

ID: 1242**Sport Marketing & Sponsorship - Revised Version***Topics: Sport Marketing & Sponsorship***Professionalization of Sponsorship Management in Voluntary Sports Clubs****Schulz, Luc Alexander¹; Nagel, Siegfried²; Lang, Grazia²; Stieger, Raphael²; Meier, Romano²; Schlesinger, Torsten¹**¹Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany; ²University of Bern, Switzerland; luc-alexander.schulz@hsw.tu-chemnitz.de**Aim and Research Question**

For around $\frac{2}{3}$ of voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) in Germany, the financial situation can be classified as problematic (Breuer & Feiler, 2022). However, a large part of the financial resources of VSCs is attributed to revenues that cannot be directly influenced (e.g., public subsidies) or are associated with further liabilities (e.g., membership fees). Accordingly, a stronger emphasis on sponsorship income and the associated management can be observed as a functional strategy for increasing club revenues (Hindmarsh, 2020). Current developments indicate that VSCs have been able to meaningfully increase their sponsorship income in the recent years (Breuer & Feiler, 2022). Therefore, it can be assumed that professionalization processes of sponsorship management in VSCs have already been taken place. While the sponsorship management in professional sports organizations is well investigated (e.g., Dietl & Schweizer, 2014), the development of sponsorship management in mainly voluntary sports organizations has not been considered yet. Therefore, how transformative developments of sponsorship management for VSCs unfold is a "black box" in the current literature. The aim of this study is to analyze professionalization processes of sponsorship management in VSCs, which leads to the following research questions: (i) *To what extent are sponsorship management structures transformed during professionalization processes in VSCs?* (ii) *What underlying (promoting and hindering) factors determine these processes?*

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The only existing sponsorship management process model in VSCs (Hindmarsh, 2020) merely describes the timing of sponsorship engagements "from inception to end of agreement" (Hindmarsh, 2020, p. 1), and do not take transformative developments (i.e., how sponsorship management in VSCs becomes more business-like) into account. To analyze these transformative professionalization processes, a conceptual multi-level framework by Nagel et al. (2015) is used. The framework differentiates next to three forms of professionalization (strategies & activities, people & positions, structures & processes) between causes and consequences of professionalization, which makes it possible to shed light on the holistic transformative developments of sponsorship management in VSCs. Such transformative developments can be driven by external stakeholders (e.g., sponsors), emerge from the VSCs itself (e.g., financial needs) or be initiated by club members (e.g., key actors). Consequently, different transformative developments of sponsorship management can have an impact not only on the VSCs itself (e.g., financial resources), but also on external stakeholders and VSC's members.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis:

The analysis is based on a multiple case study design (Yin, 2014), which investigates multidivisional VSCs in Germany (n=3). When selecting the clubs, it was ensured that the clubs had certain (contrastive) developments in sponsorship management (e.g., acquisition of sponsorship staff) and differed in their organizational characteristics (e.g., number of members). To analyze transformative processes in the sponsorship management of the sports clubs "from inside-out" in a differentiated manner, data in each club was collected through (i)

document analysis (e.g., strategy papers, sponsorship reports), (ii) 3-4 problem-centered interviews with decision makers, and (iii) 1-2 focus groups with club members. The data was analyzed performing the qualitative content analysis, first with theory-based deductive coding and supplementary inductive coding, considering specific characteristics and developments of the mainly volunteer-driven VSCs. For a subsequent determination and visualization of causal relationships during the transformative processes, the method of visual mapping (e.g., Parmentier-Cajaiba & Cajaiba-Santana, 2020) was used.

Results/Findings and Discussion

Results indicate that the transformation of sponsorship management in VSCs is initiated by the recruitment of competent staff responsible for sponsorship management. Due to the organizational form of VSCs, even the recruitment of responsible volunteers could be identified as professionalization. In the multidivisional clubs studied, ex-ante individual departments managed their sponsorships autonomously, which often led to lack of transparency and price differences for similar sponsorship services. As part of professionalization processes, these activities were bundled and managed centrally, which was accompanied by further developments (e.g., expansion of marketing opportunities). Due to the fact that the VSCs had limited media coverage, emergent developments of alternative activation opportunities for sponsors (e.g., team sponsorships) occurred.

In these processes, divergent interests between volunteers and full-time staff made it difficult to professionalize, which was identified as a key hindering factor. In contrast, key actors, who drove sponsorship out of their own affinity, were important drivers for professionalization of sponsorship management in the otherwise rather sluggish transforming VSCs. Overall, professionalization of sponsorship management contributed to longer partnerships, increased sponsorship income, and thus diversification of club revenues.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

The findings reveal that the professionalization of sponsorship management in VSCs is characterized by the simultaneous approach of volunteer and paid managers and limited marketing opportunities due to low media coverage. In addition, transformation processes of sponsorship management were often associated with complex planned and emergent sub-processes. Therefore, the findings contribute to the functional control and management of transformative processes of sponsorship management in VSCs.