

# Why sports fans find this brand violation a game winner

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Researchers from University of Oregon and Zayed University (UAE) published a new paper in the Journal of Marketing, which finds that sports fans exhibit more favorable attitudes towards sponsors who adopt

the team colors, such as Anheuser Busch customizing Bud Light beer cans to match each NFL team it sponsors. Fans exhibit a higher likelihood to visit, buy, and recommend the sponsor.

The study forthcoming in the May issue of the *Journal of Marketing* titled "The Color of Support: The Effect of Sponsor-Team Visual Congruence on Sponsorship Performance" is authored by Conor M. Henderson, Marc Mazodier, and Aparna Sundar.

It's increasingly difficult to connect with consumers in the modern media era. TV viewers stream or record shows to watch "on demand" only to skip past commercials. Even if they watch "live" programming on a big screen TV, they turn to their "second screen" mobile device during commercial breaks.

This is one reason why global [brand](#) managers sponsoring sporting events—consumers still watch them live and often in groups. For example, in 2018, 88 of the top 100 TV broadcasts were sports, demonstrating why brands rush to sponsor teams. Spending on sports sponsorships exceeds \$62 billion worldwide, with growth outpacing general advertising 4.3% to 2.6%. In a world of digital fragmentation, sports is one of the last ways to reach the mass market.

Because sponsor images, such as logos on athletes' clothing or on stadium walls, make brief appearances during games, brand managers know that compelling visual design is critical to creating consumer brand affinity and recall. However, some companies are now violating the established branding principle of maintaining a consistent visual image over time to reinforce a brand's identity, and instead they are adopting a sponsored team's colors when displaying their logo in [sponsorship](#) settings. For example, in the 2016 NFL season, Bud Light customized its beer cans to visually match each team it sponsors. This research suggests that shedding its iconic blue color in favor of each sponsored team's

colors may have enhanced the effectiveness of its \$1.4 billion NFL sponsorship. Kaiser Permanente dressed its logo in red (instead of blue) when advertising in the Boston Red Sox stadium.

This move is controversial. On one hand, matching brand-team colors may reduce attention, as eye-tracking experiments find that sponsorship signage with contrasting colors better captures viewers' attention. On the other hand, past research demonstrates that students evaluate brand advertisements supporting a cause more favorably when the brand's and the cause's colors match.

To clarify which strategy yields the best results, the researchers investigated the performance implications of visual congruence (i.e., when a brand sponsor matches the team's colors) in stadiums and using actual fan data. They posited that visual congruence enhances sponsorship performance, as long as the viewer processes the visual information. In other words, the viewer should have the opportunity (i.e., exposures to signage), ability (i.e., no color blindness), and motivation (i.e., fan status) to process the visually congruent color matching. "With these viewer characteristics as preconditions, we predict that fans evaluate visually congruent sponsorships more positively because the brand assumes the shared identity of a raving fan," said Henderson.

The reported studies incorporate brand sponsor evaluation data from 1,358 participants across three studies in different sports and sponsorship advertising contexts. The first study ties actual in-stadium sponsorship signage from every MLB stadium to 703 fans' evaluations of their teams' brand sponsors. The resulting 15,289 ratings reveal a positive effect of visual congruence on fan attitudes toward the sponsorship. As predicted, the positive effects disappear when fans have not viewed enough games or are color-blind.

The second study, set in the context of sponsor product packaging

similar to Bud Light's custom NFL cans, verifies that perceived sponsor support drives the positive effect of visual congruence on attitudes toward the sponsorship. The third study featured digital advertising that promoted the Golden State Warriors, an NBA team, along with their main jersey sponsor Rakuten. It found that visual congruence through color matching drives favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions among fans, but not among nonfans. Targeting is key—a visually congruent sponsorship ad (vs. incongruent ad) prompts fans to rate the brand about 17% more favorably on a composite of brand performance metrics, but there is a marginal indication that nonfans recall the brand less frequently.

"Our findings reveal the importance of [color](#) beyond its connotative meaning. Color signifies a brand sponsor's genuine support of the team, which is critical because fan attributions partly determine sponsorship success. Despite the strong argument for keeping branding elements consistent, our findings support the view that sponsors win when their brands support the home team," explains Mazodier. For instance, until recently Bank of America used its traditional red and blue colors during its sponsorship of Chicago's St. Patrick's Day 8K Shamrock Shuffle fun run. However, Bank of America now adopts the green and white colors that adorn the whole city on that day.

Overall, adopting a team's colors in sponsorship can help brands maximize sponsorship return on investment.

**More information:** Conor M. Henderson et al, The Color of Support: The Effect of Sponsor–Team Visual Congruence on Sponsorship Performance, *Journal of Marketing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242919831672](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919831672)

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