

Performance over Strategy: A Myth of Denial in Sponsorship among Football Clubs in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the prevailing assumption among Ghanaian football club owners and managers that on-field performance is the primary driver of sponsorship acquisition. Drawing on comparative insights and sponsorship theory, it argues that the overemphasis on performance masks a deeper strategic vacuum. In the dynamic world of football sponsorship, performance is often hailed as the golden ticket to corporate backing. In Ghana, this belief has become a deeply entrenched narrative—one that equates on-field success with off-field financial support. Yet, beneath this surface lies a critical myth: that performance alone guarantees sponsorship. This article interrogates that assumption, arguing that the overemphasis on performance masks a strategic vacuum that continues to undermine the commercial viability of Ghanaian football clubs. The paper explores how this myth perpetuates organizational denial, stifles innovation, and undermines long-term commercial sustainability. It concludes by proposing a strategic sponsorship framework tailored to the Ghanaian football context, emphasizing brand and value alignment, digital engagement, and community relevance.

1. Introduction

In Ghana's football ecosystem, the belief that sporting success alone guarantees sponsorship remains pervasive. Clubs often equate league performance with commercial appeal, assuming that winning matches or producing star players will automatically attract corporate partners. This article challenges that assumption, arguing that performance, while valuable, is insufficient without a coherent sponsorship strategy. The myth of performance supremacy has become a form of organizational denial—one that obscures the structural and strategic deficiencies undermining sponsorship outcomes. Many club executives and fans alike believe that winning matches, topping

league tables, or producing star players is sufficient to attract sponsors. While performance can enhance visibility, it is not a standalone value proposition. In fact, global sponsorship trends reveal that brands increasingly prioritize alignment with values, audience engagement, digital reach, and community impact over mere sporting success. In Ghana, however, clubs often neglect these strategic imperatives. Sponsorship proposals are hastily assembled, lacking data-driven insights, brand alignment, or long-term activation plans. The result? Sporadic, short-term deals that fail to build sustainable partnerships.

2. Literature Review: Sponsorship beyond Performance

2.1 The Performance-Centric Paradigm

Historically, football clubs have viewed on-field performance as the primary determinant of sponsorship success (Akowuah, 2020; Appiah Sarpong, 2018, 2024; Kusi et al., 2025). This belief is particularly entrenched in Ghana, where clubs often equate league rankings, match victories, and player visibility with commercial appeal (Akowuah, 2020; Appiah Sarpong, 2018, 2024; Kusi et al., 2025). Akowuah (2020) found that Ghanaian clubs frequently rely on performance metrics to justify sponsorship requests, despite lacking structured brand narratives or activation strategies and even good governance structures. Similarly, Appiah Sarpong (2024) highlighted that while fans respond positively to performance, sponsors prioritize broader engagement metrics and brand alignment. This performance-centric paradigm, however, reflects a narrow understanding of sponsorship as a reward mechanism rather than a strategic partnership. Kusi et al. (2025) argue that Ghanaian clubs often fail to meet corporate expectations due to poor proposal design, limited digital presence, and weak community positioning—despite strong fan loyalty and historical prestige.

2.2 Strategic Sponsorship: A Global Shift

Globally, the sponsorship landscape has evolved from performance-based models to strategic, data-driven partnerships (Cornwell, 2020; Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005; Jiao, 2025; Varea-Calero et al., 2025). Cornwell (2020) emphasizes that modern sponsorship

is rooted in brand synergy, audience targeting, and measurable returns on investment. Chadwick and Thwaites (2005) similarly assert that sponsorship success depends on relationship management and strategic planning, not just athletic achievement. European clubs exemplify this shift. Manchester City FC, for instance, has restructured its sponsorship model around global branding, digital engagement, and lifestyle storytelling (Cornwell, 2020; Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005; Jiao, 2025; Varea-Calero et al., 2025). Clubs like FC Barcelona and Juventus integrate sponsorship into broader entertainment ecosystems, offering sponsors emotional resonance and cross-platform exposure. In Latin America and Asia, clubs increasingly use community programs, youth academies, and CSR initiatives to attract sponsors. Varea-Calero et al. (2025), in a bibliometric analysis of three decades of sponsorship research, confirm a global trend toward strategic packaging, digital metrics, and social impact as key sponsorship drivers.

2.3 Implications for Ghanaian Football

The contrast between Ghanaian and global sponsorship models reveals a critical gap. While Ghanaian clubs continue to prioritize performance, global best practices emphasize strategic planning, digital infrastructure, and community relevance. This disconnect perpetuates a cycle of short-term deals and missed opportunities. To remain competitive, Ghanaian clubs must reframe sponsorship as a multidimensional value proposition—one that transcends match results and embraces brand storytelling, fan analytics, good governance and social impact.

Sponsorship literature increasingly emphasizes strategic alignment, audience engagement, and brand storytelling over mere athletic success (Cornwell, 2020;

Chadwick & Thwaites, 2005). In mature markets, clubs invest in sponsorship departments, digital analytics, and community programs to create multidimensional value for sponsors. Performance is seen as a catalyst—not a guarantee—of sponsorship. In contrast, many African clubs, including those in Ghana, continue to rely on outdated models that prioritize trophies over strategy.

Across African leagues, sponsorship is often reactive—triggered by performance spikes or tournament wins. However, clubs that invest in strategic branding, community programs, and digital platforms (e.g., Mamelodi Sundowns in South Africa, TP Mazembe in DR Congo) show stronger sponsorship retention (Akindes, 2019; Sarpong & Zungu, 2024). These cases suggest that strategic planning, not just performance, is key to sustainable sponsorship. While formal academic studies are fewer, several Nigerian case analyses (e.g., Enyimba FC, Kano Pillars) echo similar themes: Clubs with strong performance records still struggle to attract long-term sponsors. Sponsorship proposals often lack market data, brand alignment, and activation strategies. Sponsors increasingly demand digital engagement, CSR integration, and fan loyalty metrics (Franck & Nuesch, 2012; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2019). These insights are supported by regional sports marketing conferences and practitioner interviews, which emphasize the need for strategic sponsorship planning across Ghanaian clubs. African literature increasingly challenges the myth that performance guarantees sponsorship. Studies from Ghana and Nigeria reveal that clubs must move beyond match results and embrace strategic sponsorship models—built on brand identity, digital engagement, and community impact. This shift is essential for transforming sponsorship from a

transactional reward into a long-term partnership.

3. The Ghanaian Context: Performance as Proxy

Ghanaian clubs such as Asante Kotoko and Accra Hearts of Oak have historically enjoyed strong fan bases and competitive success (Appiah Sarpong, 2018; Akowuah, 2020). Yet, their sponsorship portfolios remain inconsistent and under-leveraged. Interviews with club executives and sponsorship officers reveal a recurring theme: the belief that “winning speaks for itself.” This mindset often leads to underinvestment in brand development, digital platforms, and stakeholder engagement—key pillars of modern sponsorship. Sponsorship is not charity—it is a business transaction. Brands seek returns on investment through visibility, brand association, and consumer engagement. Without a clear strategy that articulates a club’s brand identity, fan demographics, digital footprint, and community relevance, performance becomes a weak currency.

Clubs like Accra Hearts of Oak and Asante Kotoko, despite their historic success, have struggled to secure consistent, high-value sponsorships. Contrast this with clubs in South Africa or Morocco, where strategic branding, media packaging, and stakeholder engagement are central to sponsorship acquisition (Hindmarsh et al., 2024; Walters & Tacon, 2011).

4. Denial and Its Organizational Consequences

The myth of performance supremacy fosters a culture of denial. Clubs attribute sponsorship failures to external factors—economic downturns, league instability, or lack of government or federation support—

while neglecting internal shortcomings. This denial inhibits learning, discourages innovation, and perpetuates a reactive rather than proactive approach to sponsorship. Moreover, it limits the ability of clubs to articulate their unique value propositions to potential sponsors. This myth of performance supremacy, indeed fosters a culture of denial in Ghana. Club administrators deflect responsibility for poor sponsorship outcomes, blaming league structures, refereeing, or economic conditions—while ignoring internal deficiencies in marketing, data analytics, and stakeholder management.

This denial as an emphasis further stifles innovation within the Ghanaian context, and present what is been witnessed in the past two decades of sponsorship struggles. Few clubs invest in sponsorship departments, CSR systems, or fan engagement platforms. Traditional media remains the primary communication channel, despite the rise of digital platforms like TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram as key sponsorship leverage points.

5. Theoretical Framework

The resource-based view (RBV) provides a useful lens for examining sponsorship in football, emphasizing that clubs derive sustained advantage from intangible resources such as brand equity, heritage, and fan engagement rather than solely from match performance (Barney, 1991; Alkandi, 2020). Recent bibliometric analyses of sport sponsorship research confirm a shift toward resource management and brand co-creation, highlighting the need for clubs to leverage strategic assets to attract sponsors (Varea-Calero et al., 2024). This perspective challenges the assumption that winning games alone secures sponsorship deals.

Signaling theory further explains how clubs communicate value to potential sponsors in contexts of information asymmetry. While many Ghanaian clubs rely on performance as a primary signal, sponsors often seek broader indicators of professionalism, governance, and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Studies show that congruence articulation and CSR-linked messaging are critical signals for sponsor trust and fit, suggesting that performance-only signals are insufficient (Graeber & Close Scheinbaum, 2020; Marshall-Heyman, 2019). Marshall-Heyman (2019) similarly found that sponsorship effects on football brands depend more on communication practices and brand management than on short-term results. Stakeholder theory positions sponsors as key stakeholders whose interests must be integrated into club strategy alongside fans, communities, and governing bodies. Walters and Tacon (2011), and Freeman (1984) argue that stakeholder salience and CSR actions determine sponsorship quality, while Hindmarsh et al. (2021) demonstrate that shared values and wellbeing outcomes are causal conditions for successful grassroots sponsorship. These findings underscore the importance of multi-stakeholder value creation, which performance-centric approaches often neglect.

Institutional theory highlights the cultural and normative pressures within football environments that valorize short-term performance. In Ghana, this institutional bias perpetuates the belief that winning matches guarantees sponsorship, sidelining strategic management practices. Koronios et al. (2021) advocate for institutionalizing sponsorship capabilities through measurement scales and fit criteria, thereby professionalizing sponsorship management and countering performance-first assumptions.

Finally, strategic fit theory emphasizes that sponsorship effectiveness depends on alignment between sponsor objectives and club identity. Empirical evidence shows that congruence and cause–brand fit drive positive outcomes for both sponsors and clubs, whereas misfit erodes value regardless of team performance (Graeber & Close Scheinbaum, 2020). In the Ghanaian context, studies reveal that fan purchase intentions and brand loyalty are influenced more by sponsorship quality and brand image than by match performance (Appiah Sarpong, 2018; Akowuah, 2020). This suggests that clubs must articulate strategic fit and community impact to overcome sponsorship denial.

Together, these perspectives reveal that the “performance over strategy” narrative is a myth that denies the complex realities of sponsorship. Sustainable sponsorship in Ghanaian football requires clubs to institutionalize strategic management, signal professionalism, and align with stakeholder and sponsor values rather than relying solely on on-field success.

6. Strategic Sponsorship: A Framework for Ghanaian Clubs

To move beyond this denial, Ghanaian football clubs must adopt a strategic sponsorship model grounded in four pillars:

1. **Brand Identity:** Develop a clear, authentic brand narrative that resonates with fans and aligns with sponsor values.
2. **Digital Engagement:** Leverage platforms like TikTok, X, and Instagram to offer sponsors measurable reach and fan interaction.
3. **Community Impact:** Position clubs as agents of social change through youth development, education, and health and environmental initiatives.

4. **Data-Driven Proposals:** Use fan analytics, media metrics, and activation plans to demonstrate ROI to sponsors.

Towards a Strategic Sponsorship Culture in Ghana

To break this cycle, Ghanaian football clubs must:

1. **Develop Sponsorship Playbooks:** Tailored documents that outline brand alignment strategies, activation ideas, and measurable KPIs.
2. **Invest in Digital Infrastructure:** Use data analytics to understand fan behavior and offer sponsors targeted engagement.
3. **Build Community Narratives:** Position clubs as agents of social change—through youth development, education, and health initiatives.
4. **Train Sponsorship Officers:** Equip staff with skills in negotiation, storytelling, and brand management.

This framework shifts the focus from performance to partnership, enabling clubs to build long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with sponsors in Ghana.

7. Conclusion

The belief that performance alone drives sponsorship is not only outdated—it is counterproductive. For Ghanaian football clubs to thrive commercially, they must confront the myth of performance supremacy and embrace strategic thinking. Sponsorship is not a reward for winning; it is a partnership built on shared vision, values, and measurable impact. The future of football sponsorship in Ghana depends on clubs’ ability to think beyond the pitch.

Performance may open the door, but strategy keeps it open. Until Ghanaian football clubs confront the myth that performance alone drives sponsorship, they will remain trapped in a cycle of short-term deals and missed opportunities. The future belongs to clubs that think beyond the pitch—those that see sponsorship not as a reward for winning, but as a partnership built on shared vision, values, and strategic intent.

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