

Sponsorship as an internal branding tool and its effects on employees' identification with the brand

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Abstract Recent research has acknowledged that a firm's external advertising targeted at consumers can also be used for internal branding activities. The present study extends this research stream and investigates the role of a firm's sponsorships directed towards consumers in achieving internal branding goals. Specifically, this study examines how employees' perceptions of sponsorship characteristics impact their identification with the brand. Results from an empirical study with the employees of *backaldrin*, an Austrian producer of baking ingredients sponsoring the Austrian national biathlon team, indicate that employees with better general attitude towards sponsorship show higher brand identification. Employees' attitudes towards the sponsored property and perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property have no direct effect on brand identification, but are positively related with employees' general attitude towards sponsorship. The study concludes with managerial implications how companies can implement sponsorship as an effective internal branding tool.

Keywords Internal branding · Brand identification · Sponsorship · Employees

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Introduction

Current research has identified brand identification as one of the central outcomes of a firm's internal branding activities (e.g. Piehler et al. 2016). Although comparatively little is known about the antecedents of brand identification, the literature highlights the importance of consistent communication for internal branding effectiveness (e.g. Punjaisri and Wilson 2007). While there is a rich body of the literature available on internal communication, less is known on the effects of external communication on employees. In recent years, the question of internal effects of external communication activities has gained importance. To date, the few existing studies investigated advertising effects on employees (e.g. Celsi and Gilly 2010; Hughes 2013), whereas evidence from other external communication activities is very limited. In our study, we thus investigate the effects of the external communication tool sponsorship on the internal audience of employees.

Internal marketing uses marketing tools and techniques in order to motivate employees to behave in a way that supports the company's goals and customer orientation (Miles and Mangold 2004; Rafiq and Ahmed 2000). Going beyond the aim of delivering satisfaction to the firm's customers, internal marketing supports employees to live a company's image (Miles and Mangold 2004). Examples for such internal marketing activities include the positioning of Southwest Airlines in the minds of customers and employees to achieve a competitive advantage. Frequent and consistent messages communicated by Southwest management were based on the mission and the values of the company and designed to support the desired brand image. The results are an increased employee satisfaction and reduced staff turnover from an internal perspective, as well as increased customer satisfaction and



favourable corporate image from an external perspective (Miles and Mangold 2005). Moreover, employees may act as brand ambassadors conveying the values of the brand to the firm's customers.

Thus, firms should take a broader perspective on the marketing function and include internal branding into their marketing and brand management activities. Internal branding can be defined as a “[...] concept that deals with the brand cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally at employee level” (Piehler et al. 2015, p. 53). Internal brand management can be conceptualized as a comprehensive model where both internal and external sources serve as input that form employee perceptions (Miles and Mangold 2004; Punjaisri et al. 2008). The importance of internal branding is not limited to the context of services where employees play a central role in delivering the brand promise and create a consistent experience for the customers at all touch points of the brand (Piehler et al. 2015).

The communication of consistent messages to employees is thus central (Miles and Mangold 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007, 2011). Miles and Mangold (2004) advise to use both internal and external modes of messages in the employee branding process. Research so far has focused mainly on the internal communication modes (e.g. de Chernatony et al. 2006). Furthermore, scholars argue in favour of integrating internal branding with other marketing activities of the firm, such as corporate communications (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011) and including both marketing practices, like internal communication, and human resource practices, like employee training, in internal branding programmes (Punjaisri et al. 2009).

Extant research has hardly investigated the effect of firms' communication to external stakeholder groups on their employees. Yet, researchers agree that external communication activities are relevant to both external as well as internal audiences (Christensen 1995; Hughes 2013). Previous studies investigating the effects of advertising on employees were carried out mainly in the context of services. Hughes (2013) recently showed in a consumer products and business-to-business sales setting the impact of advertising on the internal stakeholder group of the sales force. Salespeople are not the primary audience of a firm's advertising, they are even regarded as “[...] merely collateral observers” (Hughes 2013, p. 2), but due to the increased need for legitimacy of marketing costs and its benefits for the company, the effects of advertising should be analysed from a multidimensional perspective, including various stakeholder groups (Hughes 2013).

From the perspective of the internal branding literature, previous studies do not recognize sponsorship as part of internal branding (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Punjaisri et al. 2008, 2009). Also previous research on the internal effects of advertising on brand identification among the

second audience of employees has not included sponsorship activities (e.g. Hughes 2013). Yet, besides advertising, sponsorship presents itself as a promising communication tool for internal branding. To date, however, surprisingly scant empirical evidence regarding effects of sponsorship on employees is available. Plewa and Quester (2011) suggest a conceptual framework for investigating sponsorship effects on employees, but also emphasize the need to validate this framework empirically. Hickman et al. (2005) underscore the importance of the fit between the sponsored property and the sponsor for employee perceptions, but do not test their assumption. Farrelly et al. (2012) concede that little research considers how sport sponsorship can bolster employee identification. At the same time, recent research on internal brand management outcomes, like brand understanding, brand identification, brand commitment and brand citizenship behaviour, highlights the need for studies on antecedents of these outcomes (Piehler et al. 2016).

Therefore, the goal of this study is to show the influence of sponsorship activities on brand identification among the internal audience of employees. This study contributes to the literature by framing the external communication tool sponsorship as part of the internal branding programme and examining drivers of the effectiveness of sponsorship based on the perceptions of employees. In contrast to the majority of previous internal branding studies based on the perspective of management and brand consultants (e.g. de Chernatony et al. 2006) our research relies on the perception of employees. Furthermore, our study is among the first to investigate the link between external marketing communication and internal branding going beyond a services context (e.g. Hughes 2013). The next section develops the research framework drawing from the literature streams related to internal branding and sponsorship. These streams help to identify drivers of sponsorship effectiveness for employees and develop a research model how these drivers influence employees' identification with the brand. The empirical study tests the corresponding hypotheses in the context of a sport sponsorship with 165 employees. The last section discusses the results, summarizes the theoretical contribution, provides guidelines for managers and outlines areas for further research.

Theoretical framework, conceptual model and hypotheses

The theoretical framework to identify sponsorship effects on employees relies on the literature related to internal marketing and branding. According to Berry (1981, p. 34), internal marketing focuses on “viewing employees as internal customers, viewing jobs as internal products [...]”



that satisfy the needs and wants of these internal customers while addressing the objectives of the organization". The target market for internal marketing and the related concept of internal branding thus consists of an organization's employees. Both internal marketing and internal branding aim to positively influence the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of the employees towards the brand through the use of certain processes and activities, which in turn affects employee performance (Berry and Parasuraman 1991; Punjaisri and Wilson 2007). Internal marketing and branding should be distinguished from employer branding; the latter being concerned with the recruitment of employees. The focus of internal marketing and branding is in employees who are already part of the organization (Saleem and Iglesias 2016).

The high relevance of internal marketing lies in its ability to support the employees in establishing a strong emotional connection to the products or services of the firm (Mitchell 2002). Lings (2004) introduced the concept of internal market orientation, complementing existing constructs of external market orientation and concentrating on the human resources perspective of internal marketing. Recent literature on internal marketing shows that an internal market orientation shapes a firm's external market capabilities (Fang et al. 2014).

Moreover, internal marketing and internal branding can be viewed from a strategic perspective in terms of brand management. A modern understanding of brand management takes a broad perspective and considers employees as a central stakeholder group for brand management activities. Thus, attention should be drawn also to external brand communication as a powerful tool of internal branding (Piehler et al. 2015). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) highlight the role of employees in the identity-based, holistic brand management approach for generating brand commitment. Internal marketing and branding measures have the potential to substantially strengthen the brand (Burmann et al. 2009). Furthermore, internal branding is regarded as an organization-wide effort directed towards all employees on all firm levels, going beyond customer-contact employees in service or corporate brand settings (Saleem and Iglesias 2016).

Both external and internal communications are used as managerial tools for internal branding to influence employee perceptions (Burmann and Zeplin 2005; Burmann and Piehler 2013; Piehler et al. 2015). Internal messages are communicated either formally through human resource management systems and public relations management systems or informally through corporate culture as well as co-worker and leader influence. External messages include advertising and public relations on the formal side and customer feedback on the informal side. These employee perceptions shape the brand image as

interpreted by the employees, which in turn leads to favourable consequences such as reduced employee turnover, increased employee satisfaction, enhanced service quality, increased customer retention and positive word-of-mouth communication (Miles and Mangold 2004). Saleem and Iglesias (2016) suggest a conceptual model based on the five components of brand ideologies, brand leadership, brand-centred human resource management, internal brand communities and internal brand communications. The latter includes all brand-related communication to both internal and external stakeholders (Saleem and Iglesias 2016).

Thus, attention should be drawn also to external brand communication as a powerful tool of internal branding (Piehler et al. 2015). In terms of a firm's communication strategy, there is abundant research on external effects of external marketing communication tools, as well as research on internal effects of internal communication tools. In contrast, substantially less empirical research exists on the internal effects of external marketing communication tools, although the topic as such has been recognized early in the literature (Acito and Ford 1980). Gilly and Wolfinbarger (1998) identify employees as an important internal or "second audience" for a firm's advertising activities. Likewise, de Chernatony et al. (2006) recognize advertising as an important and yet underexplored channel for the communication of brand values to employees and show effects of advertising on employees' value perceptions. Wentzel et al. (2010) empirically validate internal effects of advertising in an experimental setting with real service employees. In a similar vein, Celsi and Gilly (2010) show effects of a firm's advertising on employees, that is, employees' customer focus increases when employees perceive ads as effective and value congruent. Miles et al. (2011) reveal a positive effect of external formal messages such as advertising and public relations on employees' knowledge of the desired brand image. Piehler et al. (2015) find that TV advertising leads to increased employee pride and claim that even more attention should be drawn to external brand communication as a powerful tool of internal branding.

One of the key outcomes of internal branding is brand identification (Burmann and Zeplin 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Punjaisri et al. 2009; Saleem and Iglesias 2016). Punjaisri et al. (2008) find in a qualitative study in the hospitality industry that internal branding increases brand identification, that is, employees' sense of pride and belonging to the brand, emotional attachment to the brand and brand loyalty. Brand identification was associated with the enhancement of employees' skills and capabilities to meet customer expectations (Punjaisri et al. 2008). Quantitative research suggests enhanced employee performance in the presence of positive brand attitudes, of which brand



identification is one aspect besides brand commitment and brand loyalty (Punjaisri and Wilson 2007, 2011). In a services context, Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) also show a positive influence of internal branding on employees' organizational identification and the role of employees engaging in brand building behaviour. Nevertheless, Piehler et al. (2016) state that more research is needed to investigate the antecedents of internal brand management outcomes such as brand identification.

We conceptualize identification at the corporate level and use brand identification based on social identity theory and the organizational identification literature, which is in line with current research (e.g. Hughes 2013). Brand identification influences both an employees' satisfaction and the effectiveness of the firm through employees' psychological membership (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Identification with brand identity may be regarded as "[...] the acceptance of social influence due to a sense of belonging to the group determining the brand experience, and a perception of being intertwined with the group's fate—i.e., its success or failures are perceived as one's own" (Burmam and Zeplin 2005, p. 285). The feeling of personal obligation to the brand associated with identification is central for the constructs of brand commitment and brand citizenship (Burmam and Zeplin 2005).

Internal communications have a stronger impact on employee performance than training. The communication of consistent messages to employees is thus central (Punjaisri and Wilson 2007, 2011). However, previous studies by Punjaisri et al. (2008, 2009) as well as Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) do not mention advertising or sponsorship as internal branding tools. They argue in favour of integrating internal branding with other marketing activities of the firm, such as corporate communications (Punjaisri and Wilson 2011) and including both marketing practices and human resource practices in internal branding programmes (Punjaisri et al. 2009). This study introduces sponsorship as part of a firm's external communication strategy that may also be used as internal branding tool to improve employees' identification with the brand, drawing upon the perceptions of the employees. Yet, little is known what characteristics of sponsorship have an impact on employees' identification with the brand.

First, sponsorship effects on employees are likely driven by employees' overall perceptions of sponsorship. Employees' general attitude towards sponsorship encompasses an individual's broad and psychological disposition (Khan et al. 2013; Schwarz et al. 2009). Khan and Stanton (2010) highlight the relevance of the attitude towards sponsorship in general as an antecedent of employees' brand identification and suggest that individuals refer to their general beliefs and attitudes in decision situations.

Second, the perception of the specific sponsored property likely affects employees' response to the company's sponsorship. Employees will identify strongly with their firm, if they feel proud to be associated with an organization which sponsors a worthwhile cause (Dutton et al. 1994). If employees perceive that the company, the customers and the co-workers share the identity of being a fan of a sponsored team, athlete, event or sport, then employees will be motivated to increase their identification with the brand (Hickman et al. 2005). Indeed, Hickman et al. (2005) find positive effects of employees' attitude towards the sponsored property on their brand identification.

Third, perceptions of fit may impact the effectiveness of sponsorship as an internal marketing tool for increasing identification with the brand. Fit can be conceptualized in a general sense as "the respondent's attitude towards the pairing of event and sponsor, and the degree to which the pairing is perceived as well matched or a good fit, without any restriction on the basis used to establish it" (Speed and Thompson 2000, p. 230). The fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property has attracted much attention in research on sponsorship effects on consumers (e.g. Speed and Thompson 2000) and often showed a positive impact on variables such as corporate image or attitude (Grohs and Reisinger 2014; Rifon et al. 2004). Surprisingly, the large body of research on the nature and effects of fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property and its management has not considered its relevance and application to the internal audience (Farrelly et al. 2012). Only Hickman et al. (2005) assume that the fit between a sponsored event and the company can be central in enhancing sponsorship outcomes on employees, but they do not test this proposition empirically.

Against this backdrop and in line with the previous discussion, our conceptual model proposes that employee perceptions of sponsorship in general (general attitude towards sponsorship), perceptions of the specific sponsored activity (attitude towards the sponsored property) and perceptions of fit (between the sponsor and the sponsored property) increase their identification with the brand. Thus, we propose the following three hypotheses (cf. Fig. 1):

- H1:** Employees' general attitude towards sponsorship positively influences their brand identification.
- H2:** Employees' attitude towards the sponsored property positively influences their brand identification.
- H3:** Employees' perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property positively influences their brand identification.



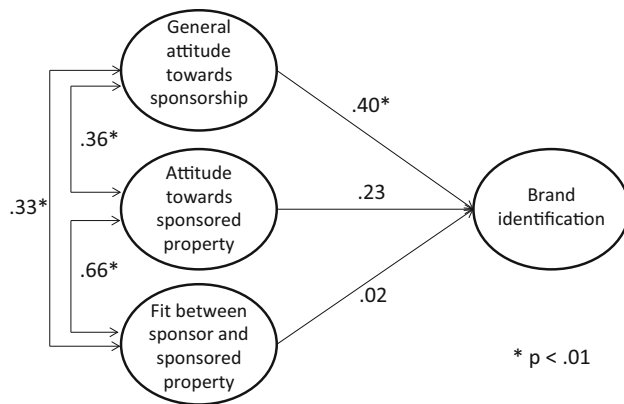


Fig. 1 Drivers of employees' brand identification

Empirical study

Context

The empirical study was conducted with *backaldrin the Kornspitz Company*, Austria's leading producer of baking ingredients. Today, *backaldrin* sells the most successful branded roll in Europe that is also exported to 69 countries worldwide. The company engages in sport sponsorship which it considers a vital part of the company's communication strategy (backaldrin 2016). The empirical study focuses on employees' perceptions of the sponsorship of the Austrian national biathlon team, which is in line with the literature suggesting that brand identification is best measured through employees' perceptions (Piehler et al. 2016). *backaldrin* performs various activities to engage employees with its sport sponsorship. Athletes of the biathlon team, for example, visit the company and their subsidiaries for meet and greet, sign autographs or send individual video messages to the employees. Furthermore, employees receive free tickets for the competitions as well as merchandise clothing of the team and athletes. For the Olympic Games, special cooperation activities are performed and prizes are awarded. In addition, sponsored athletes hold cross-country skiing lessons for employees, and the physiotherapist of the biathlon team visits the company to talk to employees how to improve their physical condition and health. *backaldrin* has been engaged in the sponsorship of the Austrian biathlon team since 2010.

Measures

For construct measurement, the study predominantly relied on multi-item scales that had been validated in the literature and translated to German (brand identification: three items (Mael and Ashforth 1992); general attitude towards

sponsorship: six items (based on Irwin et al. 2003); attitude towards the sponsored property: four items (Speed and Thompson 2000); fit between sponsor and sponsored property: four items (Speed and Thompson 2000)). All items used five-point Likert scales anchored by 1 = fully agree and 5 = fully disagree. The scales were reversed to ease interpretation of the results, so that larger numbers indicate higher brand identification, better general attitude towards sponsorship, better attitude towards the sponsored property, and better fit between sponsor and sponsored property.

Data collection

The questionnaire was pretested among selected employees to ensure comprehensibility. All 349 employees of the company were informed about the survey before they received the online survey. Furthermore, all respondents were assured anonymity. Employees in the production unit who did not have internet access at their workplace were contacted via paper questionnaires. Through those measures, 195 questionnaires were returned, of which 165 did not show missing values. These questionnaires were used for data analysis, resulting in an effective response rate of 47%. The statistical software programs SPSS 24 and AMOS 24 were used for data analysis.

Results

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with all 17 items indicated an unsatisfactory model fit ($\chi^2(113) = 276.57$, $p < .01$; NNFI = .89; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .09) caused by cross-loadings of the error terms of some items. After eliminating these items, CFA indicated that the measurement model was adequate ($\chi^2(59) = 80.77$, $p = .03$; NNFI = .98; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .05; cf. Bagozzi and Yi 2012). In this model, brand identification was measured with three items, general attitude towards sponsorship with four items, attitude towards the sponsored property with three items, and fit between sponsor and sponsored property with three items (cf. Table 1). With the exception of one item for one construct (brand identification), all standardized factor loadings were larger than .60, and all were statistically significant ($p < .01$). Composite reliability (CR) for the model constructs ranged between .77 and .92, and average variance extracted (AVE) was greater than 50% for all constructs. These values exceed thresholds commonly suggested in the literature (Bagozzi and Yi 2012) and support convergent validity. In support of discriminant validity, in each case AVE exceeded the highest squared correlation between the construct and other



Table 1 Scale items and CFA results

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Brand identification	I am very interested in what others think about <i>company name</i>	.79	.77	.53
	When someone praises <i>company name</i> , it feels like a personal compliment	.83		
	<i>Company name</i> 's successes are my successes	.54		
General attitude towards sponsorship	Companies that support athletes are generally likeable	.67	.81	.52
	Sponsorships are attractive for companies to present themselves	.74		
	Sponsorships aid both companies and athletes	.78		
	Through sponsorships, companies can present themselves in an informal way	.69		
Attitude towards sponsored property	The Austrian biathlon team is important for me	.89	.92	.79
	I enjoy following coverage of the Austrian biathlon team	.98		
	I would want to attend a biathlon event	.79		
Fit between sponsor and sponsored property	The Austrian biathlon team and <i>company name</i> stand for similar things	.64	.84	.65
	<i>Company name</i> and the Austrian biathlon team fit together well	.97		
	It makes sense to me that <i>company name</i> sponsors the Austrian biathlon team	.78		

$N = 165$. All loadings are significant ($p < .01$)

constructs (cf. Voorhees et al. 2016). Table 1 lists all constructs, items, standardized loadings, CR and AVE values. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics and correlations between the constructs.

Structural model and hypotheses tests

The test of the structural model indicated a good fit of the data to the theoretical model ($\chi^2(59) = 80.77$, $p = .03$; NNFI = .98; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .05). Figure 1 shows the standardized estimates of the structural model. The R-square value for the latent endogenous variable brand identification was satisfactory (.31). Hypothesis H1 predicted that employees' general attitude towards sponsorship positively influenced their brand identification. The data supported this notion ($\beta = .40$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis H2 predicted a positive effect of employees' attitude towards the sponsored property on their brand identification. The data provided only marginal support for this relationship ($\beta = .23$, $p = .08$). Hypothesis H3 suggested

that employees who perceived a better fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property had higher brand identification. The data did not support this relationship ($\beta = .02$, $p = .93$). Overall, only one hypothesis is fully supported. The following section discusses reasons for these findings and implications for both scholars and practitioners.

Discussion and implications

Discussion of findings and theoretical contributions

The study finds that specific characteristics of a company's sport sponsorship drive the effectiveness of the sponsorship as an internal marketing and branding tool in terms of employees' identification with the employer brand. Specifically, the results of the empirical study show that employees' general perceptions of their employer's sponsorship (i.e. general attitude towards sponsorship) have a

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations among constructs

Construct	Mean (SD)	BI	AG	AS	FI
Brand identification (BI)	4.29 (.79)	(.73)			
General attitude towards sponsorship (AG)	4.29 (.69)	.44	(.72)		
Attitude towards sponsored property (AS)	3.26 (1.30)	.37	.43	(.89)	
Fit between sponsor and sponsored property (FI)	3.75 (.93)	.43	.60	.67	(.81)

$N = 165$. All correlations are significant ($p < .01$). Square root of AVE is shown in diagonal



strong direct impact on employees' identification with the brand. Employees' perceptions of the specific sponsorship (i.e. attitude towards the sponsored property and perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property) show no significant effect on their brand identification, but relate strongly to general attitudes towards sponsorship.

These results indicate differences between drivers of sport sponsorship effects for employees and consumers. In particular, general attitudes towards sponsorship appear more relevant for employees than for consumers compared with factors related to the specific sponsorship. Employees reward employer behaviour that shows that the company is a valuable member of the community, but they are less inclined to expect that their employer sponsors properties that they personally like than external consumer audiences. It must be noted, though, that the sample size in the current study is small and the path coefficient for the effect of employees' attitude towards the sponsored property on brand identification is quite large and will likely become significant with a larger sample. Thus, one should not assume that employees do not care about the specific property the employer sponsors. The not significant effect of employees' perceived fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property on brand identification suggests that the fit concept works differently for employees compared with consumers. In a consumer context, the audience (consumer), the sponsor (employer) and the sponsored property are separate entities, whereas in an employee context the audience (employee) is formally part of the sponsor (employer). In addition, the activities that *backaldrin* conducted to engage employees with the sponsorship and the long-term (since 2010) sponsorship relationship may have fostered employees' knowledge about and involvement with the sponsorship. The resulting strong connection between sponsor (employer), audience (employees) and sponsored property can then make employees perceive the employer-property fit and the attitude towards the sponsored property as highly interrelated, as evidenced by the high correlation between both constructs in the study.

Scholars have been calling for more research on the antecedents of internal brand management outcomes, such as brand identification (Piehler et al. 2016), and in particular the use of external brand communication as a powerful tool for internal branding (Piehler et al. 2015). This study follows the calls and investigates which characteristics of sponsorship targeted at external audiences also drive employees' brand identification. Doing so, the study adds to the literature suggesting that external communication activities, if designed adequately, are relevant to both external and internal audiences (Christensen 1995; Hughes 2013). In addition, previous studies investigating the effects of external marketing communication activities on employees were carried out mainly in the context of

services (e.g. Miles et al. 2011). This study extends previous work and shows how specific sponsorship characteristics impact brand identification for the so-called second audience of employees in a manufacturing context. Summing up, the present study identifies prerequisites for the successful implementation of sponsorships to foster employees' brand identification (e.g. Farrelly et al. 2012) and thereby incorporates sponsorship into the integrative framework of the effectiveness of external communication for internal branding (Miles and Mangold 2004; Piehler et al. 2015).

Managerial implications

Firms' marketing departments are faced with increased need for legitimacy of marketing costs and its benefits for the company (Hughes 2013). The positive effects of sponsorships do not only relate to external stakeholders such as customers, but also to the internal stakeholder group of employees. Marketing sponsorship activities inside the firm thus increases the effectiveness of marketing programmes. This observation provides marketers with strong arguments to justify and support marketing expenditures vis-à-vis top management and other functional departments of the company. Besides these general implications, the findings also provide the following specific recommendations for firms for selecting appropriate sponsorship partners and designing the sponsorship programmes:

Directing internal branding efforts towards all employees

Our research shows the positive effects of sport sponsorships on employees of the company. Internal branding activities should thus not be limited to customer-contact employees, but should be directed towards all employees of the firm. This is due to the increasing number of stakeholder and brand touch points (Saleem and Iglesias 2016). Each employee has the potential to act as a brand ambassador and should be encouraged to do so.

Internal branding is relevant for firms in different contexts

Internal branding activities are not limited to service firms. Also for firms in a manufacturing context, sponsorships can be applied, if designed appropriately, as an effective internal branding tool.

Foster employees' positive attitude towards sponsorship and the sponsored property

Sponsorship as an internal branding tool is most effective if it meets employees' needs in terms of central



meaningfulness and belongingness. Thus, communicating a genuine support for the sponsored property should result in better attitudes towards sponsorship. Furthermore, companies should use activation strategies to make employees participate in their company's sponsorships. Participation can increase meaningfulness and result in a better attitude towards the sponsored property. Like in the case of *backaldrin*, companies can engage their employees with their sponsorship programmes by offering their employees free tickets or merchandise of the sponsored athletes or sports teams.

Choose and manage long-term sponsorship relationships

Long-term sponsorships lasting for at least a couple of years have the advantage that employees can learn about the sponsorship. Finally, long-term sponsorships offer ample opportunities for employee participation, which should drive both employees' attitude towards the sponsored property and their perceptions of fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property.

Limitations and further research

This study is an important building block of a comprehensive framework that can explain secondary effects of communication activities targeted at external audiences, like advertising or sponsorship, on internal employees. Yet, much remains to be explored.

First, the current study investigated the sponsorship of a national sport team by a single company. Further research should extend this study by exploring different sport sponsorships (e.g. athletes, organizations, leagues, club teams) of different companies (e.g. in terms of size or industry), and different kinds of sponsorship (e.g. arts, social causes). Future studies could then integrate existing work to illuminate how employee-oriented firms can use CSR and sport sponsorship in combination to conform to the trend of increased socially responsible practices and at the same time exercise effective internal marketing and branding (Cunningham et al. 2009). Of particular interest would be a deeper understanding of the role of the perceived fit between the sponsored property and the sponsor for internal audiences, which may work differently for employees who are formally part of the sponsor compared with consumers who are not formally part of the sponsor.

In terms of strategies fostering active participation of employees in a firm's sponsorship activities, more research is needed. As yet, only anecdotal evidence of such participation strategies exists (e.g. Farrelly et al. 2012), and the effectiveness of different strategies for internal branding objectives needs to be established. In this context, the

effectiveness may also depend on the kind of and the reasons for participation (e.g. employer vs. employee driven, Plewa and Quester 2011) and the employer's sponsorship implementation strategies and activation practices that employees encounter (e.g. what, when, how and why, Weeks et al. 2008).

Employee characteristics may moderate the effectiveness of sponsorships for internal branding purposes. Further research can assess the interactions between sponsorship-related drivers of employees' identification with the brand and employee tenure, hierarchical level, other organizational dimensions or occupational roles (e.g. executives, management, office personnel, mechanical and technical employees; white collar vs. blue collar employees; union members vs. not; employees with customer contact vs. not; Becker et al. 1996; Cole and Bruch 2006; Farrelly et al. 2012; Hickman et al. 2005). In addition, company characteristics such as company size or economic situation should be considered—it may be that in good times, an employer's sponsorship will be looked at favourably and aid internal branding strategies, while in bad times it may be seen as a waste of resources by employees.

Finally, sponsorship needs to be aligned with other internal branding tools such as internal communication and training, but also with other external corporate communication, like advertising, to contribute to an integrative framework of marketing communication effects on internal branding. In addition, coordinating these communication activities with human resource practices will be a top priority for the future (Punjaisri et al. 2009).

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