

# **THE ROLE OF ATTITUDE IN SPORTS SPONSORSHIP RESPONSE**

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**Abstract:** The important purpose of this study is to identify whether attitude towards sponsorship and attitude towards event will lead to a sports sponsorship response in the *2017 SEA Games*. It is important to present the factors that will affect sponsorship response to create a winning situation between the sponsors and sponsees of an event. The high level of sponsorship response among the audience will then arouse the interest of sponsors to support prestigious events such as the *SEA Games*. Thus, survey questions from previous studies were adopted and customised to collect data. A sample of 100 Malaysian youths from the Kota Bharu district, Kelantan, who have had exposures to sport events was utilised. The results of this study indicate that there is a significant relationship between attitude towards sponsor and consumer response. Attitude towards sponsors in this study is reflected by the perceived sincere feeling towards the sponsors. It is most important for sponsorships to closely monitor sports that have the highest interest among the audience so that they can always give their views to the event organisers to gain a winning situation between both parties. For future research, e-sports sponsorship response will become an interesting area to look into since there is still little research on the factors that contribute to e-sports sponsorship response.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Sponsorship, Sponsorship Response

## **1. Introduction**

Sports sponsorship is among the most powerful marketing tools to position a brand in customers' minds. For example, a 2018 research revealed that 43.4% of respondents identified Nike as an Olympics sponsor, although this company is not one of the sponsors anymore (Breuer, Dallmeyer, Rumpf & Orłowski, 2020). This is interesting because Nike has not sponsored the Olympic Games since 1984. From this situation, it is clearly shown that brands like Nike had been positioned in customers' minds as a sport event sponsor since then. Al-Nsour and Al-Otoum (2020) define commercial sponsorship in their study as an indirect communication tool that includes a package of payments, financial or physical benefits, provided by the sponsor company to support one of the parties or social events that are important to society, and such payments can be used within a contractual relationship unrelated to the primary function of the company, or in which it has direct and indirect marketing and selling advantages.

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In Malaysia, where this study took place, it is important to look at the responses toward sports sponsorship in prestigious events like the *SEA Games*. The *29th SEA Games* or more commonly known as *Kuala Lumpur 2017* was a Southeast Asian multi-sport event that took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The games were held from 19 to 30 August 2017 which involved around 4646 athletes from 11 participating nations. A sponsorship program for this event is critically important to a developing country like Malaysia to successfully become a host. A subsidiary of Dentsu and the Sportsworld Group are the sponsorship agencies for the *2017 SEA Games*. The partnership of the two firms was announced in January 2016. Dentsu was responsible for managing sponsorship matters involving international and Malaysian firms while Sportsworld managed Malaysian government-linked companies.

There are four tiers of sponsorships depending on the amount of fund a company contributes to the event. Bronze sponsors contributed RM1 million or less and Silver sponsors contributed RM1 to 3 million. Gold sponsors contributed RM3 to 7.5 million and Platinum sponsors contributed RM7.5 to 15 million. There was a total of 39 sponsors, comprising 6 Platinum sponsors, 6 Gold sponsors, 9 Silver sponsors and 18 Bronze sponsors for the *2017 SEA Games*.

In maintaining the eagerness of giant companies to sponsor this prestigious event, it is crucial to look upon the factors that give impact towards sponsorship response among the audience of the *SEA Games*. This is due to the fact that sponsors need to be alert about these factors so that their investment in the sponsorship will not go to waste. Attitude towards the event and attitude towards the sponsors are among the factors that will determine sponsorship response. Speed and Thompson (2000) highlighted the fact that people who have a positive attitude to an event are more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward the sponsor. In a sponsorship context, a positive attitude to an event helps to predict purchase intentions of sponsored products (Bachleda et al., 2016). Since sports sponsorship is one of the fastest-growing and increasingly applied forms of marketing communication, it can be seen as a relevant subject to explore.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

Sponsorship revenue has become crucial for the financing and delivery of major and mega events (Jensen & Cornwell, 2017). For example, in the *2017 SEA Games* in Kuala Lumpur, they needed RM15 million to sponsor the bronze, silver and gold medals. Even though sports sponsorship activities have a positive role in brand building and improving customer loyalty and satisfaction (Donlan, 2014), it is still very tough to get sponsorships for sport events. Hence, it is important to present the factors that will affect sponsorship response to create a win-win situation between the sponsors and the sponsees of the events. The sponsors certainly hope that their sponsorship, in return, will increase purchase intention among viewers towards their product.

According to Schlesinger and Güngerich (2011), the fans' attitude towards the club sponsor exhibits a strong positive correlation with their purchase intention. That relationship has become a motivation for this study to see if the attitude towards events and sponsors will impact the response towards sponsorship. The high-level sponsorship response among the audience will then create an interest for sponsors to support prestigious events like the *SEA Games*. Although the importance of determinants for effective sports sponsorship is evident, there is no generally-accepted theory and there is a need for further exploration (Walraven, Koning & Bottenburg, 2012). The majority of research in sports and event sponsorships has focused on the sponsors' perspective (Toscani & Prendergast, 2018). Unlike other crucial components of many marketing programs, sponsorships have not always received the same research attention as other tactical marketing levers (Wakefield, Wakefield & Keller, 2020). Moreover, in Malaysia, there is still little research that looks into sports sponsorship response, especially those that involve prestigious, routine events.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Congruity theory

A study by Jagre et al. (2001) found that Congruity theory has been practiced in social psychology to investigate memory and explain attitude development. It has also been connected with people who are motivated to maintain their thoughts, feelings and behaviours congruently consistent (Solomon, 1996). Initially, the congruity model was outlined in explaining how an individual's attitude changes when a source is connected to a particular attitude object. When sources are associated with objects, it implies a positive connection, but when those sources are disassociated with objects, there is a denial of a connection (Jagre et al., 2001).

Another element in Congruity theory is the evaluation is positioned on both the source and the object by a person whose attitude is being observed (Shaver, 1987). Congruity theory by Mandler (1982) explains that consistency between feelings, thoughts and behaviours which are desired by consumers along with a message and source is congruent through their pre-existing beliefs, thus, making consumers motivated in measuring these messages or sources as more favourable. While in a contract, heavy inconsistency may lead to confusion and negative evaluation of messages and sources among themselves. In the same way, congruent perception between unconditioned and conditioned stimulus like advertising and brand will lead to a conditioned response among respondents (Mitchell et al., 1995).

Hence, most of the sponsorship studies with extensive literature have applied the congruence theory (Cornwell et al., 2005) and it was found that, typically, perceived congruence between the sponsors and the sponsored product will lead to a positive response, as stated by Close and Lacey (2013); Dees et al.(2008); and Gwinner and Bennett (2008). Furthermore, congruence between the sponsor companies and the sponsored sports event is the most important antecedent for attitude towards the sponsors (Filis & Spais, 2012). They also discussed that there is a positive influence between repeated exposure to sponsorship messages and perceived congruence of respondents thus arguing that consistency in behaviour and attitude has been desired by individuals (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016). Therefore, this theory indicates the meaning of sponsor property (sports teams) shifts to the sponsors in sponsorship context of study (McCracken, 1989). By taking congruity theory as the underlying theory, the researcher has constructed a research framework by addressing independent and dependent variables as follows.

### 2.2. Attitude towards the sponsors

The impact on the response of attitude towards the brand has also been examined in classical conditioning research. The effect of pre-exposure of the conditioned stimulus towards the level of condition achieved was investigated by Stuart et al. (1987). This study found that the development of a conditioned response is retarded by pre-exposure. Referring to the sponsorship study, this suggests that the sponsors will be influenced by the level of prior knowledge and the strength of respondents' opinions and will determine the degree to which the sponsorship is able to develop a conditioned response (Speed & Thompson, 2000). In order to measure the attitude towards the sponsors as an independent variable, the researcher applied the sincerity of the sponsors as a construct in conducting this study.

By referring to previous sponsorship research, it was found that sponsors will achieve superior responses from their sponsorship if they are perceived to be sincere in their sponsorships by performing philanthropic responsibilities as part of their motivation compared to sponsors who are perceived as being motivated solely by the profit-oriented factor in their sponsorships (Armstrong, 1987; D'Astous & Bitz, 1995). This point has been similarly proven by Stipp and Schiavone (1996) who found a significant impact in sponsoring the *1992 Olympics* which focused on the pro-social aspects of the sponsorship. Through their study, it explains that a favourable impact on the sponsor's image will be determined by the respondents' perception on pro-social towards sponsorships itself. Meanwhile, another study discovered that respondents might perceive the sponsors as being less credible if they believe that the sponsors are less philanthropically-motivated in their sponsorships (Rifon et al., 2004). However,

another study showed that there is a positive attitude towards sponsors in sports as well as cultural contexts since both will be influenced by perceived sincerity among the respondents (Olson, 2010).

Therefore, it is hypothesised as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: Attitude towards the sponsors is positively related to the level of sports sponsorship response.

### **2.3. Attitudes towards the event**

Related issues on attitude towards advertisements (Mitchell & Olsen, 1981; Shimp, 1981) and attitude towards endorsers (Pretty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983) have been considered in classical conditioning research. The outcome of these studies emphasised the importance of attitude towards the unconditioned stimulus as well as sport events in creating a favourable response (Speed et al., 2000). Similarly, another study found that warm feelings towards an advertisement are positively influenced by an evaluation of the advertised brand (Burke & Edell, 1989). In contrast, negative feelings will lead to negative impacts. Therefore, it can be argued that a positive attitude towards an event will be linked with a positive response towards the sponsors by encompassing this to the sponsorship context (Speed et al., 2000).

In conducting this study, the researcher has included personal liking for the event construct in measuring attitude towards the event as part of an independent variable. Speed et al. (2000) explained that personal liking for the event refers to the benefits received by respondents from the sporting event whereby this similar construct has also been applied in past research. For example, a study by D'Astous and Bitz (1995) discovered that there will be a stronger impact on the sponsor's image when respondents perceive the event to be more attractive and interesting. On the same point, Crimmins and Horn (1996) also explained that fans with a strong liking for an event can exhibit "gratitude" to the sponsors through their emotions and then translate it through their behaviours. Consequently, both findings suggest that sponsors are encouraged to select events that are most preferred by their respondents, thus, this can increase the response towards the sponsors as well. The involvement among identified and passionate event participants and supporters has become an important aspect in life, thus, making them more likely to be aware of purchasing products offered by sponsors that are connected to these events (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006).

Thus, this study assumes that:

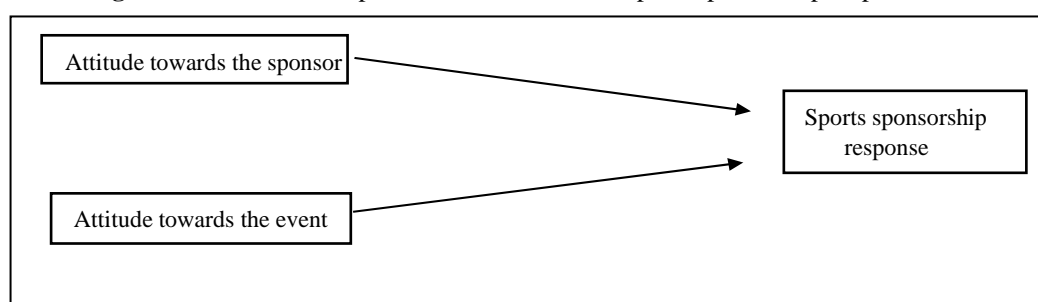
H<sub>2</sub>: Attitude towards the event is positively related to the level of sports sponsorship response.

### **2.4. Sponsorship response**

Conventionally, classical conditioning research on advertising suggests that there are three situations for respondents' response which include: respondents' attitude towards the unconditioned stimulus either it involves advertising or the endorser (Mitchell & Olsen, 1981; Shimp, 1981), respondents' prior attitude towards the conditioned stimulus which involves the brand (Stuart, Shimp & Engle, 1987), and respondents' perception of congruence between unconditioned and conditioned stimulus that involves a combination of advertisements, endorsers and brands (Mitchell et al., 1995; Shimp, 1991). Thus, Speed et al. (2000) recommended that sponsorships that represent a response to a sporting event must be influenced by the attitude towards the event, the attitude towards the sponsors and the perception of appropriateness between sponsors and the event. On the same line, researchers also refer to various theoretical approaches in linking how customers respond to sponsored messages. A study by Walliser (2003) explained that consumer response to sponsorships has been established as a broad research focus especially on the study of the psychological process of consumer sponsorships. This statement has also been supported by a study which discovered that the tendencies of responses or behaviours are consistent with both beliefs and feelings (Hawkins, 2004). For instance, what are consumers' thoughts and feelings, whether they are aroused by their "head" or "heart" (Keller, 2003).

Then, consumers would respond according to their thoughts and feelings through their behaviour. Due to prior evolution of this study context, Jones and Dearsley (1989) and McDonald (1991) discovered how consumers respond towards sponsorships. Both studies constructed significant statements in describing and measuring the images of sponsoring companies which represent them as sponsors and factors like popular, ignorance and goodwill are found to be common causes for how consumers respond towards sponsorships (McDonald et al., 1991). It was also found that the nature of the sponsorships and the link between the sponsors and the events have an important influence on consumers' reactions (D'Astous & Bitz, 1995). In other words, the more people become aware that a company is a sponsor, the more favourable they will feel towards it (McDonald et al., 1991). As a result, the positive response to sponsorship can be achieved when consumers perceive fit or relatedness between the sponsors and the events (Johar & Pham, 1999; Pham & Johar, 2001). Considering previous works by scholars, this study represents the response to an enquiry on whether sports sponsorships are influenced by attitude towards the event and attitude towards the sponsors. The research framework is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1:** The relationships between attitudes and sports sponsorship response



Source: Speed & Thomson (2000)

### 3. Materials and Methods

The analysis unit of this study is at an individual level. Respondents of this study are Malaysian youths from the district of Kota Bharu, Kelantan who have had exposure to sports events either in or outside the country in order to provide insights for the focused study. The purpose of this study is to identify the role of attitude in sports sponsorship response among Malaysian youths. Based on the data from the Institute for Youth Research Malaysia (2017), the youth population in Kota Bharu in 2017 was 177,500. Therefore, the minimum sample size required for this study, according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), must be 384. According to Dikko (2016), a 30% response rate is regarded as sufficient in survey studies. This study managed to get 100 respondents or 26.04% from the required sample size. With reference to Roscoe (1975), a sample size larger than 30 and less than 500 is suitable for most studies.

Self-administered questionnaires were used for data collection. Using convenience sampling, participants were guaranteed confidentiality and were informed that there is no right or wrong answers for the questions. It is appropriate to conduct social science experiments using a perfectly representative population sample whose results are intended to be generalised. However, obtaining a representative sample is often difficult and expensive (Goldberg, 2019). Therefore, researchers often rely on convenience samples, such as those collected from undergraduate students, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), or social media platforms such as Facebook (Dixon, 2016; Kerr & Wilson, 2018; Landrum et al., 2018).

In total, only 100 questionnaires were received and found usable for this analysis. In this study, all constructs were measured using established measures drawn from earlier studies, such as Speed and Thompson (2000) for sports sponsorship response; Stipp and Shiavone (1996) and Speed and Thomson (2000) for attitude towards sponsors; and D'Astous and Bitz (1995), Speed and Thomson (2000) and Crimmin and Horn (1996) for attitude towards events. A 5-point response scale was used for all items, from 1 = *strongly disagree* up to 5 = *strongly agree*. The 5-point response scale was used by considering Dawes' (2008) notion that 5, 7 or 10-point response scales are all equivalent for analytical tools like

structural equation models or confirmatory factor analysis.

The reliability of each construct was examined to ensure internal consistency. These constructs have never been explored previously in studying the response of Malaysian youths to sports events, so, the primary concern is building internal consistency or the extent to which the items consisting of one another are united. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to test for internal consistency.

According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), the appropriate Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency must be above 0.7, while items rated below the recommended alpha level of 0.7 must be removed so that construction reliability can be improved. All constructs used in this study have achieved the acceptable level of reliability. First, there are 7 questions about consumer response (dependent variable) which shows high reliability with the Cronbach's alpha value at 0.884 which was in the range of  $0.8 < 0.9$ . The value of Cronbach's alpha was very good and all the questions under this section can be accepted and positively correlated. There were five questions to measure attitude towards sponsors in this research questionnaire. The value of Cronbach's alpha for this section was 0.788 which was in the range of  $0.7 < 0.8$ . The value of Cronbach's alpha for the next independent variable, attitude towards the event, was 0.890 which was in the range of  $0.8 < 0.9$ . This value is considered very good. Since all the constructs under investigation were above 0.80, hence given all the benchmarks, the constructs were found to be reliable.

## **4. Result and Discussion**

### **4.1. Frequency Analysis**

Regarding the respondents' gender, 53% were females and 47% were males, with a majority of the respondents being between the ages of 18 to 23 (41%). Other than that, 60% of the respondents were single. Information on their occupation indicated that most of the respondents were students (35%) followed by 28% of them employed in the private sector. Lastly, most of the respondents were degree holders (41%) followed by those who had Diploma or STPM with 37% from the total respondents.

### **4.2. Descriptive Analysis**

#### **4.2.1. Mean Score of Consumer Responses**

There are two highest mean scores that go with the statements, "The sports sponsorship in the 2017 SEA Games would make me more likely to remember the sponsor's promotion" and "This sponsorship would make me more likely to pay attention to the sponsor's advertisements" with the same mean score of 3.81. From these findings, it can be interpreted that youths felt that they usually remember any sponsorship activities, as well as sponsor advertising that will influence their response to sports sponsorship. This is parallel with Melovic et al. (2006) in their findings which revealed that companies and sport organizations that are aware of the trends will accept and implement different alternative tactics, in order to leave a stronger impression on the target group and ensure its loyalty. One of these techniques is using sponsorship, which is gaining popularity in the promotional mix. Sponsorship of sports, culture, art and entertainment has become an essential part of brands' promotional mix, as confirmed by the data— as much as \$60.1 billion was invested in sponsorship globally in 2016, showing an investment growth of 4.6% compared to 2015.

#### **4.2.2. Mean Score of Attitude towards Sponsors**

In determining the attitude towards sponsors, respondents must rank five statements. The highest mean score was 4.14, which refers to the statement, "The sponsor's image of the 2017 SEA Games will increase if it gives support to pro-social activities such as sports". It means that most of the respondents agreed that the image of the sponsor will increase if it supports pro-social activities such as sports. It can be supported by a study by Nuseir (2020) involving 400 managers and organisers of sports events that

found businesses that sponsor sports events acquired a better brand image, increased exposure to customers and improved sales. Sports event managers and individual players also gain value from sponsorships.

#### 4.2.3. Mean Score of Attitude towards the Event

Lastly, respondents needed to answer six Likert-scale questions regarding their attitude towards the event. The highest mean score was 4.18, which refers to the statement, “The sponsors of the 2017 SEA Games could benefit from the gratitude of the fans who have a strong liking for the event”. It means that most of the respondents agreed that the sponsors of the 2017 SEA Games could benefit from the gratitude of the fans who have a strong liking for the event. According to Speed et al. (2000), personal liking for the event and its perceived status have different significance, depending on how the response is measured. Personal liking for the event is associated with positive responses at the higher level of the impact hierarchy, whereas perceived event status is associated with positive responses at the lower hierarchical level. Hence, the scholars have highlighted that these two constructs are unique and have different effects on sponsorship response.

#### 4.3. Pearson Correlation Analysis

In order to identify the strength of the correlation and relationship between each independent variable with the dependent variable, Pearson correlation was employed. First, the value of correlation analysis between attitude towards sponsors (independent variable 1) and consumer responses was 0.629 with positive correlation. This value was in the 0.41-0.7 range which indicates that between attitude towards sponsors and sponsorship response, there is a moderate correlation and substantial relationship. For the relationship between attitude towards events and sponsorship response, the value was 0.544 which represents a positive and moderate correlation. Table 1 represents the result of the Pearson correlation coefficient of this study.

**Table 1:** Result of Pearson correlation coefficient

Hypothesis	Coefficient
H1: Attitude towards the sponsors influences sports sponsorship response	0.629
H2: Attitude towards the event influences sports sponsorship response	0.544

Note: \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

#### 4.4. Hypothesis Testing

In order to test the hypotheses, the significant values of attitude on sports sponsorship responses were also measured. From Table 2, the significant value of attitude towards sponsors was 0.000 which was less than the significant level 0.05 signals that H1 is accepted and null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between attitude towards sponsors and sponsorship response. Besides, the significant value of attitude towards events is 0.002 which was less than the significant level of 0.05. It indicates that the relationship between attitude towards events and sports sponsorship response is significant. Therefore, all proposed hypotheses are supported.

**Table 2:** Summary of significant values

Hypothesis	Sign Value	Sign Level	Result
Attitude towards sponsors	0.000	0.05	Support
Attitude towards event	0.000	0.05	Support

Notes: \*Total Link Strength

## 5. Conclusion

The important purpose of this study was to identify whether attitude towards sponsorship and attitude towards events will lead to sports sponsorship response in the 2017 SEA Games. Based on the result, there is a significant relationship between attitude towards sponsors and consumer response. Attitude towards sponsors in this study is reflected by the perceived sincerity towards the sponsors. SEA Games audience did feel that the sponsors had a sincere interest in the games that they had sponsored. Hence, this attitude impacted their responses towards these sponsors. This result is parallel with the finding by Olson (2010) who found that sincerity enables fans to carry a more positive and favourable attitude towards sponsors. This finding will be a key reference for sponsors in planning their involvement in sponsorships in the future. For example, companies or any agencies that have a desire to sponsor the SEA Games in the future should start early in giving support to the sports that will be competing in order to gain perceived sincerity among SEA Games audience so that their million-ringggit sponsorships will be effective. These attitudes can avoid them from being in a situation where the audience might perceive sponsors as being less credible when they believe that the sponsors are less philanthropically-motivated in their sponsorships (Rifon et al., 2004). Another implication of this study is when the researcher identifies that attitude towards events will also lead to sports sponsorship response. This study is parallel to the study by Speed and Thompson (2000) that mentions the importance of attitude towards unconditioned stimulus as well as sports events in creating a favourable response. In our descriptive analysis, most of the respondents agree that sponsorships will get greater benefits if they like the events. Therefore, it is most important for sponsorships to closely monitor the sports that have the highest interest among the audience so that they can always give their views to event organisers to gain a win-win situation for both parties. For future research, e-sports sponsorship response will become an interesting area to look into since there is still little research done on the factors that contribute to e-sports sponsorship response.

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