

## **ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF BRAND EXPERIENCES ON CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY FOR TOURNAMENT TITLE SPONSORS**

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of brand experiences on customer-based brand equity (CBBE) for title sponsors of short-term tournaments. Although prevalent in practice, the intersection of the variables under study has received limited academic probe, the study seeks to empirically illuminate the relationship. The study presents an adapted theoretical framework to interpret this relationship. The target population for the study were brands who title sponsor short-term tournaments in the Premier Soccer League (PSL), South Africa's top-flight league. The PSL's sponsorship income was estimated to be well over R300 Million in 2018, attracting more than 10 million unique spectators yearly. Non-probability sampling was used to select executive decision makers who represented the sponsor brands and in-depth interviews were conducted using structured questionnaire guides. The results show that brands have not fully utilized brand experiences beyond the selling and awareness objectives, and further show that brand experiences can be used as an intervening variable between sponsorship and CBBE to build stronger resonance. The adapted theoretical framework posited in this study proved as a conduit to interpret the relationship under study; however, future research further may empirically validate the framework. The study findings can assist sponsors who collectively spend more than R300 Million to better leverage sponsored properties to build lasting resonance. The generalizability of the findings is restricted due to the limited sample size.*

**Keywords:** *Customer-based brand equity, title sponsorship, short-term tournaments, brand experiences.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past three decades, sponsorship marketing has been a major contributor to the popularity of South

African sports, particularly football (Blake et al., 2018). From 1996 to 2010, the South African sponsorship market experienced exponential growth, with brands paying large sums of money to leverage sponsorship rights and properties (Brand South Africa, 2015). At the end of the 2015/16 Premier Soccer League (PSL) season, South Africa's highest professional football division reported a

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sponsorship income of over R300 million (PSL, 2018). Leading up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the PSL was ranked seventh on the list of leagues with the biggest sponsorship revenues in the world (Brand South Africa, 2015). At a global scale, the International Events Group (IEG) estimated the global sports sponsorship market to be worth well over \$60 billion in 2017 (IEG, 2017).

Sponsorship marketing grew increasingly popular in the late 1980s when a significant shift was introduced in marketing (Schmid, 2017). The shift was an effort by firms to differentiate themselves in the sponsorship market by moving away from the common ratification of products' aspects and functional benefits towards brands' symbolic overtones (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Associating with sports properties allowed firms to illuminate their purpose and position, and get closer to consumers (Yousaf et al., 2018). Sponsorship also allowed firms to access exploitable commercial potential associated with the sponsored property (Yousaf et al., 2018). As sponsorship became popular, firms started devising alternate approaches to utilise sponsorship budgets to remain differentiated (Schmid, 2017).

Over time, firms have become critical of sponsorship and the value they bring given their cost (Clark et al., 2009; Nuseir, 2020). The criticism comes as there are no deliberate nor quantifiable derived benefits (Schnittka et al., 2013). As a result, firms focus more on title sponsorship of short-term tournaments instead of longterm sponsorship commitments (Clark et al., 2009). Short-term tournaments have generally been used as tactical selling assets (Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010; Mulei and Muchemi, 2021). Short-term tournaments enable firms to easily and continually assess their financial commitments to the sponsored properties (Schmitt, 2010). In South Africa, known firms like South African Breweries (SAB), Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) and Telkom have since opted for title sponsorship of short-term tournaments in place of long-term sponsorship agreements. This behaviour mimics that of sponsors in other countries further depicting the pressure on sponsors to deliver results (Schnittka et al., 2013). Although initially devised as a financial decision, shortterm tournaments have also served as means to reinvent and reassess sponsorship commitments by sponsor brands. This gave rise to title sponsorship of short-term tournaments by many sponsor brands, at a global scale (Byl, 2014).

The continued growth of title sponsorship in short-term tournament sports is attributable to several factors, but importantly, it is to get the consumers excited and remain engaged for the duration of the tournament (Byl, 2014; Kim and Kwon, 2021). Short-term tournaments are beneficial for fans as they give instant gratification wherein their team could be crowned champions without waiting for the season- long league to conclude (Byl, 2014). Short-term tournaments are an instrument to elicit excitement for fans but also to deliver impact for sponsor firms (Schmitt, 2010). Brakus et al. (2009) add that to build this excitement, sponsor firms need to deploy exciting experiences to boost the effectiveness of the tournaments. The experiences are essential in delivering impact on firms as they likely alter how consumers perceive a brand (Brakus et al., 2009; Keller, 2013).

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These experiences are about creating and staging interactive, memorable activities for consumers (Schmid, 2017). The experiences are characterised by involvement and contact between the brand and consumers during the sponsored tournament (Schmitt, 2010). Brand experiences have potential to alter how consumers perceive a brand in terms of identity, meaning, responses and relationships (Donlan and Crowther, 2013). These four tenets combined equate to customer-based brand equity (CBBE) (Keller, 2016). Chieng and Goi (2011) define CBBE as the differential brand knowledge that resides in the mind of consumers pertaining to a brand.

Building and maintaining a strong CBBE ensures that a brand remains top of mind, enjoys good salience, has good imagery, enjoys good consumer responses and has loyal customers (Chanavat and Bodet, 2014). From the existing literature, it is evident that brand experiences are a large contributor towards creating CBBE (Schmid, 2017). Customer interactions play a significant role in how consumers think, feel, and respond to a brand (Groza et al., 2012). Moreover, using a consumer passion point such as soccer makes brand experiences even more effective (Shank, 2009).

The introduction of brand experiences in sponsorship marketing, particularly short-term tournaments, has not averted the same criticisms that arose in the 1990s about the effectiveness of sponsorship marketing (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Organisations remain uncertain on the value they derive from sponsorships (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Beyond the assumed financial gains, firms are not certain if sponsorship changes what people see, hear, feel, and think towards the sponsor brand (Clark et al., 2009) It is against this background that this study investigated the effectiveness of brand experiences in short-term tournaments to deliver impact on CBBE for sponsor brands.

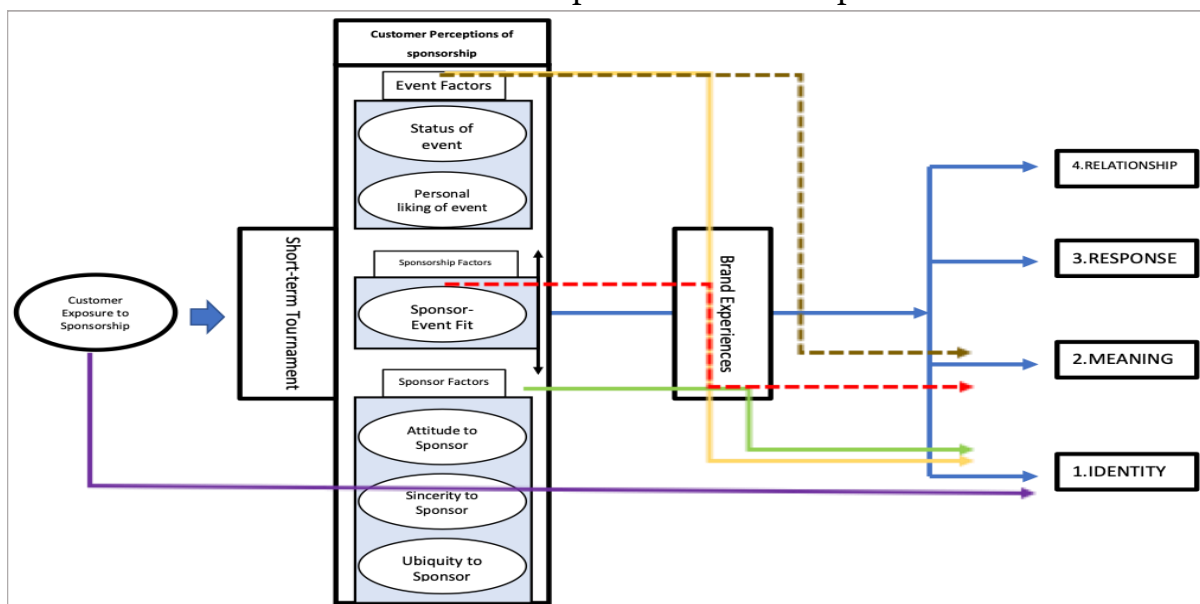


Figure 1. Adapted theoretical framework.

Firstly the paper focuses on title sponsorship of shortterm tournaments and brand experiences, and then an exposition of the adapted theoretical framework (Figure 1) as means to interpret the relationship under study. The section is followed by the research design used to collect the data, and thereafter the empirical results, findings, concluding with a discussion of managerial implications and potential future research.

## **Title Sponsorship and Short-term Tournaments**

Pursuing sponsorship is solely based on the sponsor brand's assessment of the fit between the brand and the sponsored property (Zinger and O'Reilly, 2010). Clark et al. (2009) state that sponsorship is an expensive tool and has been set remarkably high standards in terms of sponsors to deliver effectively on the brand (Kim and Kwon, 2021)

Clark et al. (2009) made the distinction between title sponsorship and affiliate sponsorship. Title sponsorship is distinguished by its premium price tag and the exclusivity that the title sponsor gets, state Clark et al. (2009). When a sponsor does not have title sponsor status, they are likely to share the spoils with other brands; the competition for share of voice and the benefits thereof will be proportional to the price paid to associate with the event (Clark et al., 2009).

Title sponsorship is considered the crown jewel of sports sponsorship because it garners top media coverage and is prized for both generating brand or product awareness and building an image for sponsors (Clark et al., 2009). Not surprisingly, the rising cost of title sponsorships has led some brands and companies to question their underlying value. Interestingly, little attention has been paid to understanding title sponsorship in literature. According to Clark et al. (2009), to date, no study has considered the strategic success of title sponsorship, a seemingly expensive activity. Lee et al. (2020) also support the assertion that research focusing on title sponsorship is not well developed and as such, title sponsorship definitions have been anecdotal evidence gathered from sponsorship related articles and resources (Lee et al., 2020)

Based on the definition of sponsorship, which is said to be the acquisition of rights to affiliate or to associate with a product or event with the purpose of deriving benefits related to the association (Clark et al., 2009; O'Hagan, 2010), title sponsorship is thus defined as the acquisition of rights to take part in the official name of the event for the purposes of deriving benefits related to the name sharing (Kudo, 2010).

According to Clark et al. (2009), brands may seek title sponsorship for one reason, deriving benefits from name sharing. Clark et al. (2009) note that there are few differences in the objectives advanced by corporates for naming rights and those seeking affiliation (Clark et al., 2009). Both sponsors, whether title or affiliate sponsor seek to utilize their right to maximize brand awareness and seek strong brand associations through repeated pairings (Lee et al., 2020). Roy and Cornwell (1999) identified six objectives that brands claimed to pursue through title sponsorship namely: image enhancement, less

cluttered communications, awareness, brand positioning, part of an integrated marketing communications plan, and direct on-site sales (Roy and Cornwell, 1999).

Salo (2011) showed that companies and brands have adopted sports sponsorship as a strategic asset for a variety of reasons, but the most common is bringing their brands closer to consumers. However, firms sponsoring short-term tournaments are constantly encountered with the challenge of reinventing and intensifying their sponsorship supporting activities to keep consumers interested and engaged (Kim and Kwon, 2021). Firms also need to keep in mind that introducing breaks in the provision of sponsorship experiences may cause retrospective judgements based on a combination of prior peaks and the intensity experienced (Fredrecksen and Kahneman, 1993; cited in Nelson and Meyvis, 2008). Short-term tournament sponsors need to constantly evaluate their activities to ensure alignment with consumers' experience expectations, failure to do may result in future activities that have absolutely no bearing in the mind of the consumer (Ariely and Zauberaman, 2000). The knowledge or insight into what consumers think helps sponsor brands to adapt their activities for continued intensified experiences to positively impact what resides in the mind of the consumer or the goodwill as stated (Speed and Thompson, 2000).

### **Consumers' experiences in soccer sponsorship**

Many firms have attempted to utilise sponsorship to deliver experiences with varying levels of success (Schmitt, 2010). Lanclos (2017) pointed to two case studies of great success in using sponsorship to deliver experiences for consumers. The case of Heineken through the sponsorship of the UEFA Champions League (UCL), the company does activations around the world pre and during the Champions League tournament (Lanclos, 2017). They complement these activations with product packaging and embedded messages designed specifically for the UCL. Another firm that has successfully utilised sponsorship of the UCL is Lays (Lanclos, 2017). Lays also has special packaging during the tournament, by running competitions and utilising the product packaging as an interaction device. Lanclos (2017) argues that this not only increases sales but direct consumer actions.

Lanclos (2017) argued that these brands have been successful in delivering compelling experiences because they integrate rationality, emotions, humanism (interactions) and mechanics (environmental design) in their experience activities. Lin and Huang (2012) stated that customers are constantly seeking, consciously and unconsciously, for experiences that deliver on these attributes. Schmitt (2010) and Meenaghan (2013) also asserted that sponsorship is one of the most suited methodologies to deliver holistic experiences. Below are key considerations that sponsors need to be cognisant of in their brand experiences during short-term tournaments.

According to Kim and Kwon (2021), consumers choose breaks in negative experiences and avoid breaks in positive experiences, they state that breaks fuel negative experiences but tend to improve positive experiences). Ariely and Loewenstein (2000) pointed out that brands need to reinvent within their long-term activities to bolster and sustain the excitement that derives from this experience. Equally so,

firms that do interrupted or shortterm experiences have equal pressure to continuously reinvent their activities for optimized experiences during the short periods of consumption (Lee *et. al.*, 2020). Ariely and Loewenstein (2000) in their study of duration in decision making and judgement concluded that stimuli have a significant impact on rating of duration. They concluded that the nature of the stimulus being evaluated or experienced plays a role in the reception or rejection of duration.

Schmitt (2010) added that individuals choose experiences that provide the most pleasure, and they care about the improvements that are effected on these experiences over time (Mamo, 2015). Schmitt (2010) also noted that over time, consumers will switch away from a favourite experience even if they get less pleasure from the switch. This behaviour is driven by the need to acquire different experiences to build varied memories, avoiding more of the same (Schmitt, 2010). Given the accumulation of these experiences, it is important to examine the rate of consumption at which consumers want to be exposed to these experiences.

It is evident that sport sponsorship serves as a vehicle to deliver customer-oriented experiences rather than convey the functional benefits of products (Tsiotsou, 2012). Mazodier and Merunka (2012) posited that sponsorship that has facets of emotional elicitation and pragmatic experiences can potentially alter what is known of a brand regardless of the duration of exposure. Even with short durations, compelling experiences can still deliver a great deal in terms of impact for brands (Eddy and Cork, 2018).

## **Sponsors' experiences' impact on customer-based brand equity**

Existing literature on sponsorship impact on brand has focused solely on brand equity at an overarching level (Tsordia *et al.*, 2018). These studies have also consistently concluded that sponsorship has the ability and leverage to impact awareness and imagery (Saran and Gogula, 2016). Current studies employ majority of evidence from brand equity to support sponsorship impact on brands. Most evidence seeks to suggest that sponsorship has been able to impact awareness and image (Chanavat and Bodet, 2014). Brand awareness is the most obvious impact attribute because of the above the line brand presence that happens during the sponsored tournament or games (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Brand experiences also contribute immensely during tournaments towards building a strong top of mind presence (Schmitt, 2010). Experiences have also been proven to attract new customers who may not be followers or fans of soccer activities (Chanavat and Bodet, 2014).

The above evidence stands to suggest that soccer sponsorship has been able to broaden the spectator base of soccer, whilst enlarging the pool of consumers exposed to the brand (Jeon and Yoo, 2021). Bodet (2009), Bodet and Bernache-Assollant (2011) found that growth in spectator numbers was fuelled by the increased awareness in terms of the brand experiences at the match. They add that consumers were aesthetic fans pulled by the call-out of the experiences at the games, cementing the importance of experiences in luring consumers (Bodet and Bernache-Assollant, 2011).

In terms of associations, Bodet and Chavanat (2014) argued that consumers were able to flesh out new associations with brands following an experience encounter. The associations are in accordance with

the differences in terms of brand experiences lived against the staged experiences at soccer matches. This finding advances the argument that experiences need to be complimented by other facets of the brand to ensure experiences are long lasting (Bodet and Chavanat, 2014). Saran and Gogula (2016) indicated that for casual spectators, the positive imagery can be short-lived, mainly because consumers are in the crux of the moment and the brand is seen as fun and entertaining. There is limited evidence to suggest that this kind of imagery can be sustained beyond the experience period (Saran and Gogula, 2016).

Lastly, in terms of loyalty, existing research has offered very thin evidence to suggest a positive conspicuous impact driven by sponsorship. Cornwell et al. (2005) noted that there is room to investigate and probe the relationship. Guschwan's research suggested that loyalty is a fickle undertaking and is certainly not changed by the "*unanimous appreciation of the fireworks at the end of the game*" (Guschwan, 2012: p. 25). The most concrete finding in terms of loyalty is captured by Guschwan's conclusion that consumers are not likely to suddenly change purchase intentions, behaviour, and brand commitment based on a day's experience. Guschwan (2012) and Chen and Lin, (2018) argues that the link between the consumer and their resonance with a brand spans beyond a day's worth of activities, it is a combination of the brand facets at every point where the consumer had a need and the brand came through for them.

## **Problem statement and objectives**

As firms continue to invest in title sponsorship of short-term tournaments, an expensive brand building exercise (Clark et al., 2009), there is a need to understand the effectiveness of this relationship and provide means to interpret it. It is difficult for firms to accurately predict that brand experiences in short-term tournaments have a significant impact on customer-based brand equity. Keller (2016) states that CBBE is built over long periods of time as consumers do not make overall brand judgments based on limited interactions; thus, it remains hazy if the firm's brands achieve the desired impact on consumers' perceptions. Keller (2016) further states that it takes time to build distinct impressions in the minds of consumers. CBBE is influenced by consumers' interactions with brand products, services, and accompanying marketing collateral (Stahl et al., 2012). Firms with strong CBBE have strong, positive associations, and enjoy a great sense of loyalty from customers (Stahl et al., 2012; Keller, 2013; 2016).

Firms are using sponsorship as means to get closer to consumers and influence what they see, hear, think, and feel (Schmitt and Zarantenello, 2013). Existing literature suggests that sponsorship has been effective to a degree in delivering impact in terms of awareness (Crompton, 2015) and to a lesser extent, image (Ozgoli, 2017). For firms who have opted to title sponsor short-term tournaments, there is also little evidence to suggest they have generated tangible impact (Kim and Kwon, 2021). Mamo (2015) argued that as a response, title sponsors of short-term tournaments have turned to brand experiences to aid sponsorship to deliver impact, particularly on CBBE. The introduction of brand experiences into

short-term tournament sponsorship and CBBE relationship has, to date received little attention in academia and as a result little evidence exists to substantiate the effectiveness of the relationship (Cornwell et al., 2012).

The purpose of this study was thus to evaluate the impact of brand experiences on customer-based brand equity in relation to short-term tournaments for title sponsors. The study investigated the relationship between title sponsorship, brand experiences and CBBE by focusing primarily on sponsors of short-term tournaments. The research question was devised with consideration of the adapted theoretical framework and the main study objective. The research question is outlined below:

*To what extent do brand experiences in sponsorship influence customer-based brand equity?*

Below are additional objectives outlined to aid answer the study question?

Secondary Objectives

i To determine if title sponsorship contributes to building brand resonance ii. To establish how sponsor brands plan, measure and evaluate the impact derived from sponsorship of a shortterm tournament

This study sought to address the void of empirical data related to the relationship between title sponsorship of short-term tournaments, brand experiences, and CBBE. Research shows that title sponsorship and short-term tournaments as study topics are both under-served areas of study, with truly little empirical evidence (Cornwell et al., 2012; Biscaia et al., 2017). The research probes a study area that is popular in practice but not in theory (Clark et al., 2009). Additionally, the study sought to introduce a theoretical framework to aid in interpreting the relationship under study.

The study used a conceptual framework that integrates three theoretical frameworks to console the relationship under study. The model expands on the sponsorship framework by Speed and Thompson (2000) and integrates brand experiences by Khan and Rahman (2015) to understand the impact of brand experiences on CBBE (Keller, 2009). The proposed model is a response to the intersection of these subject areas as evident in practice but not in academia (Lanclos, 2017). Cornwell (2012) argued that there is a huge gap between practices in sponsorship and interpretation in academia where there is shortage of scientific frameworks for interpretation. This notion is also echoed by the IEG (International Events Group) that although popular, sports sponsorship still lacks theoretical frameworks (IEG, 2017).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The relationship in the study integrates subject areas receiving great scholarly attention at a macro level. However, the relationship intersecting title sponsorship of short-term tournaments, brand experiences and building relationships is an uncharted avenue. Lanclos (2017) conceded that more research should be done to provide a holistic view of the relationship, highlighting the emergence of short-term tournaments and the traction they garner from title sponsors. The framework presented in this study focused on how brand experiences can impact customer-based brand equity in short-term tournaments. The adapted framework integrates three theoretical models based on existing empirical

evidence. The solid lines that flow onto CBBE namely, identity, meaning, responses, and relationships, represent what current literature findings have asserted. Numerous literatures confirm that exposure to an event contributes to building an identity for the sponsor brand (Keller, 2016). Similarly, the consumer's perceptions of the sponsored event in terms of event factors, sponsorship factors, and sponsor factors all also contribute towards a brand identity (Grantham and Thiesen, 2009; Khan and Rahman, 2015). CBBE as a research area has received lots of attention, and the model used in the study was adapted from Keller's theoretical model of CBBE (Keller, 2009). The sponsorship model was drawn from Grantham and Thiesen (2009), whilst the brand experiences variable was adopted from Khan and Rahman (2015). These models put together, with brand experiences as an intervening variable result in the adapted framework below.

Literature showed that there is currently a relationship that exists between sponsorship and CBBE, the relationship pertains to identity, the first tenet of CBBE (Salo, 2011; Keller, 2013). Identity is primarily built because of exposure to a brand which drives up brand awareness enabling consumers to effectively attribute a brand using different brand collateral (Chavanat and Bodet, 2014). Ozgoli (2017) argued that sponsorship can potentially impact meaning, the second tenet of CBBE, however, acknowledged that this relationship is feint. This assertion is denoted by the dotted relationship in the model.

The said intention of sponsorship does not only end with awareness but extends to tangible benefits for sponsor brands (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Renard and Sitz (2011) stated that sponsorship aims to achieve brand objectives that are not limited to advertising, direct marketing, sales, publicity, and importantly, relationship building. Chavanat and Bodet (2014) argue that providing and creating interactions that are memorable can certainly deliver the desired impact on brands. This finding warrants the testing of brand experiences as an intervening variable between sponsorship and CBBE. The amalgamation of these three variables therefore serves as basis to interpret the relationship holistically.

The adapted theoretical framework entrenches the three main thematic variables of this study, sponsorship of a short-term tournament, brand experiences and CBBE. The constructs for the integrated theoretical framework are discussed below. Starting off with shortterm tournaments:

A short-term tournament is a series of games played between contestants, the games are played over a short period of time and there is a specific criterion for inclusion, advancement and elimination (Byl, 2014). As short-term tournaments continue to be popular amongst sponsor brands, they also determine the sensitisation and adaptation of experiences (Nelson and Meyvis, 2008; Kim and Kwon, 2021). The framework helps uncover motivations behind the reasons for sponsoring short-term tournaments as title sponsors. Secondly, the framework helps ascertain which tenets of CBBE sponsor brands seek to impact through title sponsorship of short-term tournaments. Short-term tournaments served as an independent variable in the theoretical framework and for this research.

Brand experiences were the intervening variable in the framework. Theoretically, they are staged encounters designed by sponsoring brands to engage consumers (Biscaia et al., 2017). Brand experiences help to determine the kind of interactions consumers have with sponsor brands (Fransen et al., 2011). These active interactions play a critical role in enhancing a consumer's perception towards a brand and play a role in creating long lasting impact in the minds of the consumer (Keller, 2016). The experiences helped determine the impact of brands on CBBE in terms of meaning, identity, responses, and relationships.

CBBE was the dependent variable in the framework. CBBE is highly dependent on the kind of experiences that occur during a tournament (Chanavat and Bodet, 2014). Literature has shown that experiences can impact awareness and to a lesser extent, meaning. This framework seeks to understand if experiences are enough to impact all the tenets especially relationships with consumers. This element of the framework aimed to identify which elements of experiences brands deem strong enough to impact CBBE. The framework helped understand if CBBE can be impacted by brand experiences that are employed during short-term tournaments. The amalgamated theoretical framework assisted in understanding and interpreting the resultant relationships. To address the objectives of the study and verify the adapted framework, the study embarked on the below research design and methodological approach.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This section discusses the research design and the methodological approach used in the study to understand the relationship under study. A research design refers to a set of common agreements and beliefs shared between scholars about how problems should be understood and addressed (Fushimi, 2021). A research design is characterized by what is going on, known as ontology, how well the subject under study is known, known as epistemology, and how to go about finding it out, the methodology.

#### **Research paradigm**

The study followed an interpretivist paradigm approach, which allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and the experiences of the participants under study (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). In this approach, there is significant reliance on the study sample's view of the circumstances under study. Additionally, the interpretivist approach adopts a flexible and adaptive framework that is receptive to capturing meanings embedded in human interactions and decoding what is perceived as reality (Fushimi, 2021). In addition, Carson et al. (2001) argued that in the interpretivist approach, researchers enter research with an idea and prior insight of the context to be studied but assume that it is insufficient in developing a fixed research design due to the complexity and unpredictable nature of what is to be perceived as reality. Furthermore, the interpretivist approach acknowledges that there is no single external reality that is confined to a particular structure and that circumstances vary from with each respondent (Carson et al., 2001). Contextually, the interpretivist approach is best suited as

the study participants brands all have different realities and motivations, thus it was important to actively collaborate with them to get their unique perspectives.

The literature and the context provided above solidify the suitedness of an interpretivist approach. The approach enabled the researchers to get first-hand insights from brand custodians regarding their sponsorship strategies. The only way to uncover the reality of these brand decisions was a qualitative inquiry where respondents could convey their thoughts in relation to their brands' contexts. For this research, direct engagement with each brand in their own context was important because it provided a holistic view and understanding of the brand's pursuit for customer-based brand equity. Researchers in the field, notably, Cornwell et al. (2012) state that brand equity is built over long periods. This assertion is contrary to the practice by these sponsor brands therefore leaving room to probe their decisions contextually.

Importantly to this approach, argued MacKenzie and Knipe (2006), is the view that interpretivism is not preceded by theory.

They stated that interpretivism develops theory or "patterns of meaning" during the research process. The affirmation by MacKenzie and Knipe (2006) was important because it provided the researchers with the opportunity to investigate outside confines of theory. The paradigm was important because of the lack of a preexisting theoretical framework that embodies all the variables of this study. To uncover these insights and the nuggets that drive brand decisions on the quest to building resonance, a qualitative inquiry worked best because of its in-depth probing nature.

## **Methodology**

As seen in the paradigm section above, a qualitative approach was selected for this study particularly for its interpretivist nature. The relationship under study requires the interpretation of motivations by brands to sponsor short-term tournaments and how they intend to build brand equity through discharge of brand experiences. Therefore, selecting the appropriate sample, the correct data collection instrument and data analysis instrument were all critical to correctly answer the research question. The research design and research question were crucial determinants of the study methodology. A methodology is a systematic plan for conducting research. It is a blueprint detailing the techniques used to achieve the study objectives and a broad consensus in which the data for the study is gathered and the way the empiricism of the study is outlined (Taylor et al., 2015). Below is an account of the sample, and the method of data collection.

This study explored how sponsor brands use brand experiences in their sponsorship of short-term tournaments and how these experiences build customer-based brand equity. Therefore, the intended target population of the research were sponsor brands listed within professional soccer tiers, particularly in South Africa. With respect to the research question, the sample was limited to sponsor brands involved in short-term sponsorship. The sample frame for the study was an exhaustive list of sponsors who all have sponsorship agreements with any property at a PSL level in the form of team

sponsors, athlete sponsors, and facilities“ sponsors etc. (PSL, 2017). To ensure that the list was filtered such that it is representative of the required target sample for the study, a purposeful sampling technique was employed. Rizo and Levitt (2021) refer to purposeful sampling as sampling where data sources are chosen based on the parameters of the study“s research question, goals and purposes. The best sources to extract data from are brands who sponsor short-term soccer tournaments at the PSL level, which is the highest soccer tier in South Africa. Based on the research question to this study, a theoretical construct sample was used to collect data only from brand custodians who make and execute final decisions on sponsorship strategies for the targeted brands.

Using the sampling plan, a definitive sample based on the parameters of the research question and the structure of the sampling frame, the overall sample pool for the study was four sponsor brands, all represented by senior decision-makers. The limited pool was due to the number of short-term tournament sponsors at the PSL level. Marshall (1996) and Fushimi (2021) argued that qualitative samples can be small and still be representative provided that the themes developed are attributable to a ring-fenced population that has similar characteristics versus the general population. Experienced researchers have employed this approach before to get deeper insights with the most relevant target groups (Rizo and Levitt, 2021). Fushimi (2021) argues that expert surveys do not compose a big sample, but they provide subjective evaluations that are based on practical application and experience. The engagement with the experts was in the form of individual in-depth interviews through usage of a discussion guide. According to Rizo and Levitt (2021), an interview is a method of data collection whereby a researcher can ask quantitative or qualitative questions. They state that in this method, study participants respond in their own words, and the popularity of the method is characterized by its „talking“ or „engagement“ nature (Rizo and Levitt, 2021). In line with the epistemology of the interpretivist paradigm, interviews in qualitative research aim to understand people“s lives as they live them (Doody and Nooman, 2013). Schultze and Avital (2011) add that interviews help generate a contextual account of the respondents“ lives, their experiences and their interpretation. The sequencing of the guide is based on the themes of the research question. There are three macrothemes that served as a broad framework, namely: brand experiences, sponsorship, and customer-based brand. The framework was in line with the research context as outlined in the literature review.

Post data collection, a qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used for coding, synthesis, and analysis of the data. The objective of data analysis was to draw consolidated inferences about the population under study (Malhotra, 2010). An iterative analysis approach was used in this study. Iterative analysis is a context-based approach to data interpretation based on the premise that data reading alternates between emergent patterns of the data but also fuses existing explanations and models (Charmaz, 2011). The use of iterative analysis is in sync with the interpretivist paradigm, which states that the context of the study subject matters in the interpretation (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). To provide a framework, and maintain credibility and pedagogy of the study, the explanation and causality

analysis strategy was also used for results interpretation. The strategy suits the research question because it does not look solely at emergent themes in the data but also seeks to develop explanations about the causality of the events in the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994, as cited in Tracy, 2013). The strategy also analyses cases contextually because of the underpinned knowledge that in reality, different motivations, contexts, and experiences are key drivers in decision making. This notion is true to the study as the data is contextual to each sponsor brand as they all have different motivations behind their sponsorships. Below is a detailed account of the results of the study

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section were analysed with reference to the theoretical framework and themes deduced from the data. Firstly, the sample of used in this study was a group of senior experts from respective brands that sponsor short-term tournaments in South Africa. 100% of the sample were executives, selected based on their seniority at their respective organizational and their strategic oversight of the sponsorship assets.

The analysis of the data revealed the following nodes, into which the data is coded. The themes emerged in relation to the literature, the adapted framework and the research question. The nodes identified form the thematic frame for analysis. Below is a discussion of the themes and how they aid in answering the research question.

1. Brand's understanding of brand equity
2. The definition of CBBE according to the sponsor brand
3. The role of brand essence in driving CBBE
4. The motivation of sponsorship
5. Pursuing short-term tournaments
6. The importance of brand experiences
7. Types of brand experiences
8. Brands' experiences in building relationships

The first theme that the study set to uncover was the understanding of brand equity by brand custodians (Figure 2).

Although the custodians articulated their understanding of brand equity variedly, it was evident that all the respondents were quite knowledgeable of brand equity at a very macro-level. The respondents all defined brand equity within the school of thought that it is the relationship that exists between the customer and the brand (Aaker, 1993; Keller, 2001, 2009; 2016). Additionally, the respondents variedly stated that brand equity is about the brand's essence converting into brand love (Keller, 2009; 2016). The definitions provided by respondents are in line with the scholarly definitions. In addition, other respondents explained brand equity as a relational framework that results from what the brand does in relation to the needs of the consumer.

When asked specifically on CBBE, the respondents could not clearly separate CBBE from brand equity. All the respondents perceive CBBE as an action that a consumer takes, either through a purchase or recommendation of the brand to others. Respondents stated that a brand purpose is central to the enablement of CBBE through a consolidated marketing strategy. Figure 3 illustrates the respondents' understanding and attributing of CBBE.

The explicit iterations show that 100% of the sample define CBBE as a response wherein there is action taken by the consumer.

*“Customer-based brand equity is about a response from the consumer and how they relate to your brand. It is an action, and that action should be commercial either by a purchase or by recommending the brand to others”*

Respondents understood sponsorship to be a tactical strategy rather than part of a larger brand building exercise.

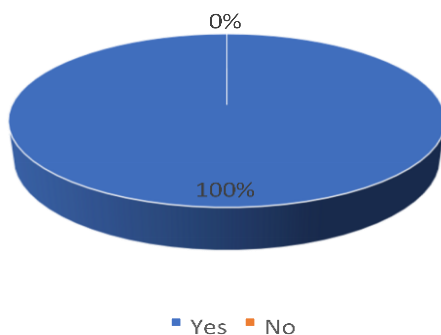
*“I think for us the short format is useful because we can use it to appeal to the wider market with certain objectives. We know that the tournament works hard to uplift our awareness for instance after the December holidays”*

They deemed the current sponsorship strategies as legacy plans, based on motivations decided many years ago, thus they could not directly attribute it to equity building. Pursuing short-term tournaments was also linked to legacy sponsorship decisions. For 75% of the sample, the reason they ended sponsoring tournaments was because their competition had already taken over the season-long leagues (Figure 4).

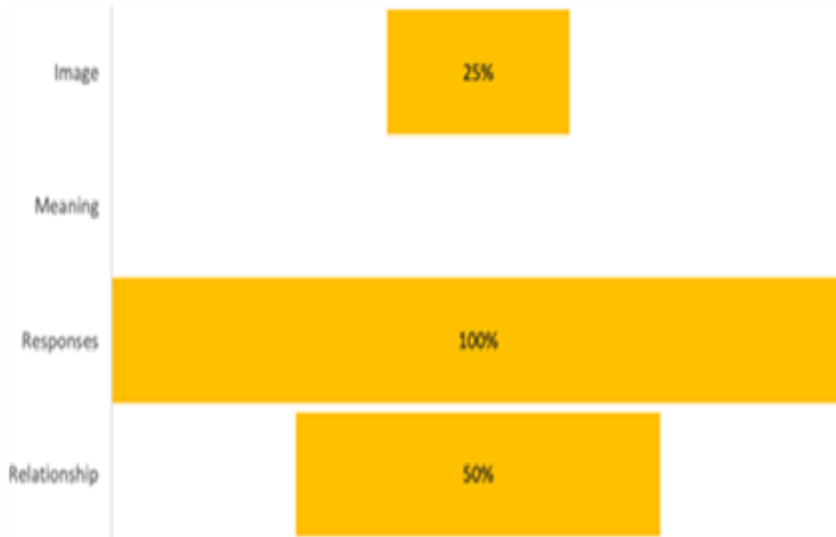
**Figure 3. CBBE attribution**

*“Customer-based brand equity is how the consumer responds to a brand’s marketing, sponsorship and products. It is a difficult one to measure. In the past sponsorship was earmarked to do that job of building customer-based equity but because there is no more exclusivity in sponsorship, it has become difficult to measure it”*

Understand Brand Equity



**Figure 2.** Brand equity.

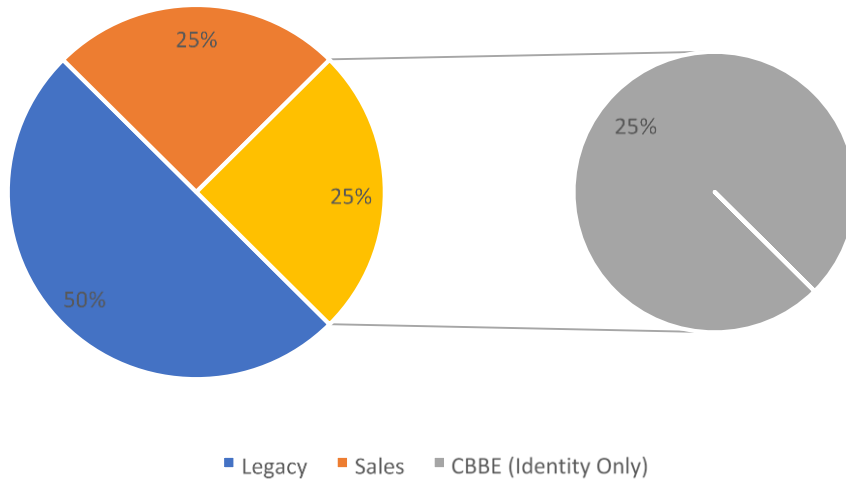


Secondary to sponsorship as a tactical strategy was the cost effectiveness of short-term tournaments. This is because of their shorter duration which helps sponsor brands to constantly re-evaluate their plans and align with business tactical objectives. Respondents noted that because there is a lot of excitement around the tournament itself, spectators are not overly concerned about which team is playing; they are more excited about the event itself. The contrary is true of the domestic league where once fatigue sets in, the only way a game will get traction is based on who is playing. Therefore, sponsor brands feed off this excitement by implementing experiences during tournaments.

*“You know social media is used to complain right, for us we have found that for the duration of the tournament, the positive sentiments on social media fly off”*

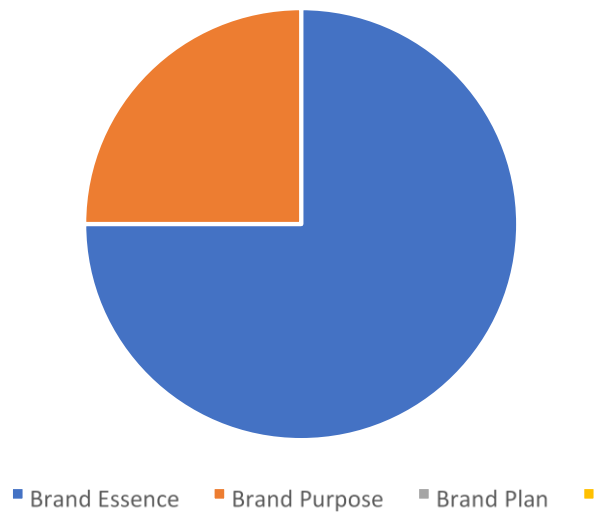
All the respondents shared the view that brand experiences are crucial to building strong brands. However, some respondents indicated that because the purpose has not been truly clear, it is difficult to deploy impactful experiences that can alter the relationship a consumer has with a brand. Respondents affirmed that the experiences are not brand-centred but about sales, showing that there is a disconnect between sponsorship the experiences are not brand-centred but about sales, showing that there is a disconnect between sponsorship and marketing at a strategic level. Figure 5 represents what the sample perceives to be the main drivers of CBBE.

Even with the above understanding, the respondents added that the activities that have been done are shortlived in line with the excitement and no audit has really been done to assess their effectiveness towards building lasting relations. Firms realise the importance and the value that can be derived from



**Figure 4.** Motivation for sponsorship.

#### Drivers of CBBE



**Figure 5.** Perceptions on drivers of CBBE.

brand experiences in sponsorship. However, they all state that they have looked at brand experiences beyond activations for product selling and core sponsorship messaging.

*“a brand needs to have a purpose, something which is a strategic consideration. From this you can build affinity with the consumer based on what you stand for as a brand”*

The respondents showed that they understood the importance of having impactful experience and what value impactful experiences bring for their brands. However, by their own admission, not many brand

experience activities have been utilised to impact beyond awareness and sales conversion. They have however been centred on achieving awareness and product selling.

There are three main experiences that sponsor brands have embarked on over time, namely brand activations, social media interactions and digital campaigns. The experiences given to consumers over the years have not led to any lasting impact. None of the brands own the relationship attribute or have identified an activity strong enough to build consumer relationships.

The respondents echoed that they understood the possible impact that experiences could have if executed with the brand's purpose in mind and within the broader marketing strategy.

*"I think for me, to build strong relationships, the sponsorship strategy should be led by the brand strategy" "To build brand love, we have to move away from selling tactics to telling human stories that are relatable"*

This insight strongly supports literature which states that to build strong experiences, brands need to focus on storytelling of real-life human experiences, and in the same breadth, the stories must stem from the brand's purpose and how the brand has played its role through the device used in the sponsorship (Khan and Rahman, 2015).

The acknowledgement by the respondents that brand experiences have the potential to impact consumer relationships is of importance for the study because it validates the adapted model. Furthermore, the data gathered especially with regard to experiences in relationship building shows that there is room to develop experience activities that speak to CBBE. The following section addresses each objective and aligns with insights from the study to recommend plans of action for academics and practitioners alike.

## **Objectives' testing**

The primary objective of the study was to establish if brand experiences impact customer-based brand equity for brands that sponsor short-term soccer tournaments. Firstly, the respondents are highly knowledgeable of CBBE as they are all practitioners in the field of brand building. Like the literature, the results showed that brand experiences are crucial in developing CBBE.

However, the respondents were not fully inclined that brand experiences in sponsorships could impact all the tenets of CBBE, especially relationships. The respondents all highlighted that this was due to the observation that there has been a misalignment between the overarching brand strategy and the sponsorship strategy. The results revealed that this was because sponsorship strategies have operated in isolation. Importantly, the results showed that the experiences being have been intended to impact on the bottom-line. Respondents indicated that on instances where they have used storytelling to deliver experiences, their brands experienced some degree of emotional uplift. This affirms that brand experiences in short-term sponsorship can indeed uplift resonance; however, brands not paid attention to objectives such as creating relationships or changing their brand image.

Objective two aimed to establish if title sponsorship of a short-term tournament contributed towards building brand resonance. The results indicated that sponsors opted for title-sponsorship because they want to enjoy the equity that the sponsored property already enjoys. This allows brands to borrow equity from another property to contribute to theirs. The respondents also cited cost as the biggest driver in determining title sponsorship of short-term tournaments. Short-term tournaments are also seen a way to avoid “white-noise”, a problem in sponsorship of domestic or season long tournaments where the tournament becomes redundant and consumers lose interest. It is also evident that short-term tournaments can elicit very high levels of enjoyment and instant gratification that sponsors can utilize.

Importantly, short-term tournaments give time and opportunity to revise the engagement strategies and to come up with better approaches should a strategy fail. Evidently, soccer as a passion point remains a strong property for engagement with consumers. This is driven by its ability to pull in spectators which provides brands with wide pools of potential customers to target.

The last objective aimed to establish how sponsor brands measure and evaluate the impact derived from sponsorship of a short-term tournament. In establishing how sponsor brands measure and evaluate the impact derived from sponsorship of a short-term tournament, it is evident that there are no established tracking measurements to track the impact of sponsorship alone as an entity. Impact from sponsorship is extrapolated based on the targets, from sales objectives. In terms of identity, meaning, responses and relationships, these are measured at overall brand. Although sponsorship remains a legacy project, there is increasing pressure to measure return on investment and to align with the main brand purpose.

As the literature shows, sponsorship marketers have come under intense scrutiny, this is because sponsorship is regarded as an expensive exercise without any tangible results to show or any direct contributions on the bottom-line. As brands opt for sponsorships, businesses want to see tangible outcomes. This study provided insights on how to utilize sponsorship properties to deliver impacts for brands. Below are the key managerial and scholarly recommendations alike.

## **Managerial and scholarly recommendations**

A key finding from the study is that brands are mostly involved in sponsorship because of legacy reasons therefore they do not have clear strategies and action plans to utilize their sponsorship properties effectively.

This has resulted in sponsorship being used as a standalone tactical asset used to ramp up sales. The biggest gap identified is the resultant mismatch between the overall brand plan and the sponsorship strategy. A key recommendation is for brands to align firstly, their overall marketing strategy to a brand purpose. A clear brand purpose drives the marketing strategy that will in turn inform the sponsorship plan. The interweaved stance will ensure that sponsorship is a tool in the marketing toolbox that supports all other mediums and carries a similar message and not only deployed because a sponsorship

commitment exists. This means for brands to have a successful sponsorship strategy; they must align with the overall brand strategy that is informed by a purpose.

Second to having a clear strategic outlook is the understanding of CBBE and how to translate it into a strategy guided by the brand purpose. The literature and the results demonstrate that having a strong CBBE is seen as the jewel, mainly because brand equity overall is seen as the heart and soul that binds the brand and the consumer. Furthermore, a strong and positive brand equity is seen as a readily available trigger for consumer action. However, CBBE as a subset has not received much attention amongst practitioners. Therefore, there is a need to first dissect what CBBE means and its value to brands and how it can be fulfilled by sponsorship. Once sponsor brands understand the different tenets of CBBE, how they can be integrated into the overall brand plan, the sponsorship strategy is therefore able to draw from the brand plan with clear action items for each tenet. To build strong relationships, the thesis identifies resonance as an attribute that sponsor brands should aim to achieve through their sponsorships. The literature shows that the best way to get closer to consumers is through exciting and memorable experiences. The study shows that brands have only used two types of activities to get close to consumers, namely, activations and digital campaigns and most recently the introduction of social media engagement. Moreover, the brands admit they have only used these methods to advance product selling and not brand building. This finding relates to the admission that brands have not used sponsorship to amplify their brand purpose or essence but instead have used sponsorship as a sales channel. There is therefore a need for brands to investigate sponsorship tactics that tell real-life stories and how the sponsor brand enables that. This creates an emotive appeal to the consumer resulting in more relatability, an element crucial in building stronger affinity. Alignment with the brand purpose will ensure that these experiences are not tactical or product focused but an interactive, emotive, storytelling experience that will make the tournament stick in the mind of the consumer.

Lastly, the findings have shown that brands understand the importance of building strong CBBE but have also not figured a tracking tool to measure the impact derived from sponsorship which makes businesses scrutinize sponsorship agreements even more. Sponsors need to develop a measurement tool to quantify the impact that sponsorship lands on their brands. This way, there will be clarity on what needs to be addressed and how the market is reacting to the sponsorship activities. The measurement tools need to provide clarity on both the financial measures and as well as the fundamentals.

Although little scientific knowledge exists that integrates sponsorship, experiences and CBBE, this study provides a framework for practitioners to follow to deploy impactful experiences. Importantly, the thesis cautions practitioners to know their brand purpose before they can aim to build relationships. A brand purpose drives the kind of experiences that brands should execute instead of the activations blanket approach. The study has also proven that the current experiences do not bring any long-term impact for the brand as they are mostly tactical.

Lastly, the findings presented in the study show that the relationship between sponsorship and CBBE is very vast and there are unlimited ways of probing its strength. The literature shows that the best way to get closer to consumers is through exciting and memorable experiences. The thesis thus presents an intervening variable, experiences, into the relationship resulting in an adapted framework for practitioners to utilize to deploy impactful experiences. As seen, the framework is an amalgamation of existing scientific models; however, further scientific validation is needed to solidify the relationship. From a scholarly perspective, more research is needed to validate the model using a bigger sample size for better generalizability and adoption. With this outlook, below are limitations found in the study that could impact the interpretation and analysis of the findings.

### **Limitations of the study**

The study was not without limitations. The foremost limitation was the sample size. The sample size for this study was four sponsor brands represented by their executives. Although small sample sizes limit the generalisability of research findings, this limitation was organic. As seen in the sample selection, the sponsorship sample itself was limited to a few firms, particularly those that sponsor short-term tournament sponsors at the PSL level in South Africa.

Therefore, the total size in the sample frame is equal to the selected sample. Another limitation as identified by Tracy (2013) prevalent in this study is the fact that qualitative data is objective and mostly based on the participant's context which limits the generalization of the research outputs. Bernard (2011) and Fushimi (2021) argue that a sample with experts is generally small but acceptable as they are knowledgeable in the field and are able to provide unique insights that are context based.

These limitations set ground for future research to further illuminate the relationship under study.

### **Future research**

The relationship posited in this study is a relatively isolated in the marketing arena and thus more scientific attention should be paid to it, both academically and practically. From evidence, short-term sponsorship is a growing field but not much research has been done to validate and illuminate the relationship (Clark et al., 2001; Cornwell et al., 2012). This study has shown the benefits of sponsoring a short-term tournament by drawing supporting schools of thought, but it is evident that the existing literature is not enough. The study results are crucial as they not only propose a theoretical framework for future consideration but also alert brands and practitioners to the fact that they are fully not utilizing their sponsored properties because of the disconnect between their brand purpose and sponsorship strategy. This thesis thus creates a new dimension of thinking about sponsorship, experiences, and CBBE both in academia and practice.

Due to the lack of scientific literature about short-term tournaments, the framework adapted in this study integrated three macro concepts to establish a consolidated framework. Although the framework was validated and proved useful through this study, more research is needed to scientifically validate it prior to future replication and use.

Lastly, the knowledge gap that exists in brand experiences needs to be addressed with special respect to impact. There is currently a disconnect between brand purpose, sponsorship strategy, brand experiences and impact on consumers. More research should concentrate on this relationship to provide a microscopic understanding because as seen in the findings, brands are battling with putting this relationship in to practice thus unable to quantify impact. This research suggests broadening of sponsorship both in theory and in practice.

#### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors do not have any conflict of interests.

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