Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Financial Technology and Business Analysis (ICFTBA 2026)
DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.39414

Digital Sponsorship Activation and Fan Engagement: A Case Study of YONEX at the All England Open

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Abstract. This exploratory single-case study examines how YONEX presents its All England Open sponsorship through selected digital communication, and what opportunities for fan engagement that communication provides. Public documents are examined through two complementary frameworks: sponsorship activation and the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) framework. The evidence base comprises three company documents — a 2019 partnership announcement, a tournament article published on 11 March 2026, and consolidated financial results for the year ended 31 March 2025 — with an organiser resource used only to confirm dates and venue. The analysis identifies three features of the focal article: a long-standing brand–event relationship presented through tournament naming and a founder-related reference, achievement stories that give equipment information a sporting context, and product links that offer a route from reading to product exploration. The equipment association is explicit, whereas guidance on recreational suitability and explicit invitations to dialogue are less developed within this article. The study separates documented content cues, proposed psychological interpretations and behaviour that still requires verification, and it proposes content and measurement improvements along these lines. Its contribution is a content-level account of participation opportunities within one sponsor-authored communication, not an estimate of sponsorship effectiveness.

Keywords: sponsorship activation, fan engagement, badminton, digital communication, stimulus–organism–response

1. Introduction

Sponsorship provides an association that brands can develop through communication, but visibility and participation require different analysis. Weeks et al. distinguish the broader practice of sponsorship-linked marketing communication from activation, which fosters audience interaction with the sponsor [1]. Cornwell et al. examine the information-processing mechanisms underlying sponsorship-linked marketing, supporting attention to how an association is communicated rather than assuming exposure is sufficient [2]. Gillooly et al. identify four core functions of sponsor-generated Twitter content: informing, entertaining, rewarding, and interacting [3]. These functions yield valuable research questions regarding what a communication delivers to its audience. Recent evidence also casts doubt on the presumed automatic connection between sponsorship and

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engagement. Schönberner and Woratschek demonstrate that activation outcomes depend on consumer evaluations, perceived authenticity, and pre-existing attitudes [4]. Naraine et al. report lower engagement for sponsored content in their professional-team Instagram sample [5]. Although these findings originate from other settings, they illuminate why YONEX communications should be evaluated based on their specific content and opportunities. Cao and Matsuoka's review further distinguishes content and sponsor characteristics from consumer engagement and its consequences [6].

YONEX's equipment business relates directly to the sport played at the All England. Its 2019 announcement describes a long-standing partnership, and its 2026 tournament report combines event reporting with product information [7, 8]. The study therefore examines how the tournament's history, athlete achievements, and equipment information are structured as different entry points for participation, and how these entry points may subsequently be evaluated. Because the materials are produced by the sponsor, the case illustrates how the association is presented, not how audiences perceive it.

RQ1: How does YONEX present its All England Open sponsorship through the selected digital communication?

RQ2: What opportunities for fan engagement does this communication provide, and what evidence is needed to evaluate them?

The following sections describe the materials, analyse the communication and develop recommendations. Opportunities for fan engagement refer to invitations or routes for action identifiable in the content, they are distinct from measured engagement.

2. Case description

2.1. The sponsorship relationship

The 2026 YONEX All England Open was held from 3 to 8 March at the Utilita Arena Birmingham [9]. YONEX's announcement of 8 March 2019 records 36 consecutive years of title sponsorship and an extension through 2025, together with equipment and shuttlecock support [7]. This document establishes historical background rather than detailing the contractual terms for the 2026 edition. The company's article of 11 March 2026 confirms the continuing branded presentation of the tournament [8]. The study concerns this sponsor–event relationship and its expression in one selected communication.

2.2. Case materials and selection

Four publicly available documents were selected: three published by YONEX and one by Badminton England (Table 1). The focal source is YONEX's article *Historic wins highlight YONEX All England 2026*, released on 11 March 2026 [8]. It combines tournament history, athlete achievements and equipment links, enabling examination of the sponsor–event linkage and audience action opportunities within a single communication asset. The other documents provide context. YONEX's partnership announcement establishes the historical sponsorship relationship [7], while its FY2025 consolidated financial results describe group-level commercial performance [10]. Badminton England's primary-school resource is an educational PDF rather than a research dataset. Its introduction on PDF page 2 states the 2026 tournament dates and venue [9]. It is used solely to support those background facts, not to evaluate YONEX's communication or audience response.

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Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to the sponsorship relationship, the focal communication or its background. Table 1 states the reason for including each source. Following Bowen's discussion of document analysis [11], the analysis distinguishes source purpose from the interpretation developed here. The focal article was examined for brand naming, the founder reference, athlete narratives and product links, which were then interpreted through sponsorship activation and S-O-R. Audience responses were not measured in this research.

Table 1. Documentary sources and their roles in the study

Document and publication date	Publisher	Role in the study
Partnership extension announcement, 8 March 2019 [7]	YONEX	Establishes the historical sponsorship relationship and support
Historic wins highlight YONEX All England 2026, 11 March 2026 [8]	YONEX	Focal text for examining the brand–event connection, athlete narratives and product links
Consolidated financial results, year ended 31 March 2025, published 9 May 2025 [10]	Yonex Co., Ltd.	Provides group-level commercial background
Primary school resource for the YONEX All England Open 2026, undated [9]	Badminton England	PDF p. 2 confirms the tournament dates and venue

3. Analysis on the problems

3.1. Analytical framework

The two frameworks provide complementary perspectives on how sponsorship communication facilitates audience engagement. Drawing on Weeks et al. [1], sponsorship activation is conceptualised as a process that extends beyond brand exposure to create opportunities for audience involvement. To further examine these opportunities, Gillooly et al.'s [3] four content functions—informing, entertaining, rewarding, and interacting—serve as analytical dimensions for assessing the engagement potential of sponsor-generated content. This integrated approach distinguishes brand–event association from active engagement opportunities, recognising that brand visibility alone does not necessarily constitute sponsorship activation.

The S-O-R framework then separates three layers: the visible content, a proposed internal response and a behavioural outcome [12]. In this case the organism layer is a set of interpretations rather than measured variables. Authenticity, credibility and relevance are treated as plausible consumer readings, not as dimensions the original framework measures or as outcomes established by the documents. Table 2 organises the material on this basis. Its three columns separate documented stimuli from proposed interpretations and from behaviour that would still require verification. The framework thus structures interpretation without implying that a psychological pathway has been tested.

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2026.39414

Table 2. Evidence and interpretation in the S-O-R framework

Documented stimulus [8]	Proposed psychological interpretation (not measured)	Behaviour requiring verification
Tournament naming and founder-named court	Authenticity or credibility	Further brand-information visits
Athlete achievement stories	Emotional interest	Sharing or repeat visits
Equipment references and product links	Equipment relevance	Clicks, enquiries or purchases

Psychological interpretations are proposed. Audience behaviours have not been measured.Source links: Partnership announcement [7] Tournament article [8] Financial results [10] School resource [9]

3.2. Presenting the brand–event relationship

The focal article embeds the sponsorship in the tournament's own story. Its title carries the sponsor's name, and a reference to the main court names the company founder, Minoru Yoneyama [8]. Read beside the 2019 announcement [7], these cues place the relationship within the event's history rather than presenting it as a recent commercial arrangement. The function is explanatory: brand naming and the founder reference render the sponsor-event association explicit. This interpretation is consistent with the discussion of sponsorship-linked communication by Weeks et al. and Cornwell et al. [1, 2]. Whether readers regard that association as authentic is a separate question. Schönberner and Woratschek [4] find that authenticity conditions activation outcomes, but that finding indicates why the perception is worth investigating, it does not show that the court reference produces it. For RQ1, the observed communicative practice combines brand naming and historical explanation.

Athlete achievements give the article a sporting reason to be read. For example, the report presents Wang Zhiyi's first All England singles title before listing her racquet, strings and footwear in the equipment section [8]. This arrangement connects an achievement story with identifiable products. Its clearest function is informing, while the sporting narrative may also carry entertainment value, consistent with Gillooly et al.'s discussion of overlapping content functions [3]. Burton et al.'s examination of athlete portrayals in sponsor communication provides a relevant comparison, although their Paralympic setting differs from this case [13]. For RQ2, the observed opportunity is movement from interest in sporting achievement towards equipment information, whether readers make that transition remains unmeasured.

Product links turn the commercial association into an available action. The equipment section names players alongside racquets, strings and shoes and links items to product pages [8]. This is more specific than a general brand reference: readers may navigate from accounts of athletic achievements to information about the associated products. With S-O-R, the equipment block is a documented stimulus, personal relevance is a proposed interpretation, and a click would be a behavioural observation. The article thus outlines a pathway for audience exploration. It does not, however, demonstrate that readers follow this pathway or that such exposure alters product preferences.

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3.3. From professional equipment to consumer relevance

Although the article highlights equipment used by elite players, it offers limited guidance on product suitability across different skill levels, playing styles, and budgets [8]. While a tournament report is not intended to serve as a comprehensive equipment selection guide, its embedded product links provide opportunities to bridge professional endorsements and recreational players' needs. Incorporating more targeted product guidance could strengthen this connection and support informed decision-making without implying that professional-grade equipment is universally suitable. Nevertheless, this finding is limited to the focal article, as the linked product pages were not examined. Consequently, the study cannot determine whether additional guidance is available throughout the broader product exploration journey.

Dialogue is a distinct opportunity from clicking through to equipment. The reviewed article mainly delivers information and navigation, with fewer explicit invitations to discuss experiences or submit content. Gillooly et al.'s interacting function provides the criterion for identifying such invitations [3]. Santos et al. show that fan engagement through social networks involves relationships and co-creation beyond viewing, though their team-based constructs cannot simply be reassigned to a sponsor [14]. Cao and Matsuoka's scoping review likewise separates content and sponsor characteristics from engagement and its consequences [6]. A discussion prompt could extend this touchpoint, but the claim stays with the selected article: fewer dialogue opportunities there do not indicate their absence across YONEX's other channels.

3.4. Commercial context and evaluation priorities

The consolidated financial results set a commercial context for evaluation (Table 3). Sales and operating profit rose between FY2024 and FY2025 alongside advertising expenditure [10]. Management links marketing to international tournaments and athletes, but this is the company's own account rather than independent attribution, and the figures precede the 2026 event while combining activities across the group. These figures justify attention to measurement, but they cannot establish a return from the All England sponsorship.

Different communication purposes require different evidence. Recognition of the sponsor–event link and perceived authenticity would require audience measures of cognitive or evaluative states. Use of the equipment route would require behavioural records, such as product-link clicks. Dialogue would require records of replies or shared experiences. S-O-R allows these stages to be interpreted together, but the available documents do not verify the proposed psychological links or causal relationships. Financial figures remain separate commercial context. This distinction answers the evidential part of RQ2 and guides the recommendations.

Table 3. Consolidated financial context

Indicator	FY2024	FY2025
Net sales	116,442	138,276
Operating profit	11,611	14,176
Advertising expenses	17,482	21,608
Operating margin	10.0%	10.3%

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Amounts in millions of yen except margin. Fiscal years ended 31 March. Source: consolidated financial results, printed pp. 1 and 10 [10].

4. Suggestions

4.1. Develop relevance and participation

A first extension relates to the equipment pathway. The article could add concise selection guidance near its equipment list, explaining playing style, experience level and product characteristics so that recreational players can read professional equipment use in relation to their own needs. The goal is informed exploration rather than champion imitation. This recommendation follows the gap identified in Section 3.3 between a visible product association and proposed personal relevance.

A second extension targets participation. A short prompt could connect the article to a brand channel suited to discussion or experience sharing, for example a question about equipment choices or tournament memories. This would add an interacting option to the selected communication and draws on Gillooly et al.'s interacting function [3]. In both cases the brand would first check existing channels and choose a suitable destination rather than duplicate activity already running. These represent extensions to the selected content, rather than assertions that such activities are currently absent.

4.2. Evaluate each proposed route

Table 4 distinguishes what a content check can establish from what needs audience data. Content checks confirm whether guidance and a participation prompt were delivered, visits, clicks and contributions show whether the routes were used. Website or campaign records would require access from the responsible publisher, with a defined period and identifiable links, sponsor and organiser records should stay separate. No such response data were collected here, so every audience indicator in Table 4 is proposed.

Later consumer research could examine relevance, authenticity and sponsor attitudes, following the evaluative issues raised by Schönberner and Woratschek [4]. Psychological measures should be analysed alongside behavioural records rather than inferred from them. This would extend the core research questions of this case study into doctoral-level inquiry, without elevating its interpretive findings to causal claims.

Table 4. Recommendations and proposed evaluation

Problem and action	Implementation check	Audience indicator	Source and implementation
Suitability guidance limited, add a selection guide	Guidance available and criteria stated	Guide visits, onward clicks	Website analytics, tagged links
Dialogue less explicit, add a sharing prompt	Prompt and response route present	Valid replies or submissions	Campaign log, define valid contributions

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Table 4. (continued)

Effects unobserved, assess stages separately	Separate reporting protocol	Behaviour: link clicks.Psychological measures in a separate study: perceived relevance and sponsor attitude.	Publisher records, future audience study

All indicators are proposed. Access to publisher records would need agreement, psychological measures would require a separate study.

5. Conclusion

The selected communication highlights YONEX's longstanding association with the All England Open through tournament naming, references to the brand's founder, athlete achievements, and product-related information. These elements reinforce the brand–event relationship by integrating sponsorship heritage with sporting narratives and product promotion. The findings further suggest that embedded product links create potential pathways for audience engagement by connecting tournament interest with product exploration. However, opportunities for personalised equipment guidance and interactive communication remain less developed within the focal article, indicating scope for more inclusive and participatory sponsorship activation.

The analysis distinguishes the presentation of a sponsor–event association, opportunities for action, and the evidence needed to establish audience response. Sponsorship activation guides the examination of content functions, while S-O-R keeps proposed interpretations separate from behaviour. Neither framework shows that fans formed the proposed perceptions or followed the links. Evaluation therefore depends on separate checks of implementation, observed action and consumer interpretation.

The evidence covers one focal article and contextual documents. It cannot represent YONEX's overall strategy or its sponsorship effectiveness, and no audience behaviour or financial return is attributed to the 2026 event. Future research may examine a verified set of brand communications alongside corresponding audience responses. Where feasible, later studies could test perceived authenticity and product relevance alongside behavioural measures. This would extend the case towards consumer research while preserving the distinction between published communication and realised engagement.

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