

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE

John van Pijkeren

**Strategic value of networking in sport
sponsorships**

Supervisors:

Joris Heuven

Michel Ehrenhard

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Strategic value of networking in sport sponsorships

John van Pijkeren
University of Twente

ABSTRACT

Sport sponsorship is interesting for organizations for more than only the value out of the relationship between sports entity and sponsor. This study reveals the network behind sport sponsorship is highly valuable for sponsors. Due to the sponsorship network centrality of sponsors increases. Relationship intensity is highly dependent of the participation of all parties. Striking results are found when analyzing the amount and type of contents exchanged. For sponsors the amount of contents exchanged with others increases, whereas the type of contents exchanged changes. Sponsorship networks facilitate the exchange of information, as well as the exchange of goods and services. The exchange of information might be of more value because it may contain information about a particular market, new product or a more efficient product process. Underexposed for a long time, the network opportunity behind sponsorships now seems to gain interest from both network scientists and practitioners. As such, as well as providing a conceptual extension to the sponsorship literature, the study also offers a route for more empirical analyses of other sponsorship networks.

Keywords: Sponsorship, Relationships, Network, Network centrality, Relationship intensity, Exchange, Content.

1. INTRODUCTION

Till now, sponsorship research only focused on the dyadic approach; the relationship between sports entity and sponsoring organization. Interestingly, there lies more contribution in sport sponsorship. What about the value gained from relationships the sponsorship network offers, a highly undervalued aspect of sport sponsoring. Sports entities are engaged with many different organizations. Sponsors therefore have the opportunity to contribute from the network the sports entity has created and provides, because all sponsors already have an interface with each other by sponsoring the same sports entity.

Scholars (e.g. McCarville & Copeland, 1994; Olkkonen *et al.*, 2000) have highlighted the importance of the strategic context of sponsorship interactions; the interacting web of organizations linked through sponsorship-driven linkages cannot be ignored when evaluating current and future sponsorship relationships.

However, there have been scarce attempts to conduct research aimed at (1) investigating the content of sponsorship networks or (2) the processes of formation and development of relationships and (3) networks behind the focal sponsorship relationship between sports entity and sponsor.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to draw from broader sponsorship and networking literature to study interorganizational relationships between sponsoring organizations. This research seeks to extend current perceptions of the reasons and objectives for linkages between sponsoring organizations and sport entities. Aim of this study is to prove strategic value of networking behind sponsorship relationships.

As a result, the central question used in this study is:

How do sponsors benefit from (strategic) value a sponsorship network provides?

Whereas (strategic) value refers to the intangible nature of advantages sponsorship offers when sponsors play an active role in the network (Farely, 2006). In order to

answer the central question, the following research questions are used:

- Since being sponsor, how did relationships between sponsors develop?
- Since being sponsor, how did the structure of the network change?
- How do the relations and the structure of the network have influence on the content exchanged in the network?

The intended contribution of this paper is twofold. The first contribution contains the expansion of the existing literature on sponsorship by investigating the relevance of networking behind sponsorships. Therefore a need exists to look beyond the traditional studies on sponsorship, and to capture the advantages the sponsoring organizations gain from those networks. These advantages may fit to meet their immediate and strategic objectives (Abratt *et al.*, 1987). Traditional studies towards sponsorship are often focused at the benefits of sponsorship by describing several objectives, like brand awareness and corporate image. This study focuses on the advantage of creating new relations and enhancing existing relationships via the network. Second, the focus is on small and medium sized organizations, which only a few scholars did (e.g. Slack & Bentz, 1996; Berret, 1993). This contrasts with traditional literature regarding sponsorship, since in the past scholars (e.g. Mack, 1999) mainly focused on objectives and results of multinationals sponsoring world-wide events, world-famous sport entities and world-class athletes.

2. SPORT SPONSORSHIP

2.1 Defining sport sponsorship

The literature about sponsorship is extensive. However, there does not exist a general accepted definition of sponsorship. There have been rigorous attempts to explicitly define and classify sponsorship, in order to define what it is and what it is not. An all-encompassing definition of sponsorship is difficult, if not impossible to make. To show differences in definition of sponsorships and to create a valuable definition, definitions and descriptions of sponsorship provided by well-known scholars are summed up in Table 1.

Scholars agree that sport sponsorship involves a relationship between a sports entity and a sponsoring organization. The sponsored gets support of the sponsor, like financial support, know-how, services or products. In turn, the sponsor has the right to associate their organization or brand with the sports entity in order to gain commercial advantage. This may lead to exposure, image-linked benefits, hospitality opportunities and also possibilities of developing connected business relationships.

In this study, the following description of sport sponsorship is used; a combination of definitions of other authors (see Table 1). This description encompasses the main aspects of several sport sponsorship definitions:

Sport sponsorship is an interaction between a sports entity and a sponsor. Sponsors are organizations acting in various kinds of markets, of which sponsoring is part of its marketing strategy. Sponsorship is the provision of resources, like financial support, know-how, products and services by an organization to the sports entity to enable the latter to pursue some activity in return for mainly intangible resources provided by the sponsored, for example, exposure, image-linked benefits, hospitality opportunities and possibilities of developing connected business relationships.

The short definition out of this nearly all-encompassing description is:

Sport sponsorship is an interaction between a sports entity and a sponsor, whereby the sponsor provides resources in exchange of mainly intangible resources provided by the sponsored.

Table 1: Sponsorship definitions

Author(s)	Definition/description
Knecht & Stoelinga (1988)	Sponsorship is an activity in which a sponsoring organization (1) supports an association or person for the presentation of sporting, artistic or similar performances of interest to the general public; (2) organizes of sporting or cultural event in exchange for mention of its brand name.
Olkkonen (2001)	Sponsorship relationships involve interaction between various kinds of organizations: public and private, profit and non-profit. Sponsors are usually organizations or public-sector organizations acting in various kinds of markets, while the sponsored can take different forms according to the type of organization and societal field, for example, sports and the arts. Economic aspects of sponsorship relationships relate to the exchange of money and/or products/services/know-how provided by the sponsor. This against mainly intangible resources provided by the sponsored, for example, exposure, image-linked benefits, hospitality opportunities and possibilities of developing connected business relationships.
Shank (1999)	Sponsorship is an investment in a sports entity to support overall organizational objectives, marketing goals and/or strategies.
Meenaghan (1991)	Sponsorship is the provision of assistance – financial or in kind – to an activity by an organization for the purpose of achieving communication objectives.
Shilbury <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Sponsorship is a business relationship between a sponsor and a beneficiary, which offers in return some rights and association that may be used for commercial advantage.
Erdogan & Kitchen (1998)	Sponsorship is the practice of promoting an organization's interests and its brands by tying them to a specific and meaningful related event, organization or charitable cause.

2.2 Development of sport sponsorship

According to Maguire (1999) sponsorship is an evolving area of interest to academics and business practitioners. The range of sponsored activities has increased steadily the last century. Sponsorship has become an increasingly popular medium of corporate communication among organizations (Olkkonen *et al.*, 2000). Over the past forty years sponsorship has evolved from a small-scale activity in a limited number of industrialized countries to a major global industry (Meenaghan, 1998). Despite the negative effects of the global economic crisis, the global sponsorship expenditures have still increased with 3,9% in 2008. Stotlar (2004) pointed to the annual increase in corporate spending with some organizations spending over \$100 million every year. Tripodi (2001) claims sponsorship has the potential to become the marketing communication tool of the twenty-first century.

Lee *et al.* (1997) stated that in the beginning of the nineties 65% of sponsorship spending is devoted to

sports. Later on, other authors noted even higher rates of sport sponsorship spending, up to 80% (Stotlar, 2004; Veloutsou & Costa, 2006). This clearly suggests that sport is by far the most developed area of sponsorship (Davies, 2006). Walliser (2003) states sport sponsorship is easy accepted by consumers. According to Shanklin & Kuzma (1992) sport sponsorship is important and popular because sport is an universal language that attracts high emotions and passion, provides drama, unites people and encompasses values, elements that most organizations would like to associate with. Highly involved fans identify themselves strongly with their favorite sport events, teams or athletes (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976).

As a result of this growth of sponsorship interest, sports became closer linked with the corporate world and the popular appeal of sport increased significantly during the twentieth century. It was not just a case of business values intruding into sport, or sport being turned into business. It was also a matter of recognizing the potential value in the increasingly competitive process of

capital accumulation in the consumer society. It was about its unique value in enhancing corporate brands, marketing, and the promotion and sale of products with popular sport events and iconic celebrity sporting figures (Smart, 2007). There are many motives to choose a sport sponsorship activity, which is highly organization-dependent (McCook *et al.* 1997). The following priorities have been observed: perceived affinity between sponsor product and sponsored activity, affinity between targets of sponsor and sponsored, the popularity and image of the potential sponsored party and its willingness to cooperate (on a long-term basis), geographical reach, contact frequency, contact quality, expected sponsorship costs/benefits, the type of rights received and the possibility to integrate the sponsorship into the communication/marketing strategy (Walliser, 2003).

Traditionally, sports sponsorship is a tool mainly used by organizations to generate awareness (Davies *et al.*, 2006; Amis *et al.*, 1999), enhance corporate image (Meenaghan, 1991), alter attitudes (Dolphin, 2003) and attempt to influence consumer behavior patterns (Nicholls & Roslow, 1999; Grimes & Meenaghan, 1998). Sport sponsorship is seen as a method to cut through clutter effectively, target specific consumer segments, and to generate beneficial consumer effects. These aspects have meant that as an element of the promotional mix, sports sponsorship is becoming an important practice to a wider selection of organizations (Tripodi, 2001). According to Sam *et al.* (2005) this reflects sponsorship's central importance to the organization of sport in general but more particularly its significance as a conceptual link with aspects of marketing.

However, when reflecting the importance of sponsorship, the value of sponsorship is difficult to attribute to particular actions in the sponsorship relationship. It is often realized at distinctly different times, and from various sources (Thompson & Speed, 2000). Sport entities often receive revenues, such as right fees, at the beginning of the relationship. Sponsors, on the other hand, may not realize any return on investment until much later. Often, they may only do so after investing considerably more funds in some form of activation. It may take years for sponsors to fully realize value as a shift in consumer attitude toward the sponsor's brand can require a long term association between the two parties as well as ongoing activation efforts (Thompson & Speed, 2000).

2.3 Bringing in the network perspective

Dyadic Approach

The primary research interest in traditional sponsorship research lies in studying the dyadic relationship; the so called dyadic approach described by Oikkonen & Tikkanen (2000). This approach refers to studies that focuses on exchange processes and relationship formation between sponsor and sponsored in the case of sponsorship relationships. The dyadic approach aims at a more thorough understanding of interactions, its forms and development process between the sports entity and its sponsors.

The dyadic approach focuses on the immediate set of relations in which an organization is directly involved and ignores interconnections among relations. However, according to Coussens (2006) and Oikkonen (2001), linkages between sports entities and sponsoring organizations do not exist in isolation from other organizational interactions and relationships. Behind the dyadic relationship of sport sponsorship lies an extensive network of different organizations related to the same sports entity. This means organizations have at least one interest in common with each other, an interest organizations could and should build upon via the network their part of.

When using the term dyadic relationship in this study, we refer to the relationship between the sponsor and the sports entity.

Network Approach

The core characteristics of any organization are seen as stemming in part from its relations with other organizations (Kadushin, 2003; Håkansson & Snehota, 1995). Blankenburg-Holm *et al.* (1996) argue that as an organization's behavior and performance depends on the behavior and performance of other organizations, so does the behavior and performance in a focal dyad depends on other relations. Connections extend further to indirectly connected relations in which an organization's immediate counterparts' counterparts are involved. Sponsors in the dyadic relationship with sports entities are also involved in other relationships that are connected to the focal relation, the sports entity. Therefore an extension of the dyadic approach is the network approach. This approach goes beyond dyadic relationships to incorporate networks of relationships and aims at making sense of what happens in complex relationships between organizations in networks (Oikkonen, 2001). The network approach denies that any organization can be understood apart from its relationships with other organizations. This approach recognizes third degree relationships with other sponsors allied with the sports entity.

As a result, a successful bilateral sponsorship relationship is likely to multiply into a series of successful bilateral relationships that eventually form a network, or a map of exchange linkages (Chelladurai, 1994). The system of these interconnected relations makes up the business network in which the organization is embedded (Wilkinson, 2002). According to Anderson *et al.* (1994) each participant in the network builds up a reputation regarding its core competency, which feeds into other relationships in the network, leading to a network identity.

This perspective on interorganizational relationships and networks refers to a description of networks as associated or bonded structures which comprise not only the sponsor and the sponsored, but also other sponsors engaged in the network the sports entity created. The concept of a sponsorship network allows us to move beyond the dyadic relationship to network-wide effects.

3. THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Joining sponsorship networks

Central to the picture of the network is the thought that participating organizations go outside their own sphere of control and ally with partners to gain control over their environment (Astley, 1984). This strain of network theory relies closely upon the ideas of Prahalad & Hamel (1990) that organizations should specialize in what they do well and obtain other necessary factors from outside organizations, likewise specializing in different but complementary core competencies. Due to the mutual exchange of unique and valuable competencies sponsors gain more skills. Not primarily out of the dyadic relationship with the sports entities, but sponsors are also introduced to third parties; other sponsors provide links to other network participants. Each partner is attractive to the other not only through the direct relationship and obvious trade of services, but through the unique network of other already established relationships that it offers to its partner (Erickson & Kushner, 1999). Consequently, the organization's value as a network partner is based on its network identity, emphasized by Anderson *et al.* (1994). Network identity is a combination of an organization's core competencies, other network connections and its ability to gain further network-specific knowledge that contributes to the operating efficiency of the network itself. As learning takes place, organizations gain specialized skills that increase their value to their partners.

Influence of joining networks on new relationships

By joining a sponsorship network, sponsors expand their relationship portfolio by creating new relationships with other sponsors. Due to the network, sponsors have contact with other members more frequent, which is likely to result in an increased relationship. By being a participant of a network, sponsors have the possibility to gain skills in order to make themselves more attractive for other sponsors to cooperate with. This is especially the case for sponsorship networks, because organizations already have one interest in common, namely the sports entity they are sponsor of. It is therefore more likely that the relationship between network members develops into a mutual cooperation. Expanding its relationship portfolio also enhances the network centrality of organizations. In this study, a sponsor is qualified as central when the number of links to reach every other sponsor is low (Ibarra, 1993). By joining a sponsorship network, organizations create relationships with other members. This results in a decrease of the number of links to reach every other sponsor. This is stated in Hypothesis 1a.

Hypothesis 1a: By joining a sponsorship network, organizations enhance their network centrality.

Influence of joining networks on existing relationships

When joining a network, sponsors also meet organizations with whom they already cooperate. The network participation influences the nature of the relationships. The relationship intensity, which means the strength of the relation, is likely to increase because sponsors have contact more frequent. As the intensity increases, so does the reciprocity, which is the degree to which cooperating sponsors report the same intensities. Organizations have contact more frequent and are therefore aware of each other's intensities. At last, network participation also increases multiplexity. Multiplexity identifies the degree to which two organizations are linked by multiple roles. The more role requirements linking one sponsor to another, the stronger the linkage (Tichy *et al.*, 1979). It is likely relationships enhance; network participation increases the intensity of relationships. Below this statement is hypothesized.

Hypothesis 1b: By joining a sponsorship network, relationships intensity of existing relationships between sponsors increase.

3.2 Influences on contents exchanged

Organizations have to exchange with a network of external actors to acquire resources, new relations and legitimacy necessary for survival and growth. These resources are the transactional content; what is exchanged when two organizations are linked. According to Tichy *et al.* (1979), four types of transactional contents can be distinguished: (1) exchange of affect, (2) exchange of influence, (3) exchange of information, and (4) exchange of goods or services.

First, the exchange of affect is about the amity and appreciation exchanged between organizations in a network; the expression of affect. Second, the exchange of influence concerns issues like class, status and power. These issues result in hierarch in networks, which is stated in terms of the position of a given sponsor relative to other sponsors, without assuming any content to this position. This type of exchange refers to influence attempts of organizations against other organizations in the network. Third, the exchange of information means sponsors share information about a particular subject, like new developments in the market they are active at. This may contain information about products, production processes or other valuable information. Last, the exchange of goods and services consist of the exchange of the tangible or intangible between organizations. The exchange of goods can be in the form of machines and products *et cetera*, whereas the exchange of services contains delivering services like calculation or invoicing bills.

Influence of network centrality on amount of contents exchanged

As proposed, by being a participant of a network, sponsors expand their relationship portfolio by creating new relationships with other sponsors. Especially in case of sponsorship it is more likely the relationship between sponsors develops into cooperation, because organizations have the interest of the sports entity in common. Although member of the same network, not all organizations are connected. Network members influence the density of the network by their relationship portfolio. Network density is part of the structural characteristics of networks and refers to the overall pattern of relationships between the network members. The more relationships between different sponsors in the network, the higher the density of the network (Kadushin, 2004). Expanding relationship portfolio also enhances the network

centrality of organizations. Network centrality means the position of organizations in the sponsorship network relatively to other sponsors. An organization is qualified as central when the number of links to reach every other sponsor is low; the more central an organization, the more cooperation with other network members. It is assumed that the extent of the relationship portfolio positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged between organizations. As a result, Hypothesis 2 is:

Hypothesis 2a: Network centrality positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged.

Influence of network centrality on type of contents exchanged

We distinguish four types of contents exchanged between organizations. In Hypothesis 2a it is questioned whether or not network centrality positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged. This might not be the only relation between network centrality and contents exchanged. It is also likely network centrality affects the type of contents exchanged. A theoretical explanation is that organizations need a developed relationship before exchanging goods and services (e.g. Johnson & Selnes, 2004). Another explanation, used in this study, is based on logical reasoning; where organizations' demand to goods and services limited, exchange of information is unrestrained. When organizations do have a lot of relationships in a network, it is likely they have enough sponsors in order to satisfy their own demand to goods and services. However, valuable information about specific products or markets is always appreciated by organizations. Therefore the exchange of information, as well as the exchange of affect is indefinite. As a result, Hypothesis 3b is:

Hypothesis 2b: Network centrality affects the type of contents exchanged.

Influence of relationship intensity on contents exchanged

A sponsor community is a network where the nodes are the sponsors and the relationships between them are the threads. Both the threads and the nodes in the business context have their own particular content. Both are heavy with resources, knowledge and understanding in many different forms (Håkansson, 1997). This heaviness is the result of complex interactions, adaptations and investments within and between the sponsors over time. The development of any relationship between two organizations depends on a number of factors: on what has happened in the past; on what the two parties have previously learned in other relationships; on what currently happens between the organizations in the

relationship and in others in which they are involved; on the expectations of both organizations of their future interactions; on what happens in the wider network of relationships in which they are not directly involved (Håkansson, 2002). Organizations need to exchange with a network of external actors to acquire resources, new relations and legitimacy necessary for survival and growth. Relationship intensity affects the performance of the relationship between members of the network. Relationship intensity means the strength of the relationship as indicated by the number of contacts in a unit of time (Santoro, 2000). In intense relationships, organizations share values, and respect each other's intensities. We assume that the more intense a relationship is, the more contents are exchanged between the organizations involved. This is stated in Hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3a: Relationship intensity positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged.

Influence of relationship intensity on type of contents exchanged

We propose relationship intensity between sponsors affects the type of contents exchanged. Therefore a closer look at the background of the type of contents and the relationship is needed. Organizations exchange goods and services, often the primary and core business of organizations (McGrath *et al.*, 1995). The relationship between organizations does not need to be intense; the exchange of this type of contents can occur on a global business level. In contrast, the exchange of information requires a more intense relationship. The exchange of information may contain valuable information about a specific market, or for example information about a specific product or production process. Organizations won't share this type of information when they are not sure the information is safe and when organizations are not sure they receive valuable information in return. It is also likely that when relationships are more intense, organizations exchange more affect. This might appear because organizations have a relationship on an equal base. When organizations do not have an intense relationship, it might occur they want to have more influence on the other. As a result, Hypothesis 3b is drawn up.

Hypothesis 3b: Relationship intensity affects the type of contents exchanged.

3.3 Influence of the contents exchanged on network performance

The value of sponsorship is difficult to attribute to particular actions and is often realized at distinctly different times, and from various sources (Thompson & Speed, 2000). According to Tripodi (2001) sponsorship success is dependent upon whether or not objectives are achieved. The objective focused on in this study is the objective of networking via sponsorship deals. Despite the rapid growth of sponsorship, little is known about the value of the network behind sponsorship. As a result, little is known about its effectiveness and performance, there is no one adequate way to measure and quantify the value from networking. Therefore, according to Hoek *et al.* (1997), few organizations make any attempt to evaluate performance, also because of the inability to clearly estimate the costs from sponsorship activities.

Sports entities often receive revenues, such as right fees, at the beginning of the relationship. Sponsors may not realize any return on investment until much later. Often, they may only do so after investing considerably more funds in some form of activation. It may take years for sponsors to fully realize value as a shift in consumer attitude toward the sponsor's brand (Thompson & Speed, 2000).

We provide some important aspects of network performance. As mentioned, organizations have to exchange with a network of external actors to acquire resources, new relations and legitimacy necessary for survival and growth. These resources are the transactional content; what is exchanged when two organizations are linked: (1) exchange of affect, (2) exchange of influence or power, (3) exchange of information, and (4) exchange of goods or services.

Influence of amount of contents exchanged on network performance

We propose that the amount of contents exchanged between organizations depends on the extent of organizations' relationships portfolios, as well as the intensity of these relationships; the more relationships, the more contents exchanged and the more intense relationships, the more contents exchanged. In one particular relationship, several types of contents can be exchanged. Two organizations share for example information of market developments, as well as exchange goods.

We assume whether or not organizations are satisfied with the network depends on the network performance; it is likely organizations are satisfied with the network when they are with the performance of it. In line, we assume network performance depends on the amount of content exchanged. As a result Hypothesis 4 is formulated.

Hypothesis 4a: The amount of contents exchanged positively relates with the network performance.

Influence of type of contents exchanged on network performance

Not only the amount of contents affects the network performance of network participants. We propose also the type of contents exchanged affects the network

performance. Organizations become member of a network in order to create new relationships and to strengthen existing relationships. To create new relationships, organizations might have the goal to exchange more goods and services. Although to strengthen relationships, organizations might have the goal to exchange information, for which a more intense relationship is needed. Thus, whether or not organizations are satisfied about the network performance, depends on the type of contents they want to exchange and the type of contents being exchanged. This is formulated in Hypothesis 4b.

Hypothesis 4b: The type of contents exchanged affects the network performance.

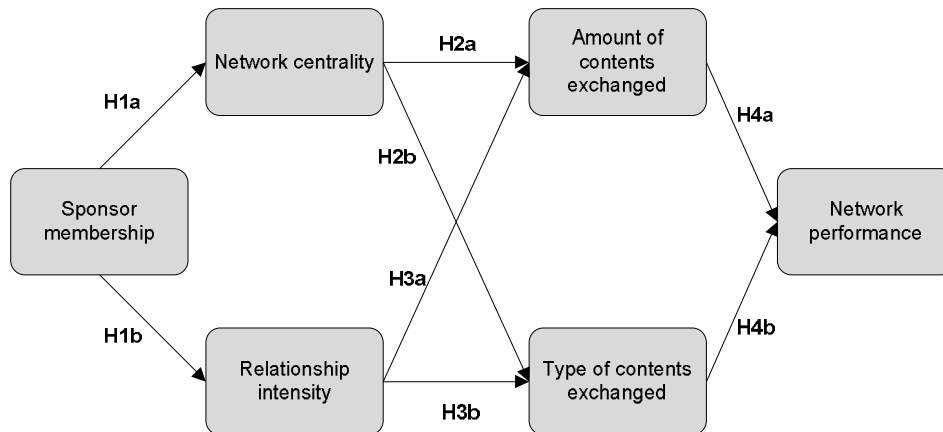


Figure 1: Model of hypotheses

4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The empirical context of this study is TopSupport, the sponsor community of Excelsior '31. Excelsior '31 is a Dutch third division football club established in Rijssen. TopSupport is a collectivity of 62 organizations sponsoring Excelsior '31. The focus is on the network of sponsors, the relationships between sponsors, and the content of these relationships.

Over 90% of all sponsors are established in Rijssen. TopSupport can be seen as a named group, because members of TopSupport (1) themselves know that they are members of the group and (2) others know that they are members of the group and can identify them as such, and (3) members interact with one another. Therefore TopSupport is a network, with its own structural characteristics (Kadushin, 2004). The network can be described in terms of their relations with external domains (Tichy *et al.*, 1979).

4.2 Research design

This research is both qualitative as quantitative, which is possible as these approaches are not mutually exclusive. First, this research is qualitative as we generate hypotheses, using semi-structured interviews with both sponsor and sponsored. Second, it is also quantitative as we start with a theoretical framework in which we propose general relationships between variables. With this quantitative approach we concentrate on measuring, after which we analyze numerical data and apply statistical tests using SPSS.

This study contains an empirical inquiry towards the network of sponsors collaborating with a sports entity. The research is explanatory as we go beyond merely describing the characteristics. Explanatory research aims to understand phenomena by discovering and measuring causal relations among them. We legitimate conducting an explanatory study by three conditions provided by Yin (1994). The first condition is the type of research question, which should be to answer questions like 'how' or 'why'. This is clearly the case in this research as we aim to explain the development of relationships as well as its contents. The second condition refers to the extent of control the researchers have over events. Researchers should have little or no possibility to control the events, which is the case in this research. The third condition is also present in this study. Circumstances of the study should be contemporary and in a real-life context, this is typically the case as we study the relationships between sponsors.

4.3 Selection and sample

The units of analysis are the actual source of information, the what or whom being studied. This can be individuals, groups, social artifacts or organizations, and even relationships between organizations; as in this study. Multiple units of analysis are used in this study; the sponsors of Excelsior '31 collaborating in a concept called TopSupport. The average sponsor is member for 4,2 years and has 56 employees. We focus on the relationships between these sponsors and the content of the relationships. The amount of sponsors part of the network has varied along the years; sponsors come and go. Therefore we determined the number of sponsors when sending the questionnaire; 62 sponsors are included in this study.

The scope of this research are the 62 sponsors. It is not valuable to make the scope of the research broader. We had the possibility to include sponsors of the Stichting Excelsior '31 Jeugd Promoting (SEJP), sponsors focusing on the youth of Excelsior '31. However, there are too

many differences between the two types of sponsors. Therefore we only focus on members of TopSupport. When making the scope narrower, we confine ourselves in making valid and reliable assumptions; the population would become too small.

4.4 Measurement

TopSupport membership. We received a list of all sponsors. We mapped the network among the sponsors, using a roster method (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Respondents, the sponsors, were presented a list of all members of TopSupport. Sponsors were asked to note the organizations they had a relationship with before being member of TopSupport and to note the organizations they cooperate with due to the sponsorship network. According to Marsden (2005), this approach enhances reliability of measurement and better captures weak ties that may be forgotten in studies using free-recall designs. We recorded the responses in a network.

Network centrality. This construct measures the level of centrality of organizations part of the sponsorship network. We also used the mapped network approach to measure this construct. An organization is perceived as central when their number of links to reach every other sponsor is low. We calculated each sponsors' centrality by summing up the number of links it takes for the sponsor to reach every other TopSupport member and by comparing these results for all sponsors.

Network popularity. Network popularity measures the popularity of sponsors in the network. Organizations are assumed to be popular if the number of organizations flowing in to and out to a given organization is high. Flowing into another sponsor is called 'in-degree', whereas flowing out to a given organization is called 'out-degree'. Again we used the roster method and the mapped network to measure this construct. In addition with the arrows we marked, we are able to analyze the number of in-degrees and out-degrees for every organization. Summing up these numbers, results in the level of popularity of every sponsor of the TopSupport network.

Relationship intensity. This construct means the strength of the relationship indicated by the number of contacts in a unit of time. First, respondents were asked with whom they have a relationship. To measure relationship intensity, we first collected the number of contacts per year between sponsors. Second, we used a question based on affinity about the relationship. To rate this item, we asked respondents to score on a Likert scale ranging from 1, 'totally not', to 5, 'very well'.

Relationship multiplexity. Multiplexity arises when organizations exchange multiple types of contents. This concept is measured by asking respondents which types of contents are exchanged with other sponsors. When exchanging two or more different contents of a possible four, relationships are found to be multiplex.

Exchange of contents. Organizations have to exchange with a network of external actors to acquire resources, new relations and legitimacy necessary for survival and growth. These resources are the transactional content; what is exchanged when two organizations are linked. Four types of transactional contents can be distinguished: (1) exchange of affect, (2) exchange of influence or power, (3) exchange of information, and (4) exchange of goods or services. We measured this by asking respondents which type of content is exchanged between sponsors. First, the exchange of affect means the expression of affect towards other organizations. This type of content is measured by the exchange of personal services and introductions to other organizations. Second, the exchange of influence or power concerns issues like class, status and power. This type of exchange refers to the relationships because of image and awareness. Third, the exchange of information means sponsors exchanging information about a particular subject. This type of exchanged is measured by whether or not organizations exchange information or advice, know-how and particular training. Last, the exchange of goods and services contains the exchange of the tangible or intangible between organizations. This is measured by asking respondents whether or not they exchange financial resources, machines, business-related services and labor.

4.5 Data collection

Multiple sources of evidence are used in order to increase the construct validity. The sources used are interviews, questionnaires and desk research. The first stage of data collection contains the interviews with five sponsors, as well as six interviews with the sponsor commission of Excelsior '31. The outcomes of the interviews are qualified as qualitative data; these are non numerical. The second stage of data collection consists of the questionnaires, which are in this study mostly numerical, thus quantitative data. This means both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in order to collect data.

Basic method

In order to collect network data appropriate, Tichy *et al.* (1979) provide four basic methods for network data collection, with their major strengths and weaknesses. The 'interactional method' is used in this study, because

we are interested in the relationships between sponsors of the same sports entity. In this interactional method, according to Clark (1968), the flow of interactions and influences are the central focus. The network data can be gathered by interviews and questionnaires. With this type of data collection, individuals or organizations are asked to report their interactions and with these data, interactions and relations can then be determined. Although interactional methods get directly at interaction processes, they do have difficulties and limitations. These include the assumption of a closed system, or at least of a bounded system, the necessity for a high response rate, and the increased interviewing or observational expense (Tichy *et al.*, 1979).

Although we agree with the limitations, they can be refuted for this research. First, the assumption of a closed system is not a problem for this research, because the focus is on TopSupport, which is a closed system itself. Second, due to extra effort, the response rate of this study is acceptable. Third, although the interviews take time, the results of the interviews and therefore of this study outweigh the costs of the interviews.

Interviews

Five face-to-face interviews with members of TopSupport are conducted, as well as six interviews with members of the sponsor commission of Excelsior '31 (Frey, 1989; Yost & Homer, 1998). The interviews are qualified as qualitative and explanatory, as the primary function of the interviews is to get a better understanding of sport sponsoring in practice. The aim of the interviews is to analyze and explain why or how something is happening. The interviews with sponsors are typically open-ended and semi-structured. The interviews with the sponsor commission are mainly unstructured and of an informal degree. These types of interview are used to collect new data and information. The interviews with sponsors are semi-structured because we already investigated which type of information we want to collect and which questions need to be answered. Although, in order to either collect new data, we need to adjust to answers while interviewing. The interviews with the sponsor commission are unstructured as we aim to collect as much information about sponsoring as possible. Due this interview styles we are able to respond to respondents' answers with flexibility. We can ask other questions or ask more about a specific subject. The participating organizations were IJzerman Notarissen, ABN Amro, Akor Bouw BV, Ter Steege Group, and Rikkert Afbouwgroep BV. This is a varied group; the organizations are active in different sectors and vary in size. We interviewed the employee in charge of the sponsoring department, which means the respondents are competent to answer.

Questionnaire

The first two questionnaire-protocols were pretested by both Excelsior '31 and the University of Twente. After the interviews, the questionnaire was sent by e-mail. After one week we sent non-respondents follow-up mailings in which a new copy of the questionnaire was attached in case organizations lost the questionnaire (Babbie, 2001). After two weeks we called organizations of which we did not get any response yet, again to increase the response rate. When the deadline was reached, the response rate was 39%. This response rate was too low (Deutkens, 2004). The cause may be that some organizations did not receive the online questionnaire because of false email addresses. Other cause, proven by the method of

data collection, is respondents quit filling in the questionnaire because of the length of the questionnaire. In order to increase the response rate the questionnaire was also offered in a hardcopy version. Altogether, the response rate is 52%, which is an acceptable rate (Deutkens, 2004).

Desk research

Other valuable information is gathered by desk research. This means gathering information by investigating documents provided by Excelsior '31 about TopSupport and their relationship with sponsoring organizations. Documents are in this case letters, programs, agendas, progress reports, and plans.

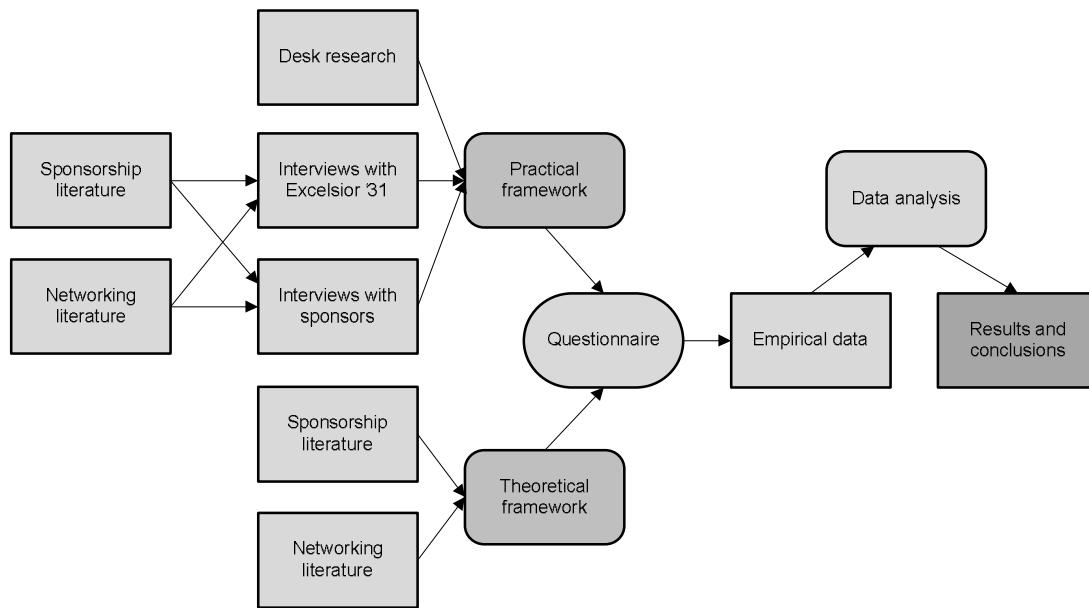


Figure 2: Study method

4.6 Data analysis

Analysis strategy

Most important is to have a general analytic strategy, which helps to choose among different techniques. An analysis should rely on all relevant evidence; network analysis is concerned with the structure, pattern and content of relationships. Network analysis seeks to identify both their causes and consequences (Tichy, 1979). Yin (1994) provides two general analytic strategies: relying on theoretical propositions and developing a case description. We use the first, because in this study we develop a theoretical framework in combination with hypotheses. The theoretical hypotheses are tested using the empirical data gathered by questionnaires. The data gathered by using the questionnaires are analyzed and compared, using SPSS. Because the respondents of this sponsor population are representative, we are able to analyze and recognize certain developments, aspects and effects which are described in the results and outcomes.

In order to analyze Hypothesis 1a, the Spearman Rho Correlation is used, 1-tailed as we propose a positive direction for the relation between 'Length of sponsorship membership' and 'network centrality'.

For Hypothesis 1b the variables regarding relationship intensity and the length of being sponsor are used. The variables are respectively interval and scale, therefore the Spearman Rho is used. As we propose a direction in the hypothesis, the test is one-tailed.

The Spearman Rho is also used to make statements about both Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b because we deal with scale and ordinal variables. Hypothesis 2a is one-tailed, as we propose a direction of the relation between network centrality and the amount of contents exchanged. Hypothesis 2b is tested two-tailed, as we only propose a change in the type of contents exchanged.

The variables regarding relationship intensity and contents exchanged are respectively qualified as interval and scale. Therefore Hypothesis 3a and 3b are analyzed using Spearman Rho; Hypothesis 3a is one-tailed as we propose a direction, Hypothesis 3b is non-directional, thus two-tailed.

In case of Hypothesis 4a and 4b we deal with both interval and scale variables; the Spearman Rho is used, Hypothesis 4a is tested one-tailed as we propose a positive direction between contents exchanged and network performance. Hypothesis 4b is tested two-tailed, as the hypothesis is non-directional.

The exchange of contents is measured by the online questionnaire. Results were available for 22 sponsors. It was not possible to collect this data by the hard copy questionnaire because of the length of the questionnaire.

5. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Hypothesis 1a: By joining a sponsorship network, organizations enhance their centrality.

In order to analyze organizational network centrality, all participating organizations are included. Before being a member of TopSupport, organizations maintained on average 21,5 ties to other organizations of the current sponsor network. Being member of TopSupport, sponsors maintained on average 25,7 ties to other sponsors in the network. The maximum degree of possible network ties was 61. Thus, becoming sponsor of TopSupport results in an average accession of 4,2 relationships with other sponsors.

The relation between joining a sponsorship network and the network centrality of network participants is analyzed using the Spearman's Rho correlation. The variables are the length of being member of the sponsorship network and the amount of relationships with other sponsors. Reported in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Network centrality analysis

		Network centrality
Length of sponsorship membership	Correlation Coefficient	,406*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,014
	N	29

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The correlation coefficient is 0.406 and its p-value, Sig. (1-tailed), is 0.014. This means r is significant beyond the .05-level. Thus, significant positive correlations existed between the length of being member of TopSupport and network centrality. By becoming member of TopSupport, network participants increase their number of relationships with other sponsors and therefore increase their network centrality. Therefore, Hypothesis 1a receives support.

Hypothesis 1b: By joining a sponsorship network, relationship intensity of existing relationships with other sponsors increases.

757 relationships between sponsors are analyzed. Measured on a five-point Likert scale the average relationship strength between two organizations is valued as 3.26. The maximum degree was 5. In order to analyze the relation between joining a sponsorship network and relationship intensity the Spearman's Rho Correlation is used, shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3: Relationship intensity analysis

		Relationship intensity
Length of sponsorship membership	Correlation Coefficient	-,003
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,494
	N	31

According to the statistical test no significant relationship is found. This means there is no significant correlation between 'Length of TopSupport membership' and 'Relationship intensity'. This is in contrast with Hypothesis 1b, thus no support is found for this hypothesis.

This outcome can be further explained by analyzing percentages of the affect of TopSupport on existing relationships. 70,9% of all sponsors declared no direct influence of TopSupport on their relationships. TopSupport had a positive influence on 15,2% of all relationships, which means these relationships became stronger. For the remaining 13,9% sponsors declared a negative influence on the strength of those relationships. As the part of the relationships becoming weaker and stronger does not differ significantly, no support is found for Hypothesis 1b. We can amplify this statement by the average influence of TopSupport on relationships, measured on a five-point Likert scale, which is valued as 3.12.

Hypothesis 2a: Network centrality positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged.

In order to analyze the affect of network centrality on the amount of contents exchanged the Spearman's Rho Correlation is used. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 5. The correlation coefficient is 0.883 and its *p*-value, Sig. (1-tailed), is 0.000. *r* is significant beyond the 1% level. This means there is a significant correlation between 'Network centrality' and 'Total amount of contents exchanged'. Thus, the more relationships one specific sponsor has in a network, the more content this sponsor exchanges. This is in support with Hypothesis 2a.

TABLE 5: Network centrality analysis

		Total amount of contents exchanged
Network centrality	Correlation Coefficient	,883**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,000
	N	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Hypothesis 2b: Network centrality influences the type of contents exchanged.

In the whole network, organizations declared to exchange 780 contents. Goods and services are exchanged the most, 342 times; 43,8%. Affect and information are exchanged 200 and 201 times; respectively 25,6% and 25,8%. 4,7% of all contents exchanged is assigned to the exchange of influence.

As analyzed in Hypothesis 2a, network centrality positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged. This hypothesis focuses on the different types of contents being exchanged in relation with network centrality. The results are reported in Table 6. Significant correlations are found for the exchange of goods and services, and for the exchange of information.

TABLE 6: Network centrality analysis per content type

		Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
Network centrality	Correlation Coefficient	,126	,744**	,288	,662**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,577	,000	,194	,001
	N	22	22	22	22

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation coefficient for the exchange of goods and services is 0.744 and its p -value, Sig. (2-tailed), is 0.000. r is significant beyond the 1% level. The correlation coefficient for the exchange of information is 0.662, its p -value is 0.001. This means the relation between network centrality and the exchange of information is significant beyond the 1% level. In case of the exchange of affect, the correlation coefficient is 0.288 and the p -value is 0,194. Although the relation is significant beyond the 5% level, the correlation is not strong. Interestingly, there is no significant correlation between network centrality and the exchange of influence (0.126), and between network centrality and the exchange of affect (0.288). This means when network centrality of one organization increases, it cannot be proven the exchange of influence also increases. It also cannot be proven network centrality positively influences the exchange of affect.

We conclude network centrality influences the types of contents exchanged. The correlation between network centrality and the exchange of information and goods and services is strong, whereas the correlation between network centrality and the exchange of exchange of affect and influence is weak. Support is found for Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3a: Relationship intensity positively relates with the amount of contents exchanged.

In order to identify the correlation between relationship intensity and the amount of contents exchanged, the Spearman's Rho is used, one-tailed as we propose a direction. The outcome is shown in Table 6. No significant relationship exists between 'Relationship strength' and 'Total amount of contents exchanged'. This means we did not find support for Hypothesis 3a.

TABLE 7: Relationship intensity analysis

		Total amount of contents exchanged
Relationship intensity	Correlation Coefficient	-,154
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,248
	N	22

Thus, we cannot conclude the amount of contents exchanged increases when the average relationship intensity between organizations becomes stronger. Nor can we conclude the amount of contents exchanged decreases when relationship intensity becomes stronger. However, it might appear the type of contents exchanged differ whenever a relationship becomes more intense.

Hypothesis 3b: Relationship intensity influences the type of contents exchanged.

As shown in Table 8, the same test as for Hypothesis 3a is used, this time per content type. According to the Spearman's Rho test, no significant relationship exists between relationship intensity and the exchange of the different content types. There are differences between the strengths of correlations between the different content types, however not significant. This means no support is found for Hypothesis 3b.

TABLE 8: Relationship intensity analysis per content type

		Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
Relationship intensity	Correlation Coefficient	-,225	-,246	-,095	-,188
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,315	,270	,673	,402
	N	22	22	22	22

But because we use a small database, the outcomes might be biased. Therefore we divided sponsors in two groups, based on relationship intensity. See Table 9.

TABLE 9: Types of contents exchanged

	Relationship intensity	Mean
Total amount of contents exchanged	>= 3	34,94
	< 3	37,20
Exchange of influence	>= 3	1,88
	< 3	1,00
Exchange of affect	>= 3	9,65
	< 3	7,20
Exchange of goods and services	>= 3	13,53
	< 3	22,40
Exchange of information	>= 3	9,88
	< 3	6,60

Most appealing results relate to the exchange of goods and services and the exchange of information. In case of goods and services, a large decrease is perceived between the group below the relationship intensity of 3 and above and equal to 3. Bluntly we could say the more intense a relationship, the less exchange of goods and services. The opposite applies for the exchange of information. The group above and equal to the relationship intensity of 3 exchanges 1,5 times more information than the group below 3. With little underpin we might say the more intense a relationship between sponsors, the more exchange of information.

Thus, based on the statistical outcome we cannot conclude relationship intensity influences the exchange of the different content types. Based on dividing sponsors and comparing absolute outcomes, we incline to conclude relationship intensity positively influences the exchange of information. The exchange of goods and services is negatively influenced by relationship intensity.

However, we conclude relationship intensity does not influence the type of contents exchanged as we rely on statistical outcomes in this study.

Hypothesis 4a: The amount of contents exchanged positively relates with the network performance.

In order to identify the relation between network performance and the amount of contents exchanged, the averages of the network performance value and of the contents exchanged are analyzed.

TABLE 10: Network performance analysis

		Total amount of contents exchanged
Network performance	Correlation Coefficient	,317
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,076
	N	22

At first sight, the outcome in Table 10 shows no significant correlation between network performance and the total amount of contents exchanged. However, on the 0.1-level the relation is significant. Keeping the small database in mind, there seems to be a relation between network performance and contents exchanged. Therefore support is found for Hypothesis 4a.

We strengthen this conclusion by analyzing the absolute amount of contents exchanged. We compare the different network performance value and the associated amount of contents exchanged. See Table 11.

TABLE 11: Network performance

Mean	
Valued network performance	Average amount of contents exchanged
2	24,67
3	29,83
4	37,50
5	77,00
Total	35,45

The averages amounts of contents exchanged increase when the valued network performance increases. When network performance is valued as 2, which means a weak performance, the average exchange is 24,7 content. For a network performance of 3, the average is 29,8. The average exchange further increases when network performance value increases to 4 (37,5) and 5 (77,0). Thus, the more contents exchanged between two network participants, the better they value the network performance.

Hypothesis 4b: The type of contents exchanged influences the network performance.

In order to analyze the influence of the different types of contents on the network performance the same method for analyzing all contents is used. The outcome is shown in Table 12.

The exchange of affect and the exchange of influence seem not to correlate with network performance. This means the exchange of affect and influence do not influence the opinion of sponsors about the performance of the network. However no significant flag is shown in the table, it might be argued the relation between the exchange of goods and services and network performance is statistically significant. Because the database contains only 22 sponsors, it is hard to identify significant relations at the 0.01- or 0.05-level. The relation between the exchange of goods and services and network performance is significant at the 0.1-level. Therefore we conclude this correlation is significant. In case of the exchange of information and network performance there also seems to be a positive relation, although again not significant.

Because the database is small, we also analyze the relation between the exchange of different contents and network performance by absolute numbers, see Table 13.

On average the network performance is valued as higher when the exchange of contents increases. Only the exchange of goods and services shows a deviation in relation with network performance. Based on the Table 14, this type of content seems not to be determining the value of network performance. The exchange of information does. Where the network performance is valued as 5, the exchange of information shows a strong increase (35,0), compared with the exchange when network performance is valued as 3 (5,8) and 4 (9,4). Same procession applies for the exchange of influence, however the exchange of this type is minor comparing with the exchange of information.

More interesting than analyzing absolute numbers of the type of contents exchanged in relation with network performance, is analyzing the percentages of the total amount of contents exchanged per network performance level. The outcome of this analysis is reported in Table 13. Network performance is valued as higher primarily when the exchange of information is accountable for a bigger part of all contents exchanged. The opposite applies for the exchange of goods and services. This type of content does not seem to have any influence on the network performance as valued by sponsors.

As analyzed and described, the type of contents do influence the network performance. This is in support with Hypothesis 4b.

TABLE 12: Network performance analysis per content type

		Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
Network performance	Correlation Coefficient	,021	,365	-,021	,222
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,925	,095	,926	,322
	N	22	22	22	22

TABLE 13: Network performance per content type

Valued network performance	Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
2	1,00	12,67	5,00	6,00
3	1,83	9,17	13,00	5,83
4	1,58	19,25	7,25	9,42
5	4,00	18,00	20,00	35,00

TABLE 14: Network performance per content type (percentages)

Valued network performance	Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
2	4,2%	51,4%	20,3%	24,3%
3	6,2%	30,7%	43,6%	19,5%
4	4,2%	51,3%	19,3%	25,2%
5	5,2%	23,4%	26,0%	45,4%

Other interesting relations: the length of sponsor membership.

Above the relations and correlations between concepts regarding the hypotheses are analyzed. However, in order to make valuable conclusions, some other interesting relations can be analyzed. First, the relation between the length of being sponsor and network centrality is analyzed. The outcome is shown in Table 15.

TABLE 15: Sponsor membership analysis

		Total amount of contents exchanged
Length of sponsorship membership	Correlation Coefficient	,420*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,026
	N	22

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The correlation between the length of being sponsors and the total amount of contents exchanged is significant at the 0.05-level; the correlation coefficient is 0.420. This means the longer organizations are member of the sponsorship network, the more contents they exchange with other sponsors.

According to Table 16, the length of being sponsors also influences the types of contents exchanged. First, there is no significant relation between the length of being sponsor and the exchange of influence and the exchange of affect. Thus, we could not prove the exchange of affect and influence increases when being sponsor for a longer period of time. We can for the exchange of information, of which the correlation coefficient is 0.546; significant beyond the 0.01-level. Also the exchange of goods and services significantly correlates with the period of time of being sponsor; 0.426, significant beyond the 0.05-level. Thus, the longer organizations are sponsor, the more exchange of information and the more exchange of goods and services.

TABLE 16: Sponsor membership analysis per content type

		Exchange of influence	Exchange of goods and services	Exchange of affect	Exchange of information
Length of sponsorship membership	Correlation Coefficient	,151	,426*	,104	,546**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,503	,048	,644	,009
	N	22	22	22	22

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Other interesting relations: network centrality and network performance.

Next the relation between network centrality and network performance is analyzed. See Table 17.

TABLE 17: Network centrality - network performance analysis

		Network performance
Network centrality	Correlation Coefficient	,345*
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,034
	N	29

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The correlation coefficient is 0.345 and significant beyond the 0.050-level. This means the higher the network centrality, the higher the network performance as valued by network members. As network centrality is operationalized as the number of relationships in the network, the conclusion is: the more relationships, the higher the network performance.

Other interesting relations: relationship intensity and network performance.

Also the relation between the intensity of relationships and network performance is analyzed. The outcome is shown in Table 18.

TABLE 18: Relationship intensity - network performance analysis

		Network performance
Relationship intensity	Correlation Coefficient	-,176
	Sig. (1-tailed)	,172
	N	31

No significant relation exists between relationship intensity and network performance. Thus, no valid pronouncement can be done about the relation between relationship intensity and network performance. Whenever relationship intensity changes, we cannot prove the network performance changes.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study reveals some important insights for both sports entities and sponsoring organizations about the network behind sport sponsorships. Underexposed for a long time, network opportunities behind sponsorships now seem to gain interest from both network scientists and practitioners.

Relations regarding the length of sponsor membership

As expected, we found a positive relation between the length of being member of the network and network centrality. When organizations participate in a sponsorship network, their position in the network becomes stronger by developing new relationships. Mr. IJzerman of IJzerman Notarissen, when becoming sponsor a new player on the notary market, says: 'Our main goal was to create new relationship as we just started and were quite an unknown organization. The network helped our organization to create new relationships and brought us more assignments as expected.'

An unexpected result concerns the relationship intensity in relation with becoming member of the sponsorship network. We expected to prove relationships between sponsors become more intense when being member of the same sponsorship network. However, no significant increase of relationship intensity is found. This becomes even more interesting when taking into account the part of organizations being sponsor with the reason to strengthen existing relationships. Up to 34% of all sponsors declared to be member of the network in order to enhance existing relationships.

The role of the dyadic relationship

How come there is no relation between relationship intensity and the amount of contents exchanged, as well as between relationship intensity and network performance? Therefore a closer look at the dyadic relationship of the sponsorship agreement is needed. A sponsorship agreement comprises collaboration between two parties; the sponsoring organization and the sports entity. The sports entity provides the sponsoring organization the possibility to join a sponsorship network. In order to offer a productive network, the sports entity should organize meetings in which the network members come together to meet each other.

Mr. Jansen, director of Rikkert Afbouwgroep BV, says: 'From Excelsior '31 we expect they arrange meetings or

trips, so we as organizations can meet each other.' By means of meetings, organizations have the opportunity to develop new relationships and to strengthen existing relationships. On the other hand, the sponsoring organization decides to join the network with several underlying reasons. Regardless the reason, sponsoring organizations should be participating actively in the network in order to create and strengthen relationships (Thompson & Speed, 2000). Mr. Smeijers of Akor Bouw about sponsors of Excelsior '31 in general: 'Members of TopSupport cannot only blame Excelsior '31, as there are also sponsors who are not participating actively in the network and do not visit meetings.' Thus, both parties in the dyad should play an active role in both offering and utilizing opportunities. Mr. Bruggink of ThuisIn: 'I can imagine the sponsorship network can be very valuable to create and enhance relationships. I am only sponsor for marketing purposes, I cannot blame TopSupport of not giving the opportunity to strengthen relationships.'

Relations regarding total amount of contents exchanged

As analyzed, network centrality has a positive influence on the total amount of contents exchanged. This means the more relationships an organization maintains, the more contents it exchanges. Thus, a significant part of all new relationship contains the exchange of contents.

In contrast with network centrality, relationship intensity has no influence on the total amount of contents exchanged. Keeping the small database in mind, relationship intensity even seems to have a negative influence on the total amount of contents exchanged. This means when relationships between organizations become more intense, these organizations exchange the same or even less contents than when relationships are less intense.

Network performance in relation with network centrality and relationship intensity

Using the empirical results we determined organizations are satisfied with the influence of the length of being sponsor on network centrality, as indicated by the relation between network centrality and network performance. Sponsors are not satisfied with the influence on relationship intensity; no relation is found between relationship intensity and network performance. However, this relation seems to be important for the network performance as up to 34% of all sponsors declared to be member of the network in order to enhance existing relationships. The relations regarding

network performance can therefore be assigned to the total amount, as well as the types of contents exchanged.

As mentioned, a higher network centrality results in more contents exchanged. A positive relation is found between the total amount of contents exchanged and network performance. In contrast, no relation is found between the length of being sponsor and relationship intensity, neither between relationship intensity and the total amount of contents exchanged. Because organizations do not exchange more contents due to more intense relationships, no relation is found between relationship intensity and network performance.

Relations regarding the types of contents exchanged

Interesting results are reported regarding the type of contents exchanged. As hypothesized, network centrality influences the type of contents exchanged. Most striking results are found regarding the relation between network centrality and the exchange of information. The correlation between network centrality and the exchange of information is strong. In general this means the more relationships one organization maintains, the more information the organization exchanges with others. Explanation might be that the exchange of information is indefinite. Organizations do not reject valuable information about a project, product or market. Therefore, when the number of relationships maintained by organizations increases, the amount of information exchanged also increases.

We also found a strong significant correlation between network centrality and the exchange of goods and services. Thus, the more relationships with other network members, the more exchange of goods and services. Explanation might be that organizations enter into a relationship when they need others' goods and/or services. This can be classified as the first stage of relationships. At the first stage of developing a relationship, organizations will not directly exchange affect or valuable information, therefore a more intense relationship is needed. Before developing an intense relationship, organizations might already exchange goods and services.

In case of the exchange of influence no significant relation is found. This means we could not prove the exchange of influence increases when network centrality increases. Concerning the exchange of influence, the average time spent on relationships may be decisive. The more relationships, the less average time spent on each relationship. When aspiring to exchange influence,

organizations need to invest in relationships, which takes time. Therefore, it seems logical there is no correlation between the number of relationships and the exchange of influence.

In case of the exchange of affect there seems to be a weak correlation with network centrality. When organizations increase their network centrality by establishing more relationships, some of these relationships result in the exchange of affect. However, the part of relationships resulting in the exchange of affect is not big enough to result in a significant correlation.

As mentioned, relationship intensity has no influence on the amount of contents exchanged. Keeping the small database in mind, it seems to have on the types of contents exchanged. There are differences when analyzing the relations between relationship intensity and the different content types. Relationship intensity seems to negatively influence the exchange of goods and services, as well as the exchange of influence. In case of the exchange of affect and information, the correlation indicates there is no significant correlation between these types of contents and relationship intensity. Thus, the negative correlation of relationship intensity in relation with the total amount of contents exchanged is mainly caused by the exchange of influence and goods and services.

Explanation might be that the exchange of goods and services does not require an intense relationship, the exchange of goods and services can also occur between two organizations only having a weak business relationship. This is not the case for the exchange of information and affect. Exchange of information and affect relatively increases when relationships are more intense. This can be explained by the trust organizations need to have in each other, because the information they share might be highly valuable or even secret. Whenever relationship intensity becomes more intense, organizations keep exchanging information, whereas the exchange of goods and services relatively seems to decrease. Mr. Jansen says: 'When meetings are organized, we as sponsors do not directly share goods or services, but we do share information. While having a nice trip organized by the sports entity, we absolutely have the opportunity to exchange information.'

Networking performance in relation with the types of contents exchanged

Unless the influence of relationship intensity and due to the influence of network centrality, two content types

significantly increase in relation with the length of being sponsor. These are the exchange of information and the exchange of goods and services. The length of being sponsor seems not to relate with the exchange of influence and the exchange of affect.

Interestingly, organizations value network performance higher in relation with both the exchange of information as the exchange of goods and services. There is no relation between the network performance as valued by sponsors and the exchange of affect and influence. Thus, the exchange of the type of contents which increased due to being sponsor seems to be dependents of the network performance.

This may have to reasons. First, organizations value the exchange of information and goods and services as more important. As a result they value the network performance as higher. Second, and more viable, network performance is dependent of contents types of which the exchange increases.

Conclusion

Concluding, joining a sponsorship network is interesting and valuable for organizations in order to create new relationships and as a result to exchange more contents. Via this study we state organizations have the possibility to create new relationships by becoming member of a sponsorship network. As a result, organizations will exchange more contents, which may be highly valuable for them.

More specific, organizations have the chance to exchange more information and more goods and services. The exchange of information might contain information about a particular market, a single product or product process. Therefore, the information might result in chances for organizations.

In order to not only create new relationship, but also enhance existing relationships, organizations as well as the sports entity should participate actively. The sports entity should arrange meetings and bring the organizations together. Sponsors should be active when they are invited for meetings. Meetings and trips are the possibility to enhance relationships.

The different relations between the concepts distinguished by hypotheses are summarized in Figure 3. Dotted lines mean no significant correlations between concepts, whereas bold lines indicate significant correlations. The black lines represent the relations regarding the hypotheses. The grey lines represent other valuable and interesting relations between concepts in order to make valid conclusions.

Figure 4, on the next page, has the same characteristics as Figure 3, extended with the correlations as analyzed using SPSS.

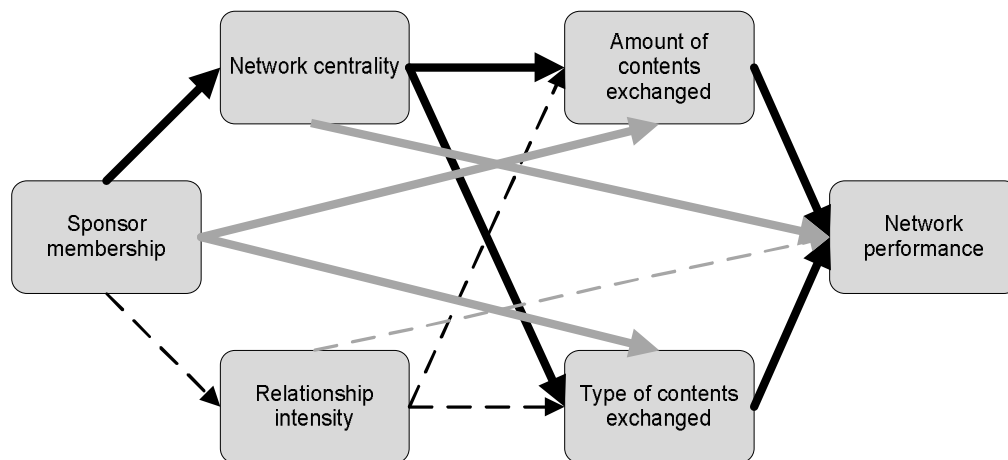


Figure 3: Relations between concepts

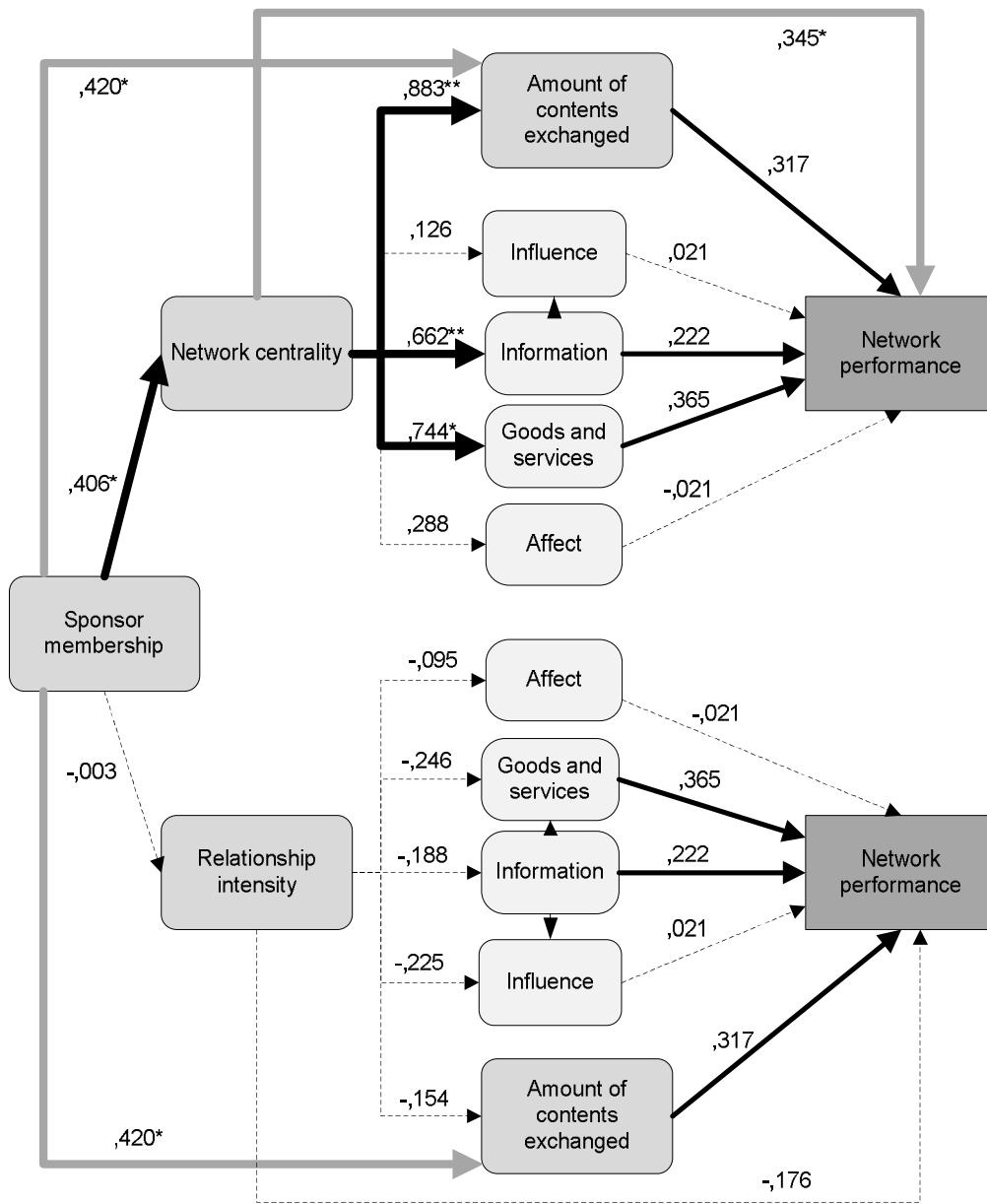


Figure 4: Relations between concepts extended with statistical correlations

7. CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Contributions

This study contributes by demonstrating the strategic value of sponsorship networks. The finding that joining a sponsorship network facilitates the exchange of several types of contents is in line with the assumptions of other authors that a sponsorship agreement provides more opportunities and contributions than only on the dyadic level (Olkonen, 2001; Swinney, 2008). Till now, focus of researches is mainly pointed at the dyadic approach of sponsorship agreements; the network approach of sponsorship agreements is underexposed for a long time. The network contributions behind sponsorship agreements now seem to gain interest of network scientists, as well as practitioners.

Another strength of this study is the universal format we developed in order to collect data and to analyze the sponsorship network. This means the research can easily be repeated in case of other sponsor communities and other sport entities, and even for other types of networks. When using this format, only the units of analysis change, and in line does the data, but the method of data collection and the method of analysis stay the same. As a result, the outcomes of several studies towards other sport entities can be compared.

This study also contributes to sponsorship research by focusing on small and medium enterprises. Most studies towards sponsorship use organizations operating on a global level as units of analysis. The contributions sponsorship networks offer may differ for small, medium and large enterprises. They also might have different goals in order to become sponsor of a particular sport entity or event. Therefore it is interesting to use this study in order to compare the outcomes of other studies pointed at multinationals.

Practical implications

This study is executed at Excelsior '31. Although we have not mentioned this sports entity a lot, this study is very useful for Excelsior '31. We prove the network provided by this sports entity can be highly valuable. Therefore, Excelsior '31 has the opportunity to not only offer the commercial and marketing opportunities of sponsorship, but also the network opportunities. This is an important insight in order to attract potential sponsors to become member of the network.

This research format is also practical for sports entities as information about the relationship between sports entity and sponsor can easily be collected and analyzed. By interviewing organizations, the interviewer should

therefore either focus on the relationships between sponsors and the relationship between sports entity and sponsor. This may result in important insights of sponsors about the facilities provided by the sports entity. In the case of Excelsior '31, discrepancies are found between the offer and the demand of sponsors. Based on the interviews and questionnaires, useful advice is reported to Excelsior '31. Executing these advices will plausibly result in a better understanding of each other's wishes and as a result a better relationship between Excelsior '31 and the sponsors.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. An apparent limitation affects the validity of our findings. We used only data of those organizations that were sponsor of Excelsior '31 at the moment of sending the questionnaire. We excluded organizations that were sponsor in the past. This exclusion may cause a biased view on the outcome, because these organizations maybe stopped being sponsor because they didn't create new relationships. When including these organizations, it is likely the network performance as valued by all organizations would decrease.

Second limitation concerns the external validity. In order to collect data, we used only organizations of one specific sponsorship network, mostly out of one specific city, involved in one kind of sports. This means the findings are to generalize over other sports, other kind of networks and even over other cities.

Third limitation is about the response rate and therefore about the dataset. The sponsor network analyzed in this study is a closed system, consisting of 62 organizations. 22 organizations respond to the online questionnaire and 10 organizations to the hardcopy version; the response rate is 52%. This is sufficient, but not excessive. However, for some hypotheses we used data about the organizations that responded to the online questionnaire, because it wasn't possible to collect data about the contents exchanged by the hardcopy questionnaire. As a result, statistical outcomes may be biased.

Another limitation refers to the length of the questionnaire. When organizations declared to have many relationships with other network members, the questionnaire length increased. Thus, the more relationships, the more time the questionnaire took. It might have appeared relatively more organizations with many relationships quit answering the questionnaire. This could result in a skewed distribution of respondents comparing with the population.

Another limitation refers to one part of the data collection, the collection of the exchange of influence. The exchange of influence is relatively low compared with other types of contents. Although this might be possible, it is also explainable as a limitation. Respondents won't be eager to fill in this type of content because it might be private information or they do not want to appear as such a player in the network. Therefore it might be arguable that the amount of influence exchanged should be higher than collected for this research.

Directions for future research

As we developed a universal format, the protocol can also be applied for other sponsor communities, as well as other sports entities. Therefore several paths can be taken. First, it is interesting to study other sport entities on the same level and to compare these results with the results of this study. Second, research can be done towards sport entities and their sponsor communities on other levels. Afterwards again these results can be compared with the results of this study. For the same level the interest lies in comparing the performance of the different networks of sponsoring organizations. When comparing sport entities and their sponsor communities on other levels, it is valuable to compare the professionalism and contributions for sponsors of the different networks.

In order to make justified conclusions and to analyze data on significant relations the database should be extended with organizations that stopped being sponsor for any kind of reason. This will enhance the validity of the results.

Before data collection of future research, a critical view on the questionnaire is needed in order to increase the response rate. Some questions could be adjusted to decrease the length of the questionnaire.

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