in this study are employees who are considered to be ‘outsiders’. More specifically, we suggest that employees’ brand perceptions are based on “actions insiders take to intentionally communicate positive, imperceptible qualities of the insider” (Connelly et al 2011, p. 45).

Research has highlighted two areas of information where asymmetry is particularly important: information about quality and information about behavioral intentions. According to the review by Connelly et al (2011), most signaling models include quality as a distinguishing element. For example, Hughes (2013) has studied the impact of a brand’s consumer-directed advertising on a firm’s sales personnel that are incidentally exposed to these messages. The central assertion in this study is that perceptions of advertising (measured in terms of quality and quantity) influence salesperson effort and performance along two paths: (1) by

building outcome expectancies and (2) by building brand identification.

In the present study, *sponsorship quality* represents an employee’s assessment of the likeability and popularity of the brand’s sponsorship engagements (Hughes 2013). Another related key concept of signaling in management literature is the notion of observability, which refers to the extent to which outsiders are able to notice the signal (e.g., Connelly et al 2011). According to previous research, signaling effectiveness can be enhanced by increasing the frequency of observable signals, e.g., the number of ads running in the market or the size of the media schedule (Janney and Folta 2003). Similar to the study by Hughes (2013), we consider *sponsoring quantity* as an employee’s evaluation of the number and frequency of the brand’s sponsorship engagements, as well as the intensity of the media schedule regarding the brand’s sponsorship engagements. In the following, we discuss the constructs and their relationships in more detail.

Sponsorship quantity and employee’s brand understanding

Internal marketing literature demonstrates the effect of internal branding practices on employee brand knowledge, brand identification, brand understanding, as well as their commitment and brand-supporting behavior (e.g., Morhart et al 2009; Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos 2014; Ngo et al 2020; Piehler 2018; Piehler et al 2016). A key role in this aspect relates to knowledge dissemination to transfer brand meaning and to deliver the brand promise. Internal brand knowledge is defined as “cognitive activity upon which employees understand, remember, make decisions, and perform based on the information they have received” (Ngo et al 2020, p. 275). Further, brand knowledge contributes to

one's brand understanding—that is, employees' comprehension of brand-related information (Piehler 2018; Piehler et al 2016). For the present study, we follow the view in literature that knowledge dissemination helps employees to understand their organization's brand strategy and also the rationale behind internal and external management decisions, while reducing employees' role ambiguity (King and Grace 2010). More specifically, prior studies suggest that internal brand communication is recognized as a source of employee's brand knowledge and understanding (King and Grace 2008, 2010). In line with this research, we posit that by increasing the frequency of observable signals (i.e., internal and external brand communication including sponsorship) an organization is able to increase employees' brand understanding. Following this reasoning, we argue that high levels of sponsorship improve an employee's understanding of the brand. Hence, we propose:

H1 Perceived sports (H1a), cultural, (H1b), or ecological (H1c) sponsorship quantity have a significant influence on employees' brand understanding.

Sponsorship quality and employees' perceived brand image

Brand image has long been recognized as an important concept in marketing (Keller 1993). Aaker (1991) defines brand image as a “a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way” (p. 109). In the same context, Keller (1993) defines it as “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory” (p. 3). Both definitions suggest that various abstract features may reside in the consumer's mind about the brand. In the context of the current study, the focus is on the associations that employees make with a brand. We focus on employees' attitudes toward the brand, which is different from their beliefs about the employer, referred to as employer image (Ployhart 2006; Theurer et al 2018). Research shows that strong, positive, and unique brand associations lead to a superior brand image. For example, Woisetschlager and Michaelis (2012) find that sponsorship recall has a positive effect on brand image.

Prior research in different fields has studied the relationship of information quality on outcomes such as image. For instance, in tourism Kim et al. (2017) found that tourism information quality in social media influences the formation of travelers' destination image. The authors argue that “providing tourists with high-quality contents in well-designed social media is an effective destination marketing effort to affect users' different aspects of destination image” (p. 699). Similarly, studies on sponsorship by bloggers argue that brand attitudes should be more influenced by strong than by

weak arguments depending on perceived blogger trustworthiness (Chu and Kamal 2008). We posit that higher sponsorship quality will lead to stronger employee's assessment of the likeability of the brand's sponsorship engagements. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2 Perceived sports (H2a), cultural (H2b), or ecological (H2c) sponsorship quality have a significant influence on employees' brand image.

Brand commitment

Brand commitment is defined as an individual's psychological attachment to the brand (Johnson et al 2010). Prior studies in the internal branding literature have argued that employees who internalize their own organization's brand are better equipped to fulfill the explicit and implicit promises inherent in the brand (King and Grace 2008; Miles and Mangold 2004). According to the Employee Brand Commitment Pyramid by King and Grace (2008), employees who are provided with appropriate brand-related information move to the top of the pyramid as they develop a strong commitment to the brand. Similarly, research argues that employees having knowledge and an understanding of the organization's brand positively impacts brand commitment (Piehler et al 2016; Shaari et al 2012). Employees who lack brand understanding do not know how to perform their brand-related role (Piehler 2018). Higher levels of role ambiguity will negatively impact their commitment. In accordance with prior research, we hypothesize the following:

H3 Employees' brand understanding has a significant influence on employees' brand commitment.

Individuals will usually try to work for brands that have a good reputation and a good brand image. Once they have gained membership of such a brand, they start to internalize the brand, identify with it, and, finally, commit themselves to the brand. These reflections result in the following hypothesis:

H4 Employer brand image has a significant influence on employees' brand commitment.

Brand behavior

Brand behavior refers to the contribution of employees (both on and off the job) to their company's branding efforts, which should be consistent with the brand identity and brand promise. Morhart et al (2009) consider three categories of employee brand behavior: retention, in-role behavior, and extra-role behavior. *Retention* refers to employees' intentions to maintain a professional relationship with the brand.

In-role behavior refers to the behavior of employees that meets the standard requirements with respect to the brand. If an employee does not fulfill these standards, they are sanctioned, for example, via reduced wages or dismissal. *Extra-role behavior* refers to the discretionary behavior of employees that exceeds the standard requirements of a job and supports the company's branding efforts. This behavior is neither formally rewarded, nor sanctioned when absent. In particular, the authors differentiate between two types of extra-role behavior: participation, which occurs on the job and refers to employees' active participation in developing and improving the brand, and positive word of mouth, which takes place off the job and refers to talking favorably about the brand in social situations outside the company. In our study, we also consider in-role behavior and extra-role behavior, with participation and positive word of mouth as categories of employee brand behavior. However, by including the variable brand commitment, we have already considered the aspect of employees having a strong relationship with the brand in our model. That is why we do not consider retention to be a part of our employee brand behavior variable. For reasons of model parsimony and again in contrast to Morhart et al (2009), who integrate in-role behavior, participation, and positive word of mouth as three separate variables in their research model, we consider these aspects as being dimensions of the employee brand behavior variable.

According to social identity theory, employees who commit themselves strongly to such a brand will identify with it and derive parts of their social identity from it. Consequently, employees who commit themselves strongly to a brand will want it to be successful. Thus, they support the brand in order to preserve their own social identity (Dutton et al 1994). Prior research has shown that brand commitment is an antecedent of brand-aligned employee behavior (e.g., King and Grace, 2010; Piehler 2018; Piehler et al 2016). We therefore postulate:

H5 Employees' brand commitment will positively influence employee brand behavior.

Method

Research design and sample

To test the hypotheses, we collected data from employees of a large Swiss retail company (with a market share of about one-third of the market). The company has more than 2,000 sales outlets consisting predominantly of supermarkets but also of an online shop and specialist formats. As the company holds a large sponsorship portfolio, it was deemed as a good fit for the research purpose of this study. The survey

was conducted online in order to reach employees more easily. The link to the questionnaire was sent to 600 employees of the company in Switzerland. For company reasons, the distribution of the questionnaire was restricted to employees working in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (which is also where the vast majority of the company's employees work). Moreover, in order to get a broad picture of the sponsorship's impact on the company's employees, the link to the questionnaire was sent to employees of different levels of hierarchies and seniority, of varying levels of customer contact and to employees of different gender and age. By doing this, we avoided concentrating on one specific subgroup of the company. To motivate employees to participate in the survey, we assured anonymity and offered them cinema tickets as an incentive. In total, we received 236 usable questionnaires, representing a return rate of 39.3%. Due to missing information, we had to delete five responses, resulting in an effective sample size of 231.

The data set contained 39% females and 61% males. In total, 8.9% of the survey participants were younger than 26 years of age, 54.2% were aged 26–45, and 36.9% were older than 46 years of age. In total, 45.3% of the survey participants had been working for more than ten years, 18.2% had been working for a period of 6–10 years, 20.3% had been working for a period of 3–5 years, 8.1% had been working for a period of 1–2 years, and 8.1% had been working for less than one year for the company. Altogether, 60.6% of the survey participants were employed in office work, 32.7% were in managerial positions, 5.1% were employed in manufacturing, and less than 1% were employed as salespersons or as chief executive officers. In all, 40.7% of the survey participants had contact with the company's stakeholders (customers, suppliers, media) on a routine basis.

Construct measures

The six constructs of the model are measured using a 7-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. Table 1 gives an overview of the items used to measure the constructs. All of the constructs were operationalized reflectively. The scales for *sponsorship quality* and *sponsorship quantity* were adopted from Hughes (2013) and modified to fit the context of the current study. *Brand image* was assessed with items used in previous studies (Esch et al 2006; Keller 1993; Low and Lamb 2000). We measured *brand understanding* by partly adapting the scale used by Piehler et al (2016). The items of *brand commitment* were adopted from O'Reilly III and Chatman (1986). We measured *employee brand behavior* on the basis of Morhart et al (2009). In this study, an employee's active participation in developing and improving the brand is reflected in several aspects. For this reason, we extended Morhart et al's (2009) measurement of the variable

Table 1 Measurement model results

Items	Loadings
Sports Sponsorship Quality ($\alpha=0.85$; CR=0.83)	0.76***
I like the sports sponsorship engagements (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing) of [corporate brand name]	0.74***
I feel good about the sports sponsorship engagements (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing) of [corporate brand name]	0.73***
The sports sponsorship engagements (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing) of [corporate brand name] appeal to people like me	
Cultural Sponsorship Quality ($\alpha=0.87$; CR=0.85)	0.75***
I like the cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy) of [corporate brand name]	0.82***
I feel good about the cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy) of [corporate brand name]	0.73***
The cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy) of [corporate brand name] appeal to people like me	
Ecological Sponsorship Quality ($\alpha=0.86$; CR=0.85)	0.74***
I like the ecological sponsorship engagements (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2]) of [corporate brand name]	0.87***
I feel good about the cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2]) of [corporate brand name]	0.75***
The ecological sponsorship engagements (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2]) of [corporate brand name] appeal to people like me	
Sports Sponsorship Quantity ($\alpha=0.91$; CR=0.91)	0.75***
There seem to be a lot of sports sponsorship engagements (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing) of [corporate brand name] airing in the market	0.87***
[Corporate brand name] frequently promotes sports events (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing)	0.90***
There is a heavy media schedule supporting the sports sponsorship engagements (e.g., beach volleyball, ski cross, gymnastics, and cross-country skiing) of [corporate brand name]	
Cultural Sponsorship Quantity ($\alpha=0.95$; CR=0.94)	0.81***
There seem to be a lot of cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy) of [corporate brand name] airing in the market	0.95***
[Corporate brand name] frequently promotes cultural events (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy)	0.88***
There is a heavy media schedule supporting the cultural sponsorship engagements (e.g., musicals, open air cinemas, and comedy) of [corporate brand name]	
Ecological Sponsorship Quantity ($\alpha=0.90$; CR=0.89)	0.70***
There seem to be a lot of ecological sponsorship engagements (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2]) of [corporate brand name] airing in the market	0.87***
[Corporate brand name] frequently promotes ecological events (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2])	0.89***
There is a heavy media schedule supporting the ecological sponsorship engagements (e.g., the sustainability trade show [trade show name], and the green house museums [museum name 1] and [museum name 2]) of [corporate brand name]	
Brand Image ($\alpha=0.87$; CR=0.86)	0.78***
I perceive the brand [corporate brand name] to be dynamic	0.81***
I perceive the brand [corporate brand name] to be delightful	0.69***
I perceive the brand [corporate brand name] to be sustainable	0.79***
I perceive the brand [corporate brand name] to be close to the customer	
Employee Brand Understanding ($\alpha=0.73$; CR=0.75)	0.72***
I know the brand [corporate brand name] well	0.59***
The brand [corporate brand name] has a distinctive, memorable logo	0.81***
I clearly know what the brand [corporate brand name] stands for	
Brand Commitment ($\alpha=0.81$; CR=0.82)	0.84***
If the values of this organization were different, I would not be as attached to [corporate brand name]	0.81***
[Corporate brand name] has a great deal of personal meaning for me	0.74***
I am proud to tell others that I am a part of this [corporate brand name]	
Brand Behavior ($\alpha=0.75$; CR=0.77)	0.69***
In-Role Behavior (Item Parceling)	0.95***
Extra-Role Behavior (Item Parceling)	
In-Role Behavior (Item Parceling)	
Other people would describe me as a person who is alert for failure to meet standards for brand-consistent behavior	
Other people would describe me as a person who follows brand-related rules and instructions with extreme care	
Other people would describe me as a person who adheres to our standards for brand-congruent behavior

Table 1 (continued)

Items	Loadings
Extra-Role Behavior (Item Parceling)	
Other people would describe me as a person who speaks favorably about [corporate brand name] in social situations	
Other people would describe me as a person who brings up [corporate brand name] in a positive way in conversations I have with friends and acquaintances	
Other people would describe me as a person who actively promotes [corporate brand name's] products and services to people I know	
Other people would describe me as a person who keeps informed about the brand (and tells others)	
Other people would describe me as a person who asks colleagues for feedback about my work for the brand	
Other people would describe me as a person who makes constructive suggestions on how to improve our customers' brand experience	
Other people would describe me as a person who frequently makes suggestions to co-workers on how we can strengthen our brand image	
Other people would describe me as a person who pursues additional training to improve our brand's performance	

*** $p < 0.01$; α : Cronbach's alpha; CR: composite reliability

participation by considering further aspects of employee participation in the brand. In particular, we referred to items from the organizational citizenship behavior scale established by Van Dyne et al (1994) and Turnipseed (2002) and adapted it to the context of our study. Furthermore, we aimed to reduce the distortion of the results (i.e., due to socially desirable responses) by using an indirect self-evaluation of employees. In other words, participants were asked to assess their own behavior from the perspective of other people (Piehler et al 2016; see Table 1).

We tested the three-dimensional structure of employee brand behavior by performing exploratory factor analysis. However, as participation and positive word of mouth did not reveal to be separate factors, only a two-dimensional structure of the construct, represented by in-role behavior and extra-role behavior, emerged. In-role behavior contained the intended items to measure the dimension. Extra-role behavior encompassed the items referring to participation and positive word of mouth. In order to reduce the complexity of the construct, we employed item-parceling (Bagozzi and Heatherton 1994; Bagozzi and Edwards 1998; Falk et al 2010), resulting in only one factor for each dimension.

Analysis and results

Measurement model

The measurement model was tested with the statistical software programs SPSS 21 and Amos 7.0. We tested the reliability and validity of the reflective measurements utilizing confirmatory factor analysis. As Mardia's coefficient of 5.14 indicated multivariate normality (Mardia 1985), we were allowed to use maximum likelihood as an estimation method. Table 1 presents the results of the measurement analyses. All dependent and independent constructs were included in one multi-factorial confirmatory factor analysis

model (Homburg and Jensen 2007). This model reveals a satisfactory fit to the data (root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.08, Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.88, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.90, $\chi^2/df = 2.41$).

Cronbach's alpha (α) values of 0.73 and higher indicate good levels of reliability for the scales used in the model (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). All of the latent constructs demonstrate an average variance extracted (AVE) that is greater than 0.50 (see Table 2). This indicates the relative robustness of the selected items. Internal consistency of the constructs was evaluated using composite reliability (CR) (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). The values for CR ranged between 0.75 and 0.95 and therefore exceeded the relevant threshold values (Bagozzi and Yi 1988; Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity was assessed on the basis of criteria suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981). All degrees of correlation between the latent variables are smaller than the corresponding square roots of AVE. Therefore, no criterion was violated.

As our measures derived from a single data source, common method variance (CMV) could have an influence (Podsakoff et al 2012). According to survey methodology literature, two main approaches have been identified to deal with CMV issues: (1) procedural steps in the stage of questionnaire design to reduce the likelihood that CMV will affect observed relationships and (2) a range of statistical techniques (Rodríguez-Ardura and Meseguer-Artola 2020). In our study, we followed several procedural remedies such as using clear, concise and accurate wording of the questions. We adopted Harman's single-factor test as post hoc technique to test for CMV (Harman 1976; Malhotra et al 2017). The test generated a nine-factor solution, explaining 74.1% of the variance, of which the first factor explained 11.8% of the total variance. As no general factor emerged, CMV was not considered to be a serious problem in our study.

Table 2 Discriminant validity among constructs

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. BB	5.84	0.83	0.80									
2. Knowl	6.54	0.60	0.52	0.71								
3. Image	5.44	1.07	0.33	0.40	0.78							
4. Comm	6.11	0.90	0.73	0.60	0.58	0.78						
5. Eco-Quant	5.14	1.35	0.15	0.26	0.42	0.29	0.86					
6. Cult-Quant	4.71	1.50	0.25	0.26	0.49	0.38	0.31	0.92				
7. Sports-Quant	5.03	1.39	0.21	0.34	0.38	0.26	0.36	0.51	0.87			
8. Eco-Qual	5.65	1.17	0.15	0.34	0.44	0.33	0.80	0.27	0.21	0.81		
9. Cult-Qual	5.16	1.40	0.21	0.27	0.55	0.36	0.18	0.75	0.34	0.39	0.81	
10. Sports-Qual	4.98	1.33	0.23	0.30	0.50	0.28	0.14	0.33	0.72	0.25	0.49	0.79

Diagonal values (bold) are square roots of the average variance extracted (AVE), while off-diagonal values are correlations between constructs

Abbreviations: BB: Brand Behavior; Knowl: Brand Knowledge; Image: Brand Image; Comm: Brand Commitment; Eco-Quant: Ecological Sponsorship Quantity; Cult-Quant: Cultural Sponsorship Quantity; Sports-Quant: Sports Sponsorship Quantity; Eco-Qual: Ecological Sponsorship Quality; Cult-Qual: Cultural Sponsorship Quality; Sports-Qual: Sports Sponsorship Quality

Hypotheses testing

We tested our model using structural equation analysis (maximum likelihood). The results suggest that the model fits the empirical data well (RMSEA = 0.07, TLI = 0.91, CFI = 0.91, $\chi^2/df = 2.20$). All hypotheses (except H1b) are supported. The R-squared values of the endogenous variables reveal acceptable values ranging from 0.20 to 0.54. Figure 2 illustrates the model results.

Post hoc mediation analysis

In addition to the proposed direct effects between the latent variables, we also tested whether there are indirect effects from sponsorship quality and sponsorship quantity on brand commitment and brand behavior. We performed a mediation analysis in AMOS on the overall sample using bootstrapping tests with 5,000 bootstrapped samples (Preacher and Hayes 2008; Zhao et al 2010). The results show that all of the indirect effects are significant, except the indirect effects of cultural-sponsorship quantity on brand commitment and on brand behavior. Thus, the

Fig. 2 Empirical model results. Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table 3 Results of the mediation analysis

Independent Variable (IV)	Mediation Variable(s)	Dependent Variable (DV)	Mediator(s) to Dependent	Indirect Effect of IV on DV
Sports Sponsorship Quality	Brand Image	Brand Commitment	0.43**	0.11**
Cultural Sponsorship Quality	Brand Image	Brand Commitment	0.43**	0.17**
Ecological Sponsorship Quality	Brand Image	Brand Commitment	0.43**	0.12**
Sports Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Understanding	Brand Commitment	0.45**	0.11**
Cultural Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Understanding	Brand Commitment	0.45**	0.06 (n.s.)
Ecological Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Understanding	Brand Commitment	0.45**	0.08*
Sports Sponsorship Quality	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.08**
Cultural Sponsorship Quality	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.12**
Ecological Sponsorship Quality	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.09**
Sports Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.08**
Cultural Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.04 (n.s.)
Ecological Sponsorship Quantity	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.06*
Brand Image	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.31**
Brand Understanding	Brand Commitment	Brand Behavior	0.73**	0.33**

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$, n.s. = not significant. We list standardized coefficients (β) and two-tailed test results

findings reveal that the sponsorship variables not only have a direct effect on brand image and brand understanding, but also an indirect effect on brand commitment and brand behavior via image and understanding. Table 3 provides an overview of the mediation analysis results.

Discussion and implications

Sponsorship has become a worldwide communications platform and an omnipresent aspect of customer experience that evolves as a part of indirect marketing. In addition to external audiences, sponsorship is increasingly important to engage an organization's internal audiences. Employees, particularly millennials, expect to work for a company that gives back. But they want to have a say in what causes their company supports and how and when they volunteer their time (McPherson 2019). It is important for companies to survey their workforce and forge relationships with non-profits in areas that their employees are passionate about. This includes sports, arts and the environment.

This study investigates how sports, cultural, and ecological sponsorship drives employees' brand behavior. To address our research questions, we developed and empirically tested a model to measure the effects of sponsorship on employees' brand behavior. The findings confirm the hypothesized impact of sponsorship on employees. Sponsorship quality and quantity influence—through brand image, brand understanding, and brand commitment—employees' brand behavior. The R-squared values show that the model is particularly well suited for predicting brand behavior, brand commitment, and brand image. Furthermore, the results

reveal that the effects of the sponsorship quality variables on brand behavior are stronger than those of the sponsorship quantity variables (total effect on brand behavior: 0.18 vs. 0.09). The relatively weak effect of sponsorship quantity on brand understanding can be traced back to the omnipresence of the brand for the employees; they are exposed to the brand every day at work, and they experience it in internal brand communications activities. As a consequence, it is difficult to increase brand understanding even further by boosting sponsorship quantity.

The results also indicate that brand image is mostly affected by cultural sponsorship quality, followed by ecological and sports sponsorship quality. However, the differences between the path coefficients are very small. One reason for the lower influence of sports sponsorship quality is that the sponsored sports events may be perceived to have a lower fit to the brand than the sponsored cultural and ecological events. Therefore, a transfer in attitudes from sports sponsorship quality to the attitudinal brand image might be more difficult to promote.

Sports sponsorship quantity has the strongest influence on brand understanding, followed by ecological quantity. However, we observe only marginal differences with regard to the path coefficients. Cultural sponsorship quantity does not affect brand understanding. One explanation for this is that the cultural events sponsored by the considered company are, in contrast to the sports and ecological events, not of a continuous nature. For example, the sponsored open-air cinema only takes place once a year for four weeks, while the greenhouse museum (ecological sponsorship) is mostly open all day long, and the sponsored sports events take place regularly. Thus, due to the infrequency of these

sponsorship promotions the perception of the sponsorship brand is pushed to the background. This may explain why brand understanding is not affected by cultural sponsorship quantity.

The findings have several theoretical and managerial implications. First, this study advances several research fields, including internal marketing, sponsorship, and brand behavior of employees. Existing knowledge about the effects of sponsorship on employees is still sparse, despite the prevalent rationale that an employer's sponsorship activity may influence employees' perceptions of their employer and their behavior within the organization. In this study, we develop and empirically test a sponsorship effectiveness model, demonstrating how three different types of sponsorship (sports, cultural, and ecological) influence the commitment and behavior of the internal audience. We further contribute to the rather neglected area of cultural and arts sponsorship which has experienced growth in sponsorships. Most of the research on sponsorship is in the context of sports sponsorship, its target consumers, achievable objectives, and marketing strategies (Toscani and Prendergast 2019). Our findings show that sponsored sports events may be perceived to have a lower fit to the brand than the sponsored cultural events. In this aspect, this study makes a unique contribution to the SLIM literature.

The results obtained in this study lead also to important managerial implications. The findings indicate that sponsorship quality is an important variable for developing employee brand behavior. Employees who like the sponsorship engagements of the brand they work for have a higher brand image, show a stronger brand commitment, and contribute through their brand behavior to the brand's success. Consequently, managers should ensure that employees positively evaluate the company's sponsorship engagements.

With regard to existing sponsorship engagements, we recommend that managers regularly monitor their employees' attitudes toward them. This can be achieved, for example, by conducting employee surveys. If employees express negative opinions about the company's sponsorship activity, managers will be forced to react. One way of improving sponsorship evaluation is to provide staff with better information about sponsorship, for example, by delivering background details on the sponsorship's aims or on its success. For example, Khan et al. (2013) argue that businesses should internally market their sponsorship activities and involve employees in sponsorship decisions. This will strengthen employees' understanding of the importance of these engagements. In addition, since leaders act as role models, company managers should present a positive attitude toward the sponsorship engagement in order to elicit a positive attitude toward the sponsorship among employees.

If a new sponsorship engagement is planned, it is important to identify employees' expectations and desires

regarding this. Considering employees' attitudes will help to ensure their acceptance and support of the sponsorship engagement. Furthermore, we argue that a sponsorship object (e.g., a soccer team) that meets employees' expectations will promote their positive evaluation of the sponsorship engagement.

Although the effects of sponsorship quantity are rather weak, this study's findings reveal that sponsorship quantity is another predictor of brand behavior. Employees who favorably perceive their company's sponsorship activity show higher brand understanding, are more committed to the brand, and exhibit positive brand behavior. As brand understanding strongly influences brand commitment, we recommend that managers strive for high levels of sponsorship quantity. In order to achieve this aim, managers are recommended to increase the frequency of sponsorship promotions. One way to achieve this is to extend external communications activities, for example, by promoting the company's sponsorship engagement in TV spots or in social media activities. Additionally, internal communications activities, such as newsletters, employee magazines, and the Intranet, are viable means for increasing the level of sponsorship understanding.

Research limitations and directions for future research

The present study provides a deeper understanding of the effects of a firm's sponsorship on employee behavior. However, several limitations have to be acknowledged, which, at the same time, present opportunities for future research. First, this cross-sectional study only focused on employees (i) in one single company and (ii) within the German-speaking part of Switzerland. As such, the conclusions drawn from this study only hold true for the current sample at a specific period of time, and may not be generalizable to a larger population and in different contextual settings (Shaari et al 2012). For instance, future research may begin by testing the model with employees from other companies to provide some insights into differences between companies.

Moreover, the present study is limited to the field of sponsorship. An important avenue of future research would be to examine the effects of further external communications activities on employees, such as TV spots, posters, and social media activities. On the basis of these investigations, researchers might be able to find out which external communications activities reveal the strongest effects on brand commitment and brand behavior, and thus which external communications activities companies should consider most. With respect to moderating effects, personal interests or general affinity toward sponsorships, might be variables that present an interesting task for further research.

Another potential limitation relates to the measurement of brand understanding. We partly adapted a three-item scale used by Piehler et al (2016). However, one item with the weakest loading refers to a distinctive, memorable logo. One can argue that employees are well informed about their organization's logo. Future research may use a different scale with more items (e.g., Ngo et al 2020) to measure employees' brand understanding or brand knowledge. In addition, future research may include brand recall in order to study the effects of learning and remembering of a sponsorship stimulus over time.

While there were strong reliability and validity in our results, one limitation which should be acknowledged is the discriminant validity between eco-qual and eco-quant. The measurement of these two constructs were adapted from the literature. Our results appear to suggest that there may be a need for greater refinement or development of new scales for these constructs for different contexts. Undertaking the development of refinement of these constructs measurement could aid in ensuring greater discriminant validity in future studies.

We applied the Harman's single-factor test to test for CMV. The results clearly indicated that CMV should not be a problem in our data. We acknowledge, however, that, in some instances, this test may not be powerful enough to detect the presence of CMV (e.g., Chang et al 2010; Podsakoff et al 2012). We therefore recommend researchers to assess marker variables which then allows them to apply alternative techniques.

Finally, it might be a fruitful path for future research to investigate the 'ware-out-effect' of increasing sponsorship quantity. The present research reveals a positive effect of sponsorship quantity on brand understanding and brand commitment. However, too much communication pressure could turn the positive effects into a negative effect on brand commitment due to too many repetitions. Consequently, research that investigates the level of communication pressure under various conditions in the field of sponsorship would be a beneficial addition to this paper.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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