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## Local Restaurants' Marketing and Sponsorship Within Collegiate Athletics

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**Local Restaurants' Marketing and Sponsorship Within Collegiate Athletics**

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### **Abstract**

Corporate sponsorships, trademark licensing, and broadcasting rights within college athletics have become a multibillion-dollar business over the past decade. However, a gap in research exists within local businesses sponsorship of college athletics. Many college towns heavily rely on local businesses, specifically restaurants, to attract and retain sports fans. The purpose of this study is to examine local restaurants' marketing strategies, community relations, and other sponsorship donations impacting the involvement of its collegiate sport sponsorship at the mid-major conference level. Purposeful sampling was used to include two local restaurant owners who participate in sport sponsorship in a Midwest college team. Semi-structured interview questions were used to acquire marketing strategies, sponsorship, asset selection, and return on investment (ROI) evaluation. Four main themes emerged: (1) the restaurant market in a college town, (2) pursuing big dreams through marketing: advertising, branding, and community connection, (3) progression in athletic sponsorship: decision making, investment, and assistance, and (4) keys to success. Local businesses often have different timing, intensity, and strength marketing strategies compared to those on a national level. The contributions and impacts of this study include sponsorship ROI evaluation strategies for two local restaurants, brand recognition and awareness valuation from their fan bases, and asset mixture selection.

*Keywords:* sport sponsorship, local business, restaurant, college athletics, return on investment, marketing

### **Local Restaurants' Marketing and Sponsorship Within Collegiate Athletics**

Corporate sponsorships, trademark licensing, and broadcasting rights within college athletics have become a multibillion-dollar business over the past decade. Fan attendance at Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football games and events is higher than 44.3 million per year, contributing to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)'s overall revenue generation that exceeds \$7 billion annually (Wear et al., 2016). In fact, over 65% of the revenue at major athletic programs is generated through college football (Liu et al., 2020). Sponsorship opportunities within collegiate athletics are expanding and becoming more competitive. Of the total \$62 billion that was allocated towards all sponsorships in 2017, sports sponsorship was directly responsible for 70% of appropriations (Dees et al., 2019). Sponsorships add value to a university by contributing to their overall budget and providing padding to any potential financial downfalls. One NCAA study reported only 14 of the 120 FBS schools actually had a cash flow greater than their expenses. No university's budget is alike. Larger universities, such as the power 5 schools, tend to have significantly higher and differently structured budgets, in comparison to their mid-major counterparts. (Ko & Kim, 2014). In reality, many smaller Division I schools have operating budgets closer to Division II and III schools (Weight et al., 2010). For this reason, many athletic departments heavily rely on corporate sponsorships and a strong individual fan base to survive.

A triad of brand-team-customer affiliation ties into the overall fan perception of benefiting from a sponsorship. Self-described "loyal" fans devote up to 60 hours a month talking about and attending events of their associated team(s) (Hickman, 2019). The team's record of success and failure is often interpreted as personal success or failure to highly involved, loyal fans. This loyalty translates to long-term financial commitments (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

Likewise, dedicated fans that consider themselves loyal to a specific team are more likely to purchase or consider altering purchasing tendencies to sponsors than those who are not (Dees et al., 2008). The power of word-of-mouth adds value to the organization's overall culture, mission, and consumer perception, especially when involving local businesses and non-profit organizations. Many corporations measure sponsorship effectiveness by asking customers how they were made aware of the business (Weight et al., 2010). With rising demands to maximize brand awareness, return on investment (ROI) and company recognition to a fan base has become especially valuable. ROI is used to evaluate performance in relation to the associated cost. Thus, market competition and associated cost are increasingly important to corporate sponsors (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006). Sometimes corporations opt out of sponsorships due to a perceived lack of value when in actuality, effective evaluation may not exist (Crompton, 2004).

Previous research has focused primarily on national and large corporate sponsorships within professional sports. Mega-events, such as the Olympics or the Super Bowl, have much different marketing strategies compared to local events. Global sponsorships within the Olympics tend to receive more attention over local sponsorships (Biscaia & Rocha, 2018). However, the 2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia received over \$1 billion in sponsorships, with 11 global companies contributing to \$550 million and the other \$492 million from domestic companies (Crompton, 2004). Focused marketing decisions also exist for sponsors involved with intercollegiate sports. College athletics provide a large, loyal fan base for companies that invest in sponsorship to expand brand awareness. Fostering goodwill, increasing community involvement, and creating relationships with the university are often leading aspects of sponsorship strategies employed by athletic departments. Companies may even experience a spill-over effect, or sponsoring multiple events, because of positive attitudes fans develop from

similar sport contexts in a given geographical area (Dees et al., 2008). For example, many large corporations sponsor both professional and intercollegiate football to maximize reach.

Given the mass amounts of research geared towards global brands and mega-events, a gap exists regarding local business support within college athletic sponsorship (Ko & Kim, 2014; Zinger & O'Reilly, 2010). Many college towns heavily rely on local businesses, specifically restaurants, to attract and retain sports fans. The food and beverage industry, in particular, plays an important role in the sponsorship process for university athletics and also contributes to sport tourism. Sponsorship is often perceived as a fundamental aspect of an event's success, and sport tourism events are even labeled the "most prevalent form of sponsorship investment amongst large corporate organizations" (Lamont & Dowell, 2008, p. 5). Sport tourism has helped boost the economies of many cities with the addition and promotion of hotels, resorts, restaurants, sport stadiums, and more (Shonk & Chelladurai, 2008).

The purpose of this study is to examine local restaurants' marketing strategies, community relations, and other sponsorship donations impacting the involvement of its collegiate sport sponsorship at the mid-major conference level. Local businesses often have different timing, intensity, and strength marketing strategies compared to those on a national level. The contributions and impacts of this study will include sponsorship ROI evaluation strategies for two local restaurants, brand recognition and awareness valuation from their fan bases, and asset mixture selection. Finally, recognizing the strength and value donors, at any level of sponsorship, provide a university will remain a critical point of interest throughout the study.

## **Literature Review**

### ***General Sport Sponsorship Overview***

According to Dees et al., (2019) corporate sponsorship can be defined as a company providing cash or in-kind to a sport organization in return for commercial and economic advantages. Naming rights, brand awareness reach, and the type of asset are common tools to measure fan behaviors and are classified as the overall driving forces behind corporate sponsorship. Sponsorship effectiveness is often evaluated by the longevity and stability of relationships within the athletic department (Weight et al., 2010). Markets within sponsorship are constantly evolving from technological advancements and changes in consumer habits, creating advanced opportunities for inventory items. Moreover, effectively communicating the associated benefits of a partnership with all parties involved, including the sports property and its fans, is critical to determine its success (Ko & Kim, 2014). Advertising plays an essential role towards capitalizing on brand recognition, especially by increasing the awareness of a brand and communicating brand information, as well as developing the brand image and creating emotional connection with the brand resulting in certain behavioral actions (Ciafrone et al., 2006). Generally speaking, a partnership is different from a sponsorship as a partnership often signifies a stronger relational connection between a sponsor and the athletic department. In this study, the terms 'sponsorship' and 'partnership' may be used interchangeably because small businesses often invest in sponsorships for the relationship connection.

Team identification combines the personal commitment and emotional investment associated with a sport organization and can often solidify sponsor recognition (Aiken et al., 2015). Sport teams can build special bonds – communities – through high levels of fan identification. Especially at the local level, a corporation or business's affiliation to a school is helpful to increase and motivate a stronger fan community (Weight et al., 2010). Both personal and social values are expressed through sports today. Understanding fans' values can strengthen

sponsor relations with customers. Subsequently, marketing tactics have evolved to include a deeper understanding of such consumption behaviors (Aiken et al., 2015). Most importantly, strong fan association and team identification mixed with supportive alumni contributes to a partnership's overall image.

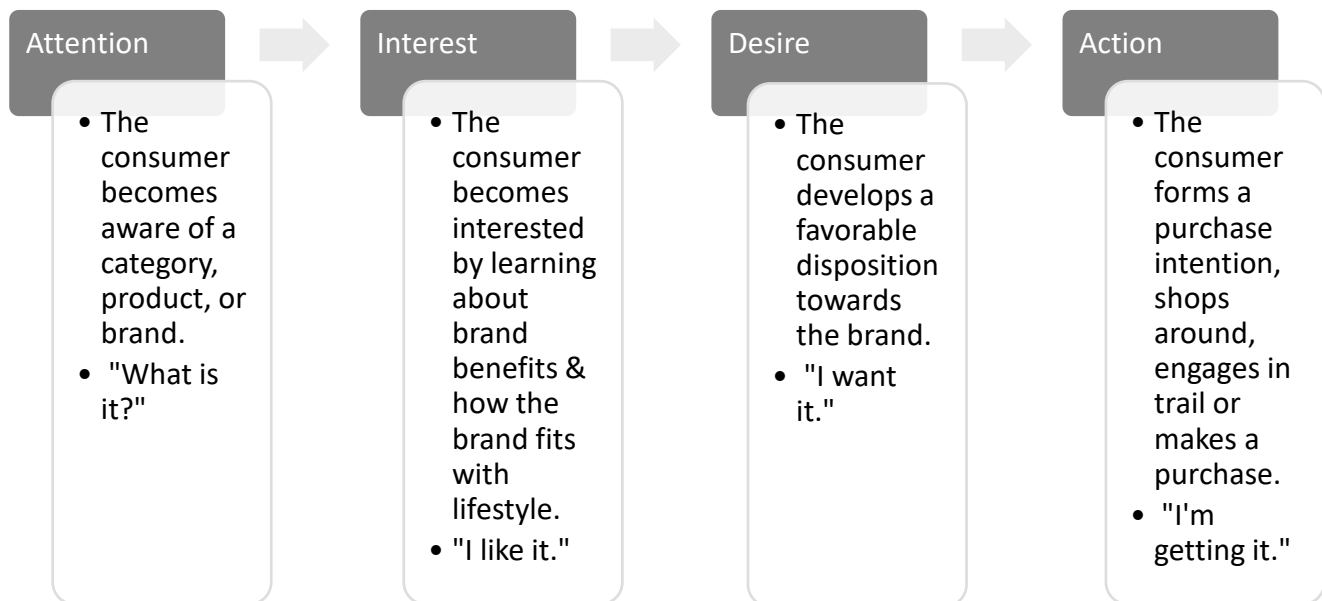
Although sport sponsorship is widely recognized for achieving promotional outcomes, brand recognition and consumer satisfaction remain highly unknown (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Existing studies examine sport sponsorship and associated ROI in Division I College Athletics (Aiken et al., 2015; Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006; Crompton, 2004). However, little research has focused specifically on mid-major Division I schools (Weight et al., 2010). Monetary-based ROI data can be measured easier than opinion-based consumer attitudes. Although ROI can be hard to measure in sponsorships, reported 'poor performance' can be one of the main reasons a company decides to not renew. To mitigate this, it is essential to offer a clear objective of sponsorship goals and outcomes before negotiation (Henseler et al., 2011). Objectives should be measurable and accompanied by specific time requirements in which they will be accomplished. Conducting frequent check-ins with the sponsor can also ensure a lasting relationship.

Attitude toward the sponsor and goodwill were the top two factors of consumer purchasing intention at a specific elite intercollegiate football program (Dees et al., 2008.) Individuals that recognize the impact of sponsorship and contributions made to the sports industry are often the most supportive. Furthermore, the goodwill reflected from effective marketing communication often resonates with less consumer resistance in sport sponsorship and can even "overcome the disadvantages of a poor fit between the sponsor and the chosen clause or property" (Ko & Kim, 2014, p. 202). Consumer responses to sponsorships may also vary based



on the sport event type, whether for-profit or not-for-profit. Also, a study of peer effects and brand revenue trends of sponsorships within the same major conferences discovered that although brands compete against one another, they are also interdependent on each other's success (Liu et al., 2020).

Sponsorship decision-making can be split into four stages: awareness, interest, desire, and action – the AIDA model (Figure 1). Awareness is formed by receiving information about a product; interest is sparked based on personal experiences or beliefs; desire is developed by filtering and considering all options; action is taken through direct steps of brand involvement (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006).



**Figure 1. AIDA (adapted from Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006 & Smith et al., 2008).**

When faced with purchasing decisions regarding brand association and their favorite sports team, consumers experience one or more of these four stages. AIDA is known as one of the earliest

hierarchy of effects models, describing how consumers face various thought processes when undergoing purchasing decisions and responding to marketing tactics (Smith et al., 2008).

Sponsors are able to choose the most important objectives and select the assets with which they would like to move forward. Ultimately, corporations seek to increase sales by moving consumers through the AIDA process stages and thus, alter purchasing tendencies (Chen & Zhang, 2011).

**Asset Selection.** Sponsorship packages drastically range in costs, and businesses may select which assets will best align with their business' objectives. Most businesses pursue sponsorship proposals that include costs, length of contract, value-added promotions, and media coverage (Weight et al., 2010). Traditional marketing assets include radio, billboards or other stationary signage, and print advertising. Newer, more innovative assets available to corporate sponsors today include social media campaigns, LED ribbons, and co-branding opportunities through intellectual property (IP) rights. However, only certain threshold sponsors are given legal IP rights to use and produce promotional items with both the university or team and company logos. Exclusivity categories, game sponsors, and in-venue activation areas are also popular and profitable marketing assets that continue evolving.

Fans are more likely to recognize sponsors associated with more branding, either in or outside the venue. Turner & Cusumano (2000) found that 62% to 77% of attendees during a single sporting event noticed sponsor advertising, and more than 90% were not even consciously looking for it. Out-of-venue advertising is also heavily used to target sports fans, with television (TV) commercials being among the most common but expensive assets. To reference, a 30 second TV commercial in the 2015 NCAA Men's March Madness Championship cost \$1.55 million, while a typical Saturday night college football game in 2015 ranged from \$84,000 to

\$104,000 (Sanderson & Siegfried, 2018). Sports fans account for particularly strong viewership, with approximately 75% of Americans watching a televised sporting event at least once a week (Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006). Some assets may be considered both in and out of venue, such as floor logos and permanent signage that are TV visible. Approximately 80% of a three-and-a-half-hour broadcast includes some type of branded product on the screen (McAllister, 2010).

Sport signage has drastically changed from static to digital with its overall advertising message to consumers. During any break in action at sporting events, sponsorship ties to a promotion or videoboard are on display. Dees et al. (2019) found that on-site activation partners were 55% more recognized through means such as pre- or post-game giveaways or tabling displays. The longevity of the partnership increased overall brand recognition by 23.3% every 3 years a company was onboard. Furthermore, season ticket holders were more likely to recognize game sponsors and exclusive category definitions (including IP rights), and in-venue videoboard messaging/signage was highly effective at a rate of 2.5 times more recognizable (Dees et al., 2019). Exclusivity rights and multi-year contracts are becoming more popular but at much higher costs. For example, many sportswear companies sign between 5–10-year contracts averaging \$6 million a year per institution (Wear et al., 2016). The main purpose of these sponsorships is to reach loyal and lifetime customers by ‘owning’ the campus.

### ***Food & Beverage Industry Overview***

The food and beverage industry's involvement in sport sponsorships can range from local youth organizations to professional sports. Each year food companies spend \$1.6 billion to specifically target youth via marketing efforts on TV, the Internet, video games, and text messages (Bragg et al., 2018.) Adolescents and children are more apt to recognize and possibly alter purchasing tendencies towards sponsors that have either invested in their youth sport clubs

or favorite elite sport teams. Promotional activities, such as providing vouchers or certificates for young athletes rewarding performance, generates a higher overall likeness for food or beverage companies. Children are a popular target audience because they are actively forming eating habits and may become lifelong customers of the company. A reported 68% of children could recall sponsors of their local sports clubs, with at least one of those being a food company sponsor (Kelly et al., 2011). Also 47% of children could recognize a sponsor of their favorite elite sporting team, and many admitted they consider these sponsorships when determining what to purchase, eat or drink (Kelly et al., 2011).

Many sport-event sponsorships include unhealthy manufacturers such as tobacco products, alcohol, and junk food (McDaniel & Heald, 2000). Some of the largest, most recognizable food and beverage partnerships with elite sport organizations include McDonald's Coca-Cola, and Anheuser-Busch (Bragg et al., 2018). Other notable fast-food chains heavily involved in sponsorship across the world include Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and Burger King (Batty & Gee, 2019). Adolescents are specifically targeted via social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or Twitter in today's advertising while children are targeted via commercials on TV programs (Huang et al., 2012). Other marketing tactics food and beverage companies use in the sports industry include athlete endorsements and the use of company logos or spokescharacters in sports video games. When adolescents see elite athletes as role models, they often pick up on specific endorsements and retain logos and brands associated with the athlete.

However, these advertisements geared towards children and adolescents may have negative effects. Children have a particular vulnerability to persuasive advertising because they do not have full cognitive abilities (Pauze et al., 2020). Increased alcohol consumption and

unhealthy eating habits among youth are two reported negative associations with food and beverage sport sponsorships (Kelly et al., 2011.) A significant association has been discovered between increased exposure of sport sponsorships and alcohol consumption amongst adolescents (Brown, 2016). Childhood obesity and cognitive development issues may also result from continuous exposure to unhealthy food and beverages seen through sport sponsorships. Nonetheless, food and beverage companies play a huge role into the overall fan experience of sport events. Sports bars may specifically monopolize on this, as beer and wings often go hand-in-hand for general fans.

### ***Local Business Sponsorship***

Small local business partnerships can have a different structure compared to large, national-level sponsorships due to the nature of business philosophy and overall operation size. National fast-food chains attempt to form a connection within local markets by enhancing their image through sport sponsorship deals (Cousens & Slack, 1996). Not only does the size of the overall business vary, but also the marketing budget and strategies used within the agreement. Social networking market plans can help small businesses expand on sport sponsorship. Small businesses can capitalize on social media avenues such as Facebook or LinkedIn, using advertising to promote their brand via targeted marketing (Lacho & Marinello, 2010).

Sponsorship also varies by event size at the national and international scale. The Super Bowl and Olympic Games are two large-scale events that attract various sponsors in different ways. Global partners account for more than 40% of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) revenue, including many that have invested for decades (Biscaia & Rocha, 2018.) As such, The Olympic Partner (TOP) Program was established based on the potential revenue stream that sponsorships could create. Clear differences in marketing tactics exist between the Olympics'

global program, or TOP, and the Local Sponsorship Program. Local sponsors often face a tougher market to differentiate from non-sponsors as the Olympics location changes every two years, between summer and winter games. As a result, local sponsors do not have the opportunity to create national or international brand awareness from only being on the radar for a few weeks. Consequently, local markets where these types of events are held may benefit from sport tourism, regardless if they are tied to a sponsorship. Restaurants and other retail businesses typically benefit from sport tourism regardless of sponsorship status because of impulsive-buying consumers (Chalip & Leyns, 2002). Increased traffic from nearby sport events often helps local businesses. Effectively managing an event's marketing, infrastructure, human resources and insurance costs are all integral parts of sport tourism (Lamont & Dowell, 2008).

Despite this, various reasons still exist for local businesses to engage in sport sponsorship including fostering community goodwill, building awareness of the firm, creating employee relations, identifying commercial objectives, and establishing personal preferences of the owner's impact on these decisions. According to Weight et al. (2010), the "most important" sponsorship criteria for discussion includes increasing company or brand awareness, reinforcing and establishing image, determining the success of an athletic program, targeting event spectators, and increasing new customers and sales. Small business development, in relation to sponsorship habits, can be described using a three-phase model (Zinger & O'Reilly, 2010). Phase I includes businesses that have a single product, few employees, and are heavily influenced by how the owner operates. Phase II is a middle ground for businesses that employ multiple suppliers or lenders and have more overall supporting personnel, such as marketing and accounting staff. Phase III has the largest scope of services to market, featuring an emergence of middle managing staff and showcasing greater attention to overall business environment

including budgetary control. These criteria structured the interview questions of this study and the analysis of results.

### **Methodology**

Two local restaurant owners with experience in sport sponsorship within University athletics were invited to participate in the study. Semi-structured interview questions were used as the main instrument of the study, which served to gain background information on the restaurants, examination of existing partnerships with the University, asset selection, and ROI evaluation. Contributions of the study will include pertinent information regarding sponsorship ROI testing procedures, brand valuation from fans or customers, and asset mixture selection to be utilized by donors and corporate sponsors in other university athletic departments. The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### **Background & Participants**

The town represented in this study lies in the Midwest region with a population of roughly 24,000 people. The food and beverage industry is heavily represented in the town, including several national chains and local dining options. To date, there are roughly 25 restaurants in town ranging from fast food to formal sit-down. Some of the common chain fast-food places and restaurants include McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, Subway, Starbucks, Buffalo Wild Wings, and Applebee's.

The University in this study consists of approximately 12,000 combined undergraduate and graduate students with 17 men's and women's sports teams, qualifying it as a mid-major Division I category in athletics. Roughly 75 partnerships exist within the University's athletic department, including 10 food and beverage companies. Within the specific restaurant niche, 33% are national sponsorships while 67% are local (B. Vig, personal communication, November

17, 2020). Many of the sponsorships are heavily invested in the school's most popular sports, football or men's and women's basketball. The two local businesses were chosen to be include in this study as they were both non-chain and localized sit-down restaurants.

The first establishment examined is a sports bar and grill founded in 2000 and located in the downtown area. Throughout the remainder of this study, it will be referred to as R1. It is a family-friendly restaurant that has 50+ TVs tuned to a large variety of sporting events, from local to international. Given the prime downtown location, R1 can be considered more of a college-aged bar on weekends or late evenings and is located in a strip of businesses along Main Avenue. The other establishment, R2, is an American-Italian chophouse and lounge, located along a main street of the town and founded in 2015. R2 is considered more of a high-end restaurant yet still family friendly. A single building, with its own parking lot, exists for this establishment. Its location is close to the University campus, opposed to the other establishment's proximity to the downtown area. Both restaurants in this case study are locally owned and operated, with no other location(s).

### **Data Collection**

A purposeful sampling strategy was applied to ensure the inclusion of local business owners that were able to provide insightful information and knowledge with this topic. The inclusion criteria are (1) local, non-chain restaurant owners, (2) involvement with intercollegiate athletics corporate sponsorship, (3) willingness to voluntarily participate in the project. The original invitation included direct contact, either email or face-to-face conversation, from the author of this study. Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and participants could choose to cease involvement at any time. No risks or direct personal benefits were associated with participation in the study.



All conversations that occurred, including the interview itself, were dependent on the safety and comfort level of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in January 2021 and both took place at the restaurant's site. The R1 interview was 27 minutes in length, and the R2 interview was 38 minutes. In order to protect the interviewees' personal privacy, all identifying information was separated from the study data. A recording of the interviewees' voice was obtained but no photos or videos were taken. However, participant's names and identities will not be included in any report of further publications.

### **Interview Structure**

Semi-structured interview questions were utilized in this study, allowing researchers to ask questions structured for consistency with clear guidelines that reflected the main purpose of the study while also offering flexibility for participants to talk about their own experiences and perspectives. There were three main sections in each interview: (1) participants' background information, including experience in the restaurant business, (2) relationship with the University's athletic department, including sponsorship assets and associated costs, (3) evaluation tools to measure business outcomes, including ROI. The interview questions were formed using the AIDA model, keeping consumer decision-making practices in mind, and Zinger & O'Reilly (2010) small business phases of development.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the text data (e.g., interview transcription) and identify common themes and essential quotations. After the interview was transcribed, the interviewees were asked to verify the accuracy of the interview transcript. The study utilized an inductive analysis. The first author was the primary data collector and interviewee, while the second author did not attend the interviews but was familiar with the

project to assist in data analysis. Both authors began to read and become familiar with all transcribed interviews and started the open-coding process. During the process, the authors took notes and reflected on the meaning of the participants' responses to identify potential themes. The authors then discussed the connection and identified themes. The authors met to discuss the emerging themes and identified both differences and similarities from the data. When differences occurred, the authors had further discussion and clarification to ensure the consistency of the process and reach a consensus agreement. Overall, 80% similarity of coding patterns and thematic identification between the two authors was reached.

## **Results**

Four main themes emerged: (1) the restaurant market in a college town, (2) pursuing big dreams through marketing: advertising, branding, and community connection, (3) progression in athletic sponsorship: decision making, investment, and assistance, and (4) keys to success.

### ***1. We are locals: Restaurant market***

Understanding geographical locations and competing market shares are vital before opening a new business. Both R1 and R2 have connections to the city, varying between family ties and own college experiences. The R1 owner has lived in the town most of his life, reflecting on how great of a place it is to live and also own a business. R2's owner attended the associated University and moved back to the college town in 2004 and started a family. The local food and beverage industry is shaped heavily by its surroundings, so a mid-sized college town often creates an influx of community support. In fact, R2's owner says one of the reasons they love the city is although it is considered a larger town, it acts more like a super tight knit smaller town. Both R1 and R2 took advantage of opening a restaurant in such a supportive college town. The R1 owner

says where you market is important and wanted to always be heavily community-based because youth sports are super important to him.

**Business background and philosophies.** A long-standing family history in the industry and the fast-paced environment are two reasons why R1 and R2 decided to open a restaurant. Growing up in his family's restaurant business, R1's owner quickly fell in love with the industry. Being a local restaurant that is heavily community-based was and still is super important to him. In fact, R1 owner's personality entails being one to constantly give. R2's owner, on the other hand, described more internal motivational factors:

“The food industry is one of the most rewarding fields to be involved in. It's constant stress, it's constant evolvment, it's ever-changing. There's nothing that's ever really stagnant about it. It's also super challenging as well. I'm one that likes to take on a challenge and get rewarded for it.”

Keeping this motivation in mind, R2 strives to continue improving and growing. The overall business goals and the owner's personal goals often align, which is the case of R1 and R2. After growing up in the industry, R1's owner quickly learned how to develop a hard work ethic. A few of his personal and business goals include putting out a reputable product, working hard, finding the right people for your business, treating employees well, and paying employees well. He truly believes that if you do these things, business will become successful both internally and externally. R2 has a similar mindset but stresses the importance of showing consumers the quality of their products and services.

At the time of R1's opening (2000) and R2's opening (2015), they were the first of their kind in each market. R1 claims that there was nothing in town like a sports bar prior to them opening and felt it was a perfect opportunity with the college community. Restaurants in this

setting often see seasonal sales trends, based on academic calendars. R2 specifically states, "There's a spike when the fall semester starts, there's a spike when the spring semester starts, and there's a tail off in the summer."

**Menu items.** Strategically selecting items to include on a menu can be challenging in the beginning stages of opening a restaurant. Developing a unique identity while also learning from trial and error can sometimes be the best mixture. Although R1 and R2's menu and overall restaurant environment vary drastically, they have established themselves as specialties of their own in the town. R1 originally just wanted a bar with a really small menu. In fact, one of the first menus was a little table tent that flipped over with appetizers on one side and burgers or sandwiches on the other side. The owner of R1 stated:

"One thing I learned in the restaurant business is you always kind of have to know who you are. And from the beginning, I wanted a menu designed that was simplified enough that you know you could train anybody on it."

R2, on the other hand, specializes in pastas and homemade cheesecakes or other desserts. Over time, R2 has decreased its menu size to become more economical in bringing in fresh products and simultaneously allow the cooks to reproduce higher end meals every time. Their menu is unique because it started and continues to be a collaboration of other people's favorite dishes and recipes. The owner uses this philosophy as an opportunity to give his employees a sense of pride by having one of their items on the menu. Ultimately, both R1 and R2 found their own niche in the market and choose to focus on their specialty dishes rather than expand their style of food.

**Competition: Franchise restaurants vs. small business.** Over time, an influx of competition for various industries has begun offering similar items and prices. The food industry includes many chain restaurants or franchises that can be found nationally and even globally. Many larger

cities have numerous restaurant options from fast-food to sports bars to fine dining. Local businesses like R1 and R2 can either thrive or die in such a tough market that shares competition. Establishing a unique identity for a new, local business should remain a priority opposed to comparing tactics with competition. In fact, R1's business philosophy is to not run business based on what the competition is doing but rather focus on what is working for them now and what could in the future. R2's quality of food, being a scratch kitchen, allows them to not have much direct competition. However, one downside of being a higher-end, scratch kitchen is being considered 'too expensive,' which may drive consumers to choose franchises instead. R2 stated:

“It is a battle to show that we are local, we are locally owned, we support other local businesses with as much as we can – you know fresh fruit and vegetables from local gardens, buying all products from local businesses that we can.”

With franchises, people often know what to expect when they drive by or go in, whereas local business have to push harder for new consumers to come give their restaurant a chance.

Various challenges and rewards exist for small, local restaurants opposed to franchises. First, the profit margin within the food industry is competitive in its own nature. In fact, R2 claimed that restaurants have a lower percentage profit per sale compared to any other business. While technology companies or other businesses can mark up their items 30-50%, the food industry is looking for a profit margin of 10% to make a 'decent living.' Ultimately, other businesses do not have to sell as many items as food companies do to make the same amount of money. Another challenge exists within brand awareness, as smaller businesses struggle to receive the same recognition that franchises can. Both marketing and overall budgets are much larger for franchises, compared to local food and beverage companies. R2's owner says that investing in something large like the University was scary because as a single-owned, smaller

restaurant – it was a huge chunk of change. However, having a relationship with the University and community can increase a small, local restaurant's ability promote brand recognition. R1 specifically mentions how the relationship formed with the University allows businesses like them to showcase their name and logo more often.

## ***2. Local restaurant with a big dream: Marketing***

Social media, word-of-mouth, and gameday promotions are the most common marketing strategies that both restaurant owners mentioned in the interviews, which can translate to other industries as well. It can be tough to advertise within the food industry because consumers have to experience your product first-hand to know if it is good or bad unlike other perishable products. Restaurant owners can market the physical product, but customers ultimately need to come in the door to try menu items. Because of this, both R1 and R2 discussed the importance of diverse advertising. A specific strategy that was discussed included gameday promotions that involve fan interaction to help increase brand awareness. R2 specifically touched on a couple of their newer, innovative assets including a gameday stat-based app promotion and also a social media video series with various athletic department and coaching staff. The ultimate goal of these promotions and advertisements is to get customers back into the door, helping create an effective partnership and overall higher ROI.

**In-general and sport-specific advertising.** Asset selection within sponsorship is critical in securing the perfect mix of marketing strategies that fit within the organization's goals and overall business plan. Matching those assets with affordable costs to the sponsor can sometimes be a challenge. Sponsorship assets can range from in-venue signage to radio to social media campaigns. Both R1 and R2 agreed that signage was important because people can see it often and with the technological advancements today, interactive advertisements can also be utilized.

R2 specifically explained that radio works well in the area, given their geographical rural location. “There’s still a lot of folks that drive 10, 20, 30 minutes one way to and from work so it’s just to stay somewhat present in their minds when they’re driving to and from” (R2 owner). Partnering with sport teams and other local organizations can help boost the morale of the company and attract new customers. Each year, R1 and R2 were able to use the growth secured via sponsorship to invest more in advertising.

**Branding: Brand recognition, awareness, exposure.** The term ‘branding’ may include several elements such as receiving brand recognition, promoting brand awareness, and creating brand exposure. Whenever a business owner embarks in a sponsorship deal, a common main goal is to see how many people you can reach. In fact, the evolution of technology has made it easy to track the number of impressions received on social media. However, many small businesses simply do not have the budget to invest as much into social media advertising and would rather focus on positive word-of-mouth in the community to get people in the doors. For the restaurant industry specifically, tracking the people that walk in the door can be difficult. Although most (small) restaurant owners want people in the door, they also want people to begin recognizing their brand or logo. R2 actually references R1 in the interview, discussing their extensive branding campaign in town:

“You can look at R1 for example – they sponsor a bunch of teams, their merchandise and logo is in so many households whether it’s pens, koozies, hats, softball t-shirts, kickball t-shirts, whatever it is – but their logo is everywhere. And they probably do 50-60% more sales than we do in a year. I know their restaurant footprint is way bigger than ours, but it doesn’t negate the fact that they still need people to come in the door and reach those sales regardless of the size of their restaurant.”

As illustrated, small businesses often create maximal brand exposure from repetitive marketing strategies via multiple avenues. In this instance, relying on positive word of mouth advertising and partnerships with other community organizations is something that has proven effectiveness.

**Target audience.** Finding and targeting a specific group of people to maximize brand recognition is something that many businesses have been successful doing over time. A target audience is often found based on your geographical location and desired reach. Tying in your organization's core values is imperative as well. In this specific case and given the nature of a rural, college town setting – local college students and faculty are a shared target audience for both R1 and R2. The sponsorship with the University helps both of these businesses achieve maximal targeting to these desired, specific groups. R2's owner coincidentally stated, "The University has a huge market, has a huge following and the audience they touch is a lot more people than what my generic audience is." Being heavily-community based also helps them attract new customers and keeps the business growing. With R1 being a sports bar and grill, they have recently pushed marketing efforts towards 'all ages welcome' because some college students under 21 may assume they cannot get in.

More specifically, the restaurant industry can struggle with target marketing because most of their desired consumers need to be within a 20–50-mile radius (at most) to actually come in the door. As R2's owner stated, "I don't have somebody that's 100-200 miles away that can buy my product and I can ship it to them. So, they have to be here; it has to be a physical transaction." Similarly, this is the same reason why investments in local sports team and donating to fundraisers or being involved with the campus is important to attract people that are physically able to come eat at R1 and R2's restaurant.



**Community, connection, and college town.** The associated benefits partnering with a university can help boost a small business' marketing efforts drastically. Although it may be a large investment, building a strong foundation that fosters community involvement helps create an inseparable relationship between the business and the town. R1's owner specifically stated, "With the University, we wanted a direct impact with marketing and the overall relationship." In this rural, college town the community involvement and support are tremendous via the University. R1 and R2 mentioned the positive environment that campus students and faculty bring to the town, making it an easier decision to sponsor and be involved with the University. The sponsorship ties have ultimately helped both restaurants increase brand awareness over time, while simultaneously fostering and facilitating a connection to the community as well.

Small, local businesses often have a stronger relationship and tie to the community that are in turn, reflected within sponsorship deals. Being community-focused can help tie together a lasting relationship with a university. In this case, both restaurant owners have some sort of background with the town and/or University. Given R1 and R2's family history and background differences, various impacts exist within business growth and consumer loyalty. Both R1 and R2 admitted that being involved with the campus athletic department has helped with return customers and overall consumer loyalty. "When coaches, faculty, and athletes come in to support our business – the community sees that partnership and they follow suit" (R1 owner). In fact, having faith in the people of the community to see the things you're doing and return the favor by coming into your business is critical to R1's business model.

### ***3. Progression in athletic sponsorship***

Corporate businesses involved in sponsorship often progress in various stages over time. The longevity of a partnership may increase brand awareness, narrow the focus on target audiences,

and relate back to business goals. Community involvement and ties to a university also foster business growth. While R1 has been involved with the campus community for 18+ years, R2 has only been involved for 3 years. Both R1 and R2 have seen an immense amount of growth in their businesses over the past several years. The R1 owner specifically stated, "I'd say every year since we've been in business, we've always seen a percentage of growth. It seems like we grow close to 10% a year sometimes."

**Decision-making: Budget, donations, and other sponsorship involvement.** Making financial decisions in a business can be challenging, so it is crucial to have a budget and monitor growth over time. In regard to marketing, many businesses have a set percentage that they invest based on sales each year. Both R1 and R2 have distinct ways of tracking how much they spend annually on marketing, relating back to overall sales. R1 says they never want to go over 5% of sales for marketing purposes. They spend around \$80K to \$100,000K a year on marketing with \$40,000 of that being directed toward their SDSU sponsorship. R2's marketing budget is roughly 4 times higher than it was when the restaurant opened, and sales have reportedly followed suit. Each year they spend roughly \$20K to \$25K on advertising with \$12K to \$15K being accounted for with SDSU. In fact, for every \$500 more a month spent in marketing, R2 is said to add an additional \$50,000 of sales in year's end.

Aside from a university-specific sponsorship, other sponsorship and donation opportunities exist for businesses. Club sports, school sports, and local fundraisers are a few easy, common opportunities prevalent in rural communities. R1 and R2 both contribute to local sports teams and community fundraisers. In fact, R1's owner reports that they've likely donated over a million dollars in the 20 years they've been in business. "It's not just to sports, I mean we donate to all kinds of things all over town... different causes or University, high school, sports,

different organizations in town” (R1 owner). The positive publicity and associated brand recognition you receive from these additional sponsorships is often unmatched.

**Marketing firm’s assistance.** The incorporation of third-party marketing agencies has advanced sport sponsorship, specifically within college athletics. Companies such as Learfield IMG College or Peak Sports MGMT own and manage the multimedia rights at various athletic departments, using their expertise in the field to maximize sponsors’ ROI. Both R1 and R2 work with Learfield IMG College for their University sponsorships. The Learfield IMG College staff allows them to select asset packages that fit into their business objectives and goals. Options include, but are not limited to, radio spots, tickets, in-game promotions, signage, and social media campaigns. One of the things that R1 and R2 appreciate the most about working with the 3<sup>rd</sup> party is the ability to revisit the contract each year and change assets as needed. R2 explains that communication with the Learfield IMG College staff is imperative to its success. “I was very up front of what I was concerned about, what I was looking for, and how we could work together” (R2 owner). Ultimately, 3<sup>rd</sup> party staffs communicate what is available or possible and ties it into an affordable partnership with the University.

**Return on investment.** Various methods exist for businesses to track ROI including conversion rates, customer surveys, and impression counts. It can be tricky to put direct numbers on anything related to ROI because people often do not tell you why they purchased a product or utilized a service. R2 pulled out of newspaper advertising because the owner feels like ‘print is dead’ and also ‘it is super hard to track.’ For the restaurant industry, business owners often see a spike in traffic flow before or after events in town. To illustrate, R1 and R2 specifically see higher sales on days that the University team has games. In fact, R1 says their sales are roughly 20% more than usual on a home football or basketball weekend.

Tracking a restaurant's ROI may be extremely difficult, as both R1 and R2 discussed. Although business owners can see either a spike or fall in sales over time, customers do not typically state the reason they came in. For both R1 and R2, tracking ROI with the University sponsorship is easier because of the relationship with Learfield IMG College. R1 specifically enjoys getting texts or hearing people talk about their campus advertisements. R2, on the other hand, looks at social media statistics and enjoys measuring the impression reach from digital advertisements. The additional sales that are generated from these various marketing strategies are effective ways for R1 and R2 to measure ROI. Developing a specific evaluation tool to measure ROI may be beneficial for both businesses.

#### ***4. Keys to success***

It is essential for businesses to stay relevant with marketing strategies. Understanding industry trends and conducting frequent self-evaluations could be useful for business owners to quickly adapt with changes, especially in the constant-changing restaurant business. Menu changes are a common example of this within the restaurant industry, often based on popular trends. For R2, they were the first scratch kitchen restaurant the town had seen. Advertising and offering quality, locally grown food were unique ways to get curious about their business strategy and ultimately attract new customers. Another key to success in sales is setting the right price for your product. R1 described the challenge of updating menus and charging the correct amount, based on the geographical location your restaurant is in.

**Adapting to change: Thriving through the pandemic.** Risk management and adapting to change are vital skills for business owners to establish and recall. Based on business goals and personal philosophies, R1 and R2 have slightly different protocols in place. Nonetheless, local businesses may face more challenges than franchises over time. Determining tactics to advance

sales may look different in various business models. For R1, reinvesting remains a top priority regardless of the year-end growth. In fact, R2's owner specifically stated, "I don't pick and choose a year, whether we had a good year or bad year – I just do it." Continuing to change and be progressive in the industry are common themes for local restaurant owners, specifically R1.

Additional challenges existed in the past year as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. Many businesses, including restaurants were forced to shut down for a long period of time with little-to-no warning. R2 states that although they had a record year through the pandemic, it was way more stressful than the year they started business because of how quickly everything changed.

"You went from Tuesday at 6 o'clock running a normal restaurant to Tuesday at 8 o'clock no longer being able to let people into your restaurant. So in a matter of 2 hours, your entire business changed. You have 30 employees, \$15,000 of food sitting on the floor and you can't let people in the door anymore."

R2 says they immediately sat down and figured out how to switch their business model and successfully did so in 3 days, redoing the entire menu and social media advertising to become a carry-out restaurant. They started selling economic meals for families, being able to feed 4 people for \$20 which was competitive with the fast-food places in town. R2 says that although it was a long, stressful time, the outpour of community support throughout it all and once they reopened was tremendous.

**Visionary: Future investments and growth.** Growing a business and retaining loyal customers requires time and resources. Marketing advancements can help with growth and also lead to future investments. Both R1 and R2 have reportedly grown each year they've been in business, while continuously pouring money into advertising and community sponsorships. R1

believes that reinvesting in the business allows them to continue growing. Having a futuristic mindset is what sets apart many local business owners from the franchises, and the idea of expanding business into other communities was discussed in both interviews. While R2 discussed the potential of expanding business into other communities within the next 5 years, R1 does not wish to branch off. As for right now, setting a strong foundation in the current location is R2's priority.

Other business plans may include expanding sponsorships, both with the University and within the community. R2 mentioned they want to explore more local sponsorships, including school-sponsored and community-based sport teams because it allows you to get your brand in front of a lot of people. Finally, selling merchandise and apparel is another way for small business owners to increase revenue and expand brand recognition. R1 has incorporated a lot of brand apparel into their business already, while R2 continues to look into this for future endeavors. The two business owners have unique past experiences that have created a similar mindset and a willingness to try new things, moving forward. Ultimately, the goal remains to figure out what works best for each of their restaurants by setting a vision into practice for future endeavors.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to examine local restaurants' marketing strategies, community relations, and other sponsorship donations impacting the involvement of its collegiate sport sponsorship at the mid-major conference level. Past research has been conducted heavily on global brands within mega-events such as the Olympics or professional sport leagues (Crompton, 2004; Biscaia & Rocha, 2018). This study advances research within college athletic sponsorships but specifically utilizes small, local businesses as the subjects. In fact, it is one of

few to analyze small, local restaurants within sport sponsorship (Chalip & Leyns, 2002). Various reasons exist for businesses to partake in sponsorships including targeting a specific population, general assistance with marketing efforts, competing with rivals, and moral obligations to give back. Other studies (Slack & Bentz, 1996; Zinger & O'Reilly 2010) that have researched small business's interaction within general sponsorship have found similar results. Small businesses sometimes invest in sponsorship due to the owner's personal preferences or to portray a community-based image to the public.

First off, the results discovered that marketing strategies and budgets are vastly different for local restaurants compared to national franchises. Small businesses often rely on an individual decision of the owner to embark in marketing efforts. For many small businesses, diverse advertising is said to be the most powerful because of the ability to reach multiple audiences. Local restaurants that participate in sport sponsorship can achieve maximal targeting to specific, desired groups. In particular, many benefits arise from partnering with a university and can help boost a small business' marketing efforts immensely. Although asset selection varies for each business, it is typically most successful when related back to the company's goals or objectives (Henseler et al., 2011). Within this study, R1 and R2 utilized Learfield IMG College staff to help align the sponsorship's assets to the business' goals and objectives. The associated growth from investing in sport sponsorship often allows small businesses to invest more in advertising each year.

As a business goes from Phase I to Phase II and eventually to Phase III, several internal foundation and marketing changes occur (Zinger & O'Reilly, 2010). Phase I includes small businesses with few employees, a single product or service, and a minimal marketing. Businesses in Phase II, such as R2, begin utilizing support personnel for marketing or accounting purposes

and have multiple suppliers or lenders. R1 could be considered part of Phase III, where they execute regular team planning, possess greater attention to the overall business environment, and conduct formal performance analyses. Nonetheless, small businesses may face various challenges with annual marketing efforts and associated financial obligations. Business owners have the option to explore new, innovative advertising or continue with traditional marketing. This study's findings suggest that utilizing the services of third-party marketing agencies, such as Learfield IMG College, may be beneficial to local business owners with less experience in sponsorship.

Next, various reasons exist for local businesses to engage in sport sponsorship ranging from fostering community goodwill to building awareness of the firm to establishing personal preferences of the owner's impact on these decisions. In this study, it was found that R1 and R2's owners used their personal preferences (associated University graduate, family ties to the community, sports fan) to invest in the collegiate athletics sponsorship. For many small businesses, including R1 and R2 in this study, increasing brand awareness and establishing an image are two of the most important sponsorship criteria (Weight et al., 2010). Participating in other local, community sponsorships or fundraisers also help businesses increase brand awareness over time, while simultaneously fostering and facilitating a connection to the community. Many owners, such as R1, even have a personal preference or moral obligation to give back in any possible way and regardless of the years' finances (Zinger & O'Reilly, 2010). Giving back to the community is a vital part and positive aspect within public relations for any business. While increasing brand awareness is a common goal for business owners, many struggle to find effective evaluation procedures. The third-party marketing agencies or even university faculty or students could provide assistance for sponsors to configure ROI by



developing an easy assessment tool. Annual surveys to gage community relations with local residents may be feasible for small businesses' future market research.

Finally, creating positive community relationships is vital for small businesses to attract new customers and continue growing. Businesses that invest in various sponsorship platforms tend to receive higher ROI and overall brand recognition. In fact, partnering with local sports teams or other community-based organizations may boost a company's morale. As part of the AIDA process, business owners often seek to alter consumers' purchasing tendencies by using strategic marketing to increase sales (Chen & Zhang, 2011). First, make consumers aware of a specific product or service and then try to spark interest. Next, force the consumer to desire the product or service and finally allow them to take action. Moving a consumer through the various stages of AIDA may ultimately provide assistance in creating loyal customers while increasing brand exposure (Smith et al., 2008 & Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006). Competition exists in different capacities for various industries based on geographical location and associated markets. With hopes of increasing brand awareness and achieving higher levels of consumer interest or desire in products, many local businesses embark in sponsorships. By portraying this specific image to the public, business owners seek to achieve better ROI's than their counterpart rival companies. Business owners may also want to take advantage of marketing opportunities with the Chamber of Commerce or other community-based organizations in the future. A collaboration with other local businesses in town, not necessarily in the same category, could be another way to expand brand recognition within a community. For example, restaurants might try to collaborate with hotels or others in the hospitality industry.

Various limitations of the study exist, including sample size and regional differences. Although only two local restaurant owners were interviewed in the study, they were in-depth and

provided unique perspectives of the topic. The COVID-19 pandemic is another unique limitation that was discussed in the study. Due to the restaurant industry, among several others, taking major hits during the pandemic, options were limited in regard to study participants. For future research, it may be beneficial to extend the study into other industries (e.g., technology companies, banks, automobile dealerships) or even across more regions in the same industry (local food and beverage/restaurants). As mentioned in the results section, other industries may not have taken the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions as hard, nor do they require such extensive in-person interaction. Likewise, other geographical locations in the same restaurant industry may provide varying results. Another recommendation would be to utilize quantitative data instead of qualitative data. Utilizing a survey instead of an interview may provide different feedback and perspective to the topic, ultimately receiving a larger sample size. Finally, looking at the involvement of small, local businesses in sport sponsorship from the third-party marketing agency's perspective may be both beneficial and unique. Companies such as Learfield IMG College and Peak Sports MGMT may provide additional information to business owners and consumers.

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