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# A digital ethnography of fan reaction to sponsorship termination

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## ABSTRACT

**Research question:** Scholars have paid little attention to consumer response to the termination of a sponsorship. The purpose of this study was to examine the reaction of fans of a professional cycling team to a sponsorship terminating, which ultimately led to the team disbanding.

**Research methods:** The research purpose was pursued through digital ethnography (via message boards and weblog), examining the case of Basque professional cycling fans. Comments were analysed to understand fans' reaction to the 2013 cessation of Euskaltel-Euskadi, a Basque professional cycling team, after its sponsor, Euskaltel, exited the partnership.

**Results and findings:** Fan reaction to Euskaltel ending its sponsorship was somewhat paradoxical, in that the terminated sponsorship ultimately led to the team disbanding, yet fans appeared to be appreciative of Euskaltel. They continued to celebrate the team's corporate sponsor colour as they mourned the end of Euskaltel-Euskadi and questioned the future of Basque cycling. This reaction is made more logical by understanding the long-term duration of the partnership, and how Euskaltel's support of the team for nearly two decades led to the intermeshing of the team and its sponsor, thus avoiding negative sentiment.

**Implications:** This study makes a meaningful contribution to the sponsorship literature, particularly sponsorship termination. This study is one of the first to examine consumer response to sponsorship termination in a real-world setting, and suggests a potential legacy effect of long-term sponsorship, such that fan reaction to a long-term sponsorship terminating may not be negative, especially if fans understand the sponsor's contribution over time.

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In 2015, total worldwide sponsorship spending surpassed \$57 billion (IEG, 2016). As sponsorship continues to grow, sport entities and corporate sponsors have expressed interest in shifting the focus of sponsorship to a partner-oriented, long-term relationship with more collaborative and proactive engagements (Farrelly, Quester, & Burton, 2006). However, given the sales-oriented nature of many sponsorships, when faced with controversy, crisis, or scandal, the instinctive reaction has been to terminate partnerships with sport entities or athletes in an effort to maintain or minimise damage to the sponsor's own corporate image, or to reallocate sponsorship dollars to areas of greater interest

(Chien, Kelly, & Weeks, 2016; Hughes & Shank, 2005). Essentially, sponsorships are often terminated for business or financial reasons – the very same reasons many companies enter these partnerships to begin with.

Although termination of sponsorship is ordinary across sport (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012), in the past decade, professional cycling has been rampant with sponsorship termination due to doping, financial crisis, and unmet expectations. A notable sponsor dissolution within professional cycling is that of Euskaltel-Euskadi, a professional cycling team from the Basque Country. Euskaltel-Euskadi – the longest standing professional cycling team when it dissolved in 2013 – was founded in 1994 by the Euskadi foundation, a ‘non-profit entity that seeks, as its final goal, the promotion, development, dissemination of Basque cycling sport’ (Euskadi, 2013). Professional cyclists riding for Euskaltel were often Basques themselves, joining other Basque professional sport teams (e.g. AC Bilbao) who have policies on team members being of Basque heritage (Shobe, 2008). As such, Euskaltel-Euskadi was not simply a professional cycling team, but one that was also representative of the Basque Country, which provided fertile ground for identity formation among cycling fans.

Euskaltel, a Basque telecom company, began co-sponsoring the team in 1997, supplementing the government/fan-funded budget the team was founded on and allowing the team to remain competitive at the professional level (i.e. the International Cycling Union [UCI] World Tour). Subsequently, the team embraced both national (Basque) and corporate (Euskaltel) identity, with fans known in the cycling community as ‘the orange tide’ as they often cloaked themselves in orange, Euskaltel’s corporate colour (Fotheringham, 2013). Despite its unique following, Euskaltel-Euskadi ceased to exist in 2013, after the telecom company ended its sponsorship and the team failed to secure another sponsor.

As sponsorship is frequently undertaken to enhance or improve a company’s image among sport consumers (e.g. Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012), numerous scholars have examined how sponsorship influences consumer perceptions of sponsors, such as attitudes towards sponsoring companies (see, e.g. Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). However, the effects of sponsorship termination on attitudes towards companies are relatively unexplored (Grohs, Kopfer, & Woisetschläger, 2016; Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012). In addition, the limited research into consumer reaction to sponsorship termination has been experimental in nature with fictional scenarios; inquiry into actual sponsorship terminations is non-existent.

In seeking to alleviate the dearth of inquiry into consumer response to sponsorship termination, the purpose of this study was to examine fans’ reaction to a real-world sponsorship termination, which left a team with no funding and ultimately led to it dissolving. Fan sentiment in response to the dissolution of Euskaltel-Euskadi in 2013 was analysed via digital ethnography. A somewhat paradoxical finding on sponsorship termination is revealed, in that fans were devastated over the dissolution of Euskaltel-Euskadi as a result of losing its sponsor (Euskaltel), but appeared to express no negative sentiment towards the exiting sponsor, instead celebrating and appreciating what the company had contributed over the years.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. First, background research pertaining to the current study is reviewed, including professional road cycling (both in general and in the Basque Country), identification, and sport sponsorship. Second, the

method used in the current study is discussed. Third, the findings of the study are detailed. Fourth, the current study is discussed in regard to its contribution to the sponsorship literature, implications for managers, and future research direction.

## Background research

### *Professional road cycling*

Professional road cycling is rich in history, with European road races dating back to the late nineteenth century. Professional road cycling races – including large, well-known spectacles such as the Tour de France and Giro d'Italia – are traditionally held annually as multi-stage events spanning several days. As such, cycling races are often 'celebrated as social and cultural tributes to their host countries and are subjects of intense national pride and prestige' (Morrow & Idle, 2008, p. 320).

Compared to other prominent professional sports across the world, which have only more recently become reliant on corporate dollars (e.g. though jersey sponsorships or facility naming rights), professional road cycling is unique in that its teams have almost always been funded by sponsor organisations. Indeed, even the Tour de France has commercial roots; the event, similar to other key cycling races (e.g. Giro d'Italia, Vuelta a España), was initiated by a French newspaper, *L'Auto*, in 1903 in an effort to increase readership (Morrow & Idle, 2008). In these years, the newspaper funded the prize money for cyclists competing in the race, and local towns and villages through which the race passed provided prizes as well (Thompson, 2008). As the race developed, cyclists competed for trade teams until 1930, when the race moved to a national team model until 1961. In 1962, it returned to trade teams, a model it still follows today with global or multinational corporations supporting teams via sponsorship.

Professional road cycling – particularly the publicity derived from cyclists who annually navigate the narrow roads of the Alps and Pyrenees in the Tour de France – and the passionate fans it attracts has made the sport an attractive avenue for corporations to reap the benefits of sponsorship. As Morrow and Idle (2008) explained, the sport's ability to seize nationwide attention and praise 'captured the interest of the spectating public and business sponsors were quick to see the commercial potential of such races' (p. 320).

Sponsorship in professional cycling works differently to that of more lucrative professional spectator sports in that without sponsors, a professional cycling team ceases to exist. Essentially, in individual or participant sports such as cycling, athletes (and teams) are reliant on sponsorship dollars for their continued participation (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012). Recently, the indefinite nature of sponsorship in professional road cycling has become a prominent concern for stakeholders. As Aubel and Ohl (2014) explained, 'The financial partners are extremely volatile, prone to withdraw funding when they change their communication strategy or fear a doping scandal' (p. 1098). As such, the UCI has made efforts to ensure sponsorship agreements are longer lasting, with minimum length requirements (i.e. UCI World Tour license contracts typically tie the sponsor to the engagement for three to four years; Morrow & Idle, 2008).

Considering fans' perspectives on circumstances in which their favourite team's survival is contingent on sponsorship, it should be no surprise that scholars have found that

individuals involved in participant sport have feelings of gratitude towards sponsors (e.g. Kim, Smith, & James, 2010). For cycling fans, sponsorship might be considered less of a promotion and more of a partnership in that sponsors are fundamental in a professional cycling team's existence. Thus, in the instance of a corporation terminating its sponsorship of a professional cycling team, one might question how identified fans might respond to such an occurrence. To best understand this matter, it is important to acknowledge the existing literature on identification and sponsorship.

### **Identification**

In this study, social identity theory is used as a theoretical lens to examine fan reaction to sponsorship termination. Researchers using social identity theory have often operationalised their research questions by assessing identification with a sport entity, often a team. A social psychological theory, the basic premise of social identity theory is that individuals derive an enhanced sense of self from the perceived awareness, value, and emotional significance of belonging to a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The groups that individuals perceive themselves as belonging to contribute to their self-image, in that the act of classifying oneself allows for affiliation with fellow group members and distinction from individuals not in the group (or outgroup; i.e. intergroup relations). In addition, group identities are not static, but rather subjectively constructed over time based on social and historical circumstances of the group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Most often, when sport consumer behaviour scholars examine social identity theory, they assess one's identity through the measurement of team identification. Team identification, defined by Wann and Branscombe (1993) as the degree of one's psychological connection to a sport entity, has been used by numerous sport consumer behaviour scholars to assess the relationship between identification and a range of variables, such as: purchasing behaviours (e.g. Kwon & Armstrong, 2002); motives (e.g. Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002); brand perceptions (e.g. Walsh & Ross, 2010); and sponsorship effectiveness (e.g. Madrigal, 2001). Essentially, those with stronger connections to a sport entity are often found to exhibit more favourable thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours towards sport entities and the organisations that support them.

Scholars have also examined the relationship between team identification and other identities. Heere and James (2007) suggested that a sport team can be representative of multiple group identities, such as a geographic identity. Heere, James, Yoshida, and Scremin (2011) found that fans' identification with a team was positively influenced by university, city, and state identity, thus illustrating the relatedness of team and place identity. More recently, Lock and Funk (2016) introduced the Multiple Ingroup Identity Framework and suggested that individuals may identify with a sport entity at superordinate, subgroup, and relational levels, each of which fulfil different social needs. In summary, individuals often do not identify with a sport entity in isolation. Instead, there are often other identities influencing one's psychological connection to a sport entity. In particular, a team-related identity can often serve as a surrogate for place identity, as the underlying psychological meaning of a team-related identity is often rooted in local culture, and the social norms and values of those particular people. In the current study, Euskaltel-Euskadi's celebration of Basque heritage allowed individuals to identify with a team that represented the Basque Country.

### ***Identification and the loss of a team***

In addition to what scholars have found regarding the relationship between team identification and other variables or identities, scholars have studied how identified fans react to teams being disrupted (i.e. those that have dissolved or relocated; Foster & Hyatt, 2007; Hyatt, 2007). This line of research is particularly relevant to the current study, as it too involves the loss of a team. In interviewing National Hockey League (NHL) Hartford Whalers fans five years after the Whalers relocated to North Carolina to become the Carolina Hurricanes, Hyatt (2007) found that most of the fans interviewed no longer had a favourite NHL team, and some even rooted against the Hurricanes. In addition, a majority of those interviewed still considered themselves Whalers fans five years after the team relocated, engaging in behaviours such as reading Whalers-related websites and continuing to wear Whalers apparel. Hyatt's findings illustrated the legacy effect of a team no longer in existence, as well as the potential for team relocation to lead to lessened fan interest in the sport.

Separately, drawing from interviews with Hartford Whalers fans, Foster and Hyatt (2007) suggested fans of a relocated team can be classified as: identified (identifying with the relocated team); dis-identified (actively separating oneself from the relocated team); schizo-identified (identifying with individual players on relocated team, but not the team overall); and non-identified (feeling indifferent towards the relocated team). It is evident fans respond to the loss of a team in different ways, and that many are deeply impacted by such losses. While the current study does not involve a relocated team, it can be argued that a relocated team, for many fans, signifies the loss of a team (Hyatt, 2007), as the focal object (team) is fundamentally different upon relocation.

### ***Sport sponsorship and identification***

Within the sponsorship literature, many scholars have focused on the influence of identification on sponsorship effectiveness among consumers in terms of cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes. Broadly, identified individuals are often more likely (than those who are not identified) to view a sponsor of that entity positively. The rationale for this is that, by mere association of a sponsor company with a team, individuals who identify with that team should have more favourable views of the sponsor (Madrigal, 2001).

Considering identification and cognitive sponsorship outcomes, scholars have suggested a positive relationship between identification and sponsor recognition (Deitz, Myers, & Stafford, 2012; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Consumer perceptions of a sponsors' image have also been found to be positively related to identification (Kim & Kim, 2009). In addition to cognitive sponsorship outcomes, the relationship between social identity and affective sponsorship outcome has been studied by several researchers. Researchers have found positive relationships between identification and consumers' attitudes towards the sponsor (Deitz et al., 2012; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001; Parker & Fink, 2010), feelings of goodwill towards the sponsor (Meenaghan, 2001), and satisfaction with the sponsor (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). Finally, scholars have also examined the relationship between identification and behavioural outcomes of sponsorship, with several finding a positive relationship between identification and sponsor product purchase intention (Deitz et al., 2012; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000, 2001).



It is evident scholars have paid a significant amount of attention to how sponsorship works during the contract, but very little attention to how sponsorship works once partnerships end. Inevitably, most sponsorship engagements – even those that are long-term partnerships – end. While sponsorship seems to have attitudinal influence during a sponsorship, especially among identified individuals, little is known about consumer response to sponsorship termination.

### ***Consumer response to sponsorship termination***

As mentioned, although scholars have extensively examined consumer perceptions of sponsorship, nearly all of these studies have focused on sponsorship engagements while in existence. Research into consumer perceptions of sponsorship termination is minimal. In addition, considering the limited research into consumer perceptions of sponsorship termination, scholars have used experimental studies to examine the phenomenon (Grohs et al., 2016; Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012), thus making evident the need for a study of consumer reaction to a real-world sponsorship termination. Nonetheless, the existing research into sponsorship termination further informs the current study.

Acknowledging the lack of inquiry into consumer perceptions of sponsorship termination, Ruth and Strizhakova (2012) examined whether sponsor termination resulted in negative attitudes towards the (former) sponsor, and the extent to which certain characteristics of the sponsorship alleviated negative consumer reaction. Using balance theory, attribution theory, and relationship theory as theoretical frameworks, the authors conducted a series of experimental studies in which survey respondents answered questions related to a fictitious scenario involving a sponsor of an arts and crafts festival in their town. The authors found that when respondents perceived the sponsorship was terminated for sales-oriented motives, consumer attitudes towards the exiting sponsor were significantly more negative. In addition, they found that those who were more involved with arts and crafts had less negative attitudes towards the exiting sponsor if they believed it had been a long (rather than short) partnership, thus indicating the potential influence of sponsor duration on consumer reaction to sponsorship termination. The authors encouraged future researchers to consider how consumers react to a sole sponsor terminating its sponsorship of an entity.

In a more recent study of sponsorship termination, Grohs et al. (2016) conducted experimental research with fans of a soccer team. Respondents answered survey questions pertaining to a fictitious sponsor (i.e. not a real company) of a real soccer team. The authors found that respondents' attitudes towards the fictitious exiting sponsor were more negative if the sponsorship was long term and appeared to fit well with the team, as well as if they were led to believe that there was no replacement for the sponsor. As such, the authors emphasised that the most troublesome sponsorship termination may be long-term sponsorship terminations where no replacement sponsor is available. In addition, given the experimental nature of their study, they encouraged future researchers to consider examining sponsorship termination in a real-world setting.

The research undertaken in the current study responds to calls from Ruth and Strizhakova (2012) and Grohs et al. (2016) for additional research into sponsorship termination, especially that which is conducted in a real-world setting, focusing on a sole sponsor exit situation. Although several recent cases of terminated sponsorships could provide insight on this topic, the case of the Basque professional cycling team Euskaltel-Euskadi losing its



sponsor, Euskaltel, is an interesting case to study because of its fit (geographically, as a Basque company) and longevity (as the partnership lasted more than 15 years).

### ***Contextual background: cycling in Basque Country***

Located in the western Pyrenees adjacent to the Bay of Biscay on the Iberian Peninsula, the Basque Country (i.e. Euskal Herria, or Euskadi) is one of several autonomous communities within Spain, each with distinct national and cultural identities. Basque inhabitants have a strong sense of Basque identity, largely a consequence of their 'strong national consciousness in political, linguistic and cultural matters' (Győri Szabó, 2013, p. 526).

Basques derive a strong sense of self from the land that they inhabit, the language they speak, and the culture they have inherited and continue to shape in modern times. As a result of such strongly held national identities, Basques have on multiple occasions (and as recently as 2005) considered seceding from Spain, however as Győri Szabó (2013) noted, this is improbable, as neither the Spanish government nor the European Union support such a notion.

Sport frequently serves as a means to convey national identity (e.g. Jackson, 1994; Maguire, 1994; Tomlinson & Young, 2006), and as scholars have suggested, sport and geographic identity are often related (Heere & James, 2007; Heere et al., 2011). In the Basque Country, sport allows Basque nationalism to be emphasised both within and beyond its borders. Cycling in the Basque Country has been considered a national sport for decades, as it is widely popular among Basques in regard to spectating professional competitions and participating in the sport as a leisure activity. Despite the Basque Country's modest size (roughly two million people inhabit the region), Basques are recognised internationally for their passion for cycling (Garcia, 2012). Particularly, Basques are recognised as avid spectators and supporters of the Tour de France and Vuelta a España when cyclists pass through the Pyrenees during the events. As such, the Basque Country has been referred to as Spain's 'cycling heartland' (Fotheringham, 2013) and 'one of the European hotbeds of cycling' (Hood, 2013).

### ***Orange tide: the rise (and fall) of a grassroots project***

Given Basques' affinity with cycling as both a recreational and spectating activity, in 1993 a group of Basque cycling fans conceptualised a unique professional road cycling team. Rather than relying primarily on corporations to fund the team, the team's budget would be realised through fan contributions and additional funding support from the Basque government (Fotheringham, 2013). Called Euskadi, riders for the Euskadi team would be required to be of Basque heritage, providing young Basque riders an opportunity to develop and compete at an international level while staying true to their Basque roots. Although many Euskadi cyclists would frequently progress to larger professional cycling teams with greater budgets, the team nonetheless served as a launching pad for several Basque riders while also reinforcing Basque identity and pride in one of its national sports. As such, the Basque team gained instant attention by many on a global scale for its novel concept (Fotheringham, 2013; Hood, 2013).

Eventually, the fan/government funded budget of Euskadi required corporate support in order to remain competitive at the global level (where most other teams were funded primarily by corporations). In 1997, Euskaltel became a corporate sponsor of the

Euskadi team, with the Basque regional government supplementing the remainder of the team's budget, thereby changing the name of the team to Euskaltel-Euskadi. Euskadi's transition to Euskaltel-Euskadi, while providing the team a financial boost, also meant a greater focus on performance rather than incubation and celebration of Basque heritage (Fotheringham, 2013). Nonetheless, Basques continued to support the team and embraced Euskaltel as a partner, with Basque cycling enthusiasts cloaking themselves in orange, the corporate colour of Euskaltel (with Basque flags in tow), as they cheered on Euskaltel-Euskadi riders. Euskaltel-Euskadi's reputation on the international level gradually increased into the 2000s, aided especially by the achievements of cyclists such as Basque Country native Iban Mayo and Asturian Samuel Sánchez.

Despite Euskaltel-Euskadi's unique history and loyal following, a series of events led to the team dissolving in late 2013. In 2012, it became known that the Basque government would no longer be able to contribute funds to the team, as the government faced budget cuts in nearly all areas. Euskaltel increased its funding to allow the team to compete in the 2013 season (Hood, 2013). However, in 2013 Euskaltel announced that it would not be able to continue to fund the team solely, and it would no longer sponsor the team after the 2013 season. Forced to find a new sponsor, the team could not secure a new funding partner, and disbanded after its final competition of the season in October 2013, leaving Basque cycling supporters to reflect on a legacy (Fotheringham, 2013; Hood, 2013).

## Method

Digital ethnography was used to examine Basque professional cycling fan reaction to the cessation of Euskaltel-Euskadi in 2013. Ethnography is a method in which a researcher explores an idea or question rather than testing a structured set of research hypotheses (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). The information acquired via ethnography is unique relative to other qualitative research methods, as it allows the researcher to observe or experience the naturalness of a scene, rather than pose certain questions to individuals in a relatively formal manner (e.g. through interview or focus group research).

Within sport management, ethnography has been increasingly used among scholars as a method of inquiry (e.g. Costa & Chalip, 2005; Kodama, Doherty, & Popovic, 2013; Newman & Giardina, 2011). The types of ethnography used by sport management scholars have included traditional ethnography (e.g. Chalip & Scott, 2005; Costa & Chalip, 2005), self or auto-ethnography (e.g. Carrington, 2008; Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013), and digital ethnography (e.g. Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2014).

## Digital ethnography

Digital ethnography as a method of inquiry allows the researcher to observe how individuals interact in a virtual space, and what exactly their behaviours are (Kozinets, 2002; Murthy, 2011). Thus, conducting digital ethnography allows researchers to gather and interpret information and interactions between Internet users as particular events occur. Given consumers' increasing use of technology to consume sport (Hutchins, 2011), digital ethnography is a viable method to understand consumer sentiment as an event unfolds (Armstrong et al., 2014).

Considering the digital ethnography conducted in the current study, fan comments on Basque-focused sites and forums were monitored over a six-month period, from July to December 2013, to 'observe' cycling fans' reactions to the loss of Euskaltel-Euskadi as a UCI World Tour team. Due to the observational nature of the study, fandom/group membership could not be assessed via survey (e.g. using an identification scale). Instead, blogs, Internet forums, and social networking sites specific to Basque cycling and/or Euskaltel-Euskadi were analysed. Based on the comments analysed, it was determined that individuals commenting on these sites were avid cycling fans, and more specifically, fans of Basque cycling. Evidence of fandom included: use of particular words suggesting a psychological connection to the team (e.g. love, we, our [team], my [team], tragic, fanatic); describing behaviours that align with those of a fan (e.g. creating videos to remember the team, continuing to wear team apparel, intentions to share memories of the team with grandchildren); and sharing feelings that suggest an emotional attachment to the team (e.g. sorrow, feeling as if someone died, loss of interest in cycling).

The sites monitored for fan comments during this period were: the Euskaltel-Euskadi Facebook page (in response to team posts regarding team performances in 2013 and farewell photos); a *Cycling News* forum (in two separate threads about Euskaltel-Euskadi disbanding on the website's professional road racing forum); and a popular Basque cycling blog (written in English) dedicated to Euskaltel-Euskadi, *Basque Cycling News* (in response to blog posts about Euskaltel-Euskadi in its final months of competition).<sup>1</sup> Observing fan comments on a range of sites (rather than a single site) allowed for a triangulation of sources in the data collected and analysed. Almost all of the comments on these sites were in English, with the remainder in Basque; to avoid potential translation issues, only comments in English were analysed.

Considering the number of individuals commenting on these sites in reaction to the ending of Euskaltel-Euskadi, those commenting could be called active consumers (i.e. those who discuss and comment on the Internet and/or social networking sites; Jenkins, 2006), representing a very small portion of the entire Basque cycling fan base. For example, on the *Basque Cycling News* blog, 5–49 readers commented on posts analysed pertaining to the fate of Euskaltel-Euskadi during the six-month period in 2013. On the *Cycling News* forum, two separate threads about Euskaltel-Euskadi's future totalled 94 posts (with some users posting more than once). Finally, on the Euskaltel-Euskadi Facebook page, posts about the team ending received more than 50 comments and hundreds of 'likes'. Although the number of comments on these sites was low in comparison to the entire population of Basque cycling fans, the comments nonetheless represented how fans reacted to the ending of Euskaltel-Euskadi on social media, and the range of sites monitored allowed for fan sentiment to be analysed from a variety of sources.

Although the comments analysed in the current study were posted publicly, given ethical concern over the privacy and protection of individuals in Internet research (Markham, 2012; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Murthy, 2011), individual names and/or usernames that may have linked a user to his/her comments have been removed and replaced with user numbers. As an additional means of protection for users, direct quotes from users have been gently revised so that information cannot easily be traced to the individual. Although refashioning data is ordinarily a frowned upon practice in research, Markham (2012) and others have supported such in online research, arguing

that the public, searchable nature of online information has posed an ethical dilemma to researchers: although individuals may publicly post opinions or thoughts on the Internet (via, e.g. message boards, blogs, social networking sites), they may not intend for this information to be used by researchers, even if it legally can be.

In the current study, it was determined that use of direct quotes might allow the information to be linked to the individual through an Internet search, and thus, quotes were refashioned to prevent such. Careful consideration was paid to how direct quotes were reworded, in an effort to maintain the truest consumer accounts and prevent distortion; words were replaced with synonyms or verb tense was changed to prevent linking the quote to the individual. Words evoking emotion or feeling (e.g. 'love') were not changed; instead, less significant words were placed with synonyms (e.g. 'many' was changed to 'several').

### **Basque cycling identity (Crisis): an interpretive analysis of fan identities**

This study is situated in an interpretive research paradigm, grounded by an assumption of subjective knowledge (in contrast to positivist and post-positivist research rooted in objectivist epistemologies; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As such, this study follows an interpretivist viewpoint that reality is not absolute, instead embracing the 'evolving nature of social reality' (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012, p. 70). As Markula and Silk (2011) noted, 'The interpretive researcher's main aim is to understand the participants' subjective experiences and through these experiences, interpret the participants' meanings' (p. 34). Thus, in the pages that follow, the researcher peers through the lens of Basque cycling fans to understand and interpret fans' reactions to the loss of Euskaltel-Euskadi as a UCI World Tour team. In doing so, the aim is to understand the influence of such a loss on fans in terms of their thoughts about the team (Euskaltel-Euskadi), its sponsor (Euskaltel), and the sport of cycling. By acknowledging fans' thoughts towards each of these entities and not simply the exiting sponsor, a more holistic understanding of fans' reaction to the terminated sponsorship is realised.

#### ***The team***

##### ***Celebrating the past***

In reacting to the disbanding of Euskaltel-Euskadi, fan sentiment towards the team was largely positive, often with a sense of nostalgia for their years as Euskaltel-Euskadi fans. Despite the reality of an ending era, many fans strived to supplant feelings of sorrow and loss with a celebration of what had once been, sharing memories from the past. A fan commented:

It was an interesting ride, with several lows, yet because of that the highs were very high. Who doesn't recall the surprise stage won by Izagirre in the Giro, beating all the favorites? An Euskaltel win was never easy which made it something to be cherished. (User 1)

Another fan wrote not only about memories of being a fan, but also how the intensity of his fandom interest led others to believe he was Basque:

Nothing says cycling like Euskaltel Euskadi orange. My love for Euskadi has developed, today people I'm Basque! I'm not sure there will ever be another team like Euskaltel Euskadi. It

represented more than cycling. It was gratefulness for the underdog, a love of a certain way of life. This team's influence is immeasurable. (User 2)

In addition to fans sharing memories of Euskaltel-Euskadi, others wrote about their intent to maintain a presence of the team in the future. One fan wrote of plans to share videos on YouTube. The notion of a Basque legacy was echoed by another fan, who emphasised not only what the Basque cycling team had accomplished in the past, but how it would be remembered in the future. The fan wrote, 'By these 20 years of joys for Basque cycling, perhaps the team disappears but the flame will always remain in our hearts' (User 4). As this fan insinuated, although financial circumstances led to Euskaltel-Euskadi's demise, the lack of a Basque professional cycling team would not extinguish long-held emotional feelings towards and attachment to cycling in the Basque Country.

The celebration of sorts and intended preservation of memories appeared to serve as a way for fans to acknowledge what they – the team, inclusive of its fans – had accomplished in 20 years, always as the underdog (relative to other World Tour teams). After all, as the team was founded and (partially) funded by Basques, it was truly a grassroots attempt for a local group of cyclists to develop and succeed on a global level. In a sense, celebrating the team's past accomplishments was a way for fans to cope with the loss of Euskaltel-Euskadi as a team (Markman & Hirt, 2002).

Two decades later, it was evident that not only had Euskaltel-Euskadi supporters fostered the development of a national, globally competitive cycling team, but that they had indeed influenced the entire sport of cycling (Brand, 2013). As one fan commented, 'The Basque influence is a large part of Cycling history and tradition. There is so much regional heritage between the Alps and the Pyrenees and the French and Spanish border' (User 5). As this user noted, the legacy of Euskaltel-Euskadi was not only apparent within the loose borders of the Basque Country, but also in far-reaching locales, wherever the sport of cycling and its enthusiasts travel.

### ***Doubting the future***

Despite many fans celebrating what Euskaltel-Euskadi had accomplished over the years, a sense of sadness was evident in that it was only a matter of time before the identity individuals had formed for the team would disappear (or at the very least, weaken). Basques (and even non-Basque supporters of the team) had made their pride in the team and Basque culture evident during Euskaltel-Euskadi's tenure, but the centrality of Basque Country and its inhabitants to the sport of cycling is conceivably everlasting, given the sport's rich history in the region.

The energy of Euskaltel-Euskadi fans in premier events such as the Tour de France gave them a significant presence in the cycling community, and the thought of this no longer being part of cycling worried and upset many Euskaltel-Euskadi fans. One fan wrote, 'So sad ... it was so much fun to be part of it all via this site, I wore the kit, supported MY team ... I'll really miss it, pro cycling won't be the same without them' (User 7). Another fan commented similarly:

It's tragic. Was a fan since 2000, in a fanatic way. The cycling races would bring me one question, how are the boys in orange doing? Cannot imagine watching races without my favorite team. Feels like someone is dying. So many things have gone wrong ... All the orange fans in the mountains will be missed. (User 8)

This individual's comment that 'someone is dying' signifies the importance of the identity derived from supporting the team, suggesting that a portion of the self (i.e. as a supporter of Euskaltel-Euskadi) is no longer. As much as fans tried to focus on the team's past accomplishments, the reality that their team would no longer exist was worrisome for them personally.

### **The sponsor**

Despite the obvious reaction among fans to the team itself disbanding, discussion of losing Euskaltel as a sponsor during this time period was much more subtle. Compared to discussion of the team disbanding, fans rarely talked about their thoughts about Euskaltel as a sponsor, or the fact that losing Euskaltel as a sponsor ultimately led to the demise of the team. Despite a lack of explicit discussion of Euskaltel, there was an overwhelming reference to the colour orange – Euskaltel's corporate colour – in fans' discussion of Euskaltel-Euskadi following news of the team's dissolution. Fans repeatedly mentioned 'orange' in their posts about the team. Indeed, Euskaltel-Euskadi cyclists and fans accrued nicknames celebrating Euskaltel's corporate colour over the years, with cyclists known as 'the orange carrots' (Cycling News, 2012) and fans referred to as 'the orange tide' (Fotheringham, 2013).

Although Euskaltel played a central role in the team's ultimate disbanding, fans' celebration of the colour orange (Euskaltel's corporate colour) in reacting to the team ending is perhaps indicative of the effects of a long-term sponsorship on identified fans, as well as fans' general appreciation for how Euskaltel had contributed to the team over the years. There appeared to be very little animosity towards the telecommunications company upon learning of the team's dissolution. Fans' continued reference to cyclists and fans basked in *orange* (rather than the Basque Country's colours of white, green, and red) might insinuate the feelings of gratitude previously posited by scholars (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Kim et al., 2010) in regard to sponsorship. Indeed, as one fan commented on the ending of the sponsorship (and thereby, the team):

Thank you to the Basque Country and Euskaltel for funding the team for decades. Thank you for not giving up on cycling during the several dark doping scandals, and thank you for the outstanding days of 2003 and 2011. (User 10)

In this regard, rather than focusing on Euskaltel not being able to continue to support the team, fans such as the previous one emphasised how Euskaltel had supported the team over a long period of time (two decades). This further suggests the benefits of long-term partnerships between an organisation and sponsor, and the intermeshing of the two entities that can occur as a result.

For some fans, the end of Euskaltel-Euskadi did not seem to be enough to diminish their affinity to Basque cycling, nor the corporate colour orange. Following the conclusion of the 2013 Vuelta a España, a fan wrote, 'Thank you for these years, I know I will continue encouraging many people from the gutter wearing my Orange shirt. Good luck to all!' (User 11). This fan found it necessary to not only celebrate the instilled feelings of pride the professional cycling team had afforded them over the years, but also to express intent to continue supporting Basque cyclists while wearing orange.

The longevity of Euskaltel's sponsorship of the Euskadi team might have resulted in fans internalising the corporation's colour as their own, a consequence of the partnership



between Euskaltel and the Euskadi cycling foundation, and how Euskaltel was true to the values of the team, its fans, and their Basque heritage. This adds support to the idea of a long-term sponsorship resulting in the sponsor becoming entangled in one's connection to a team (see Delia, 2014), and the notion that the sponsor over time becomes part of the team in the mind of the consumer. For Euskaltel-Euskadi fans, the cycling team was representative of the Basque Country, and with Euskaltel being a Basque company, geographic fit (Ruth & Simonin, 2003) in the sponsorship was established from the beginning of the partnership. Perhaps a result of the longevity and fit of the sponsorship, Euskaltel (and its signature orange colour) became synonymous with Basque cycling.

### *Where are the other companies?*

Separate from the apparent embeddedness of Euskaltel (orange) and Basque cycling, fans reacting to the ending partnership with Euskaltel were not discussing the telecommunications company negatively, but rather looking to other companies to possibly fund the team. One fan wrote:

I don't understand how no one wants to save the team? Orbea? Mondragon? Anyone! I'm not from the Basque Country but I love this team! To me, road cycling means EUSKALTEL EUSKADI. Pity! (User 12)

Another fan commented similarly:

I don't know what to say! All we needed was 3 million Euro (Euskaltel would continue with 6 mil)! For normal people this is a lot of money, but for some companies like Mondragon or local government in the Basque Country and even Bilbao - I cannot believe it was impossible to come up with this amount! It is strange and a pity! (User 13)

Others simply seemed to wish fans themselves could come up with the money to allow the team to continue, writing comments such as, 'If only I had millions lying around :(' (User 14), and, 'I'm sad about this. Why can't I win 125 million Euros in the Euro Lottery?' (User 9). Despite the hopeful comments from fans, no individuals or organisations stepped in to fund the team. As such, many Euskaltel-Euskadi fans were forced to consider their fandom of the sport of cycling moving forward.

### *The sport of cycling*

#### *In Basque Country*

In examining fan sentiment in regard to the news of Euskaltel-Euskadi disbanding in 2013, a particular sense of national identity – and superiority – was evident, again indicating the symbolic nature of Euskaltel-Euskadi to Basque identity. One fan – in response to a photo posted of Basque cycling fans in orange during the 2013 Tour de France – simply wrote, 'The fans in the Basque country are the best in everything' (User 15). This sense of Basque uniqueness and superiority was echoed by two fans engaging in discussion:

User 16: I liked Euskadi because they were a National Team.

User 17: Well ... by national you mean a Basque team ...

User 16: Euskadi is a country just as much as Scotland, Wales, and Cataluna. It has its own autonomous government. It is a shame that the team will be taken over by another multinational setup.



Given the Basque Country's historical struggle for national identity, it appears fans had come to view and experience Euskaltel-Euskadi as a symbol or representation of what could be, or, what should be: a wholly independent Euskadi.

In a sense, Basque cycling fans had embraced Euskaltel-Euskadi not just as a professional road cycling team to support on an international level, but also as a means to imagine the autonomous community as its own independent state. As one fan posted, 'They've contributed a great amount to cycling and have represented the region well. I will certainly miss them in the peloton' (User 18). So long as the Basque Country had a professional cycling team competing with the world's best cycling teams, so too could Basques imagine a continued preserving of Basque heritage (thus illustrating how the team represented the Basque Country). Essentially, Euskaltel-Euskadi and its signature colour orange had become symbolic of the Basque Country (Heere & James, 2007). Indeed, it is quite evident that many individuals' identification with the team stemmed from identification with the region and a certain way of life.

Although a majority of Euskaltel-Euskadi fans cautiously accepted news of the team's disbanding, there were still other fans who remained optimistic that the Basques would be back on the international circuit – riding as a Basque team – in the future. A fan wrote:

The Basque team is the last true regional cycling team, it has had the entire infrastructure to train riders from youth to the professional level peloton. The small portion of people in Spain were able to come up with such a laudable program that lasted for such a long time is commendable. The end of the team is a sign of the death of regionalism in the sport of cycling. Is this a good thing? I am not sure. But, if I will be watching races with my grandchildren, this team will certainly feature in the stories of 'old times'. I hope that the team just decides to come out of the World Tour and race at the local level for a couple of years; and then return to World Tour when they can get local funding. (User 19)

Thus, it is apparent some Basque cycling supporters did not necessarily believe Basque cycling had reached the end of the road with the disbanding of Euskaltel-Euskadi. Although it was evident the possibility of building another UCI World Tour Basque cycling team in the future would be an incredible task, it was equally apparent how incredible the very construction of Euskaltel-Euskadi was. Essentially, the fact that the once grassroots cycling project had succeeded at the international level secured hope that it might someday return to the international circuit.

### *On a global level*

Although some fans expressed their intent to follow Basque cyclists on whatever team they ended up riding for in the future, many others expressed their discontent with or entire disengagement from the sport of cycling as a result of the Euskaltel-Euskadi occurrences. Indeed, such a distancing tactic is quite plausible in instances where individuals' identities as fans are threatened (Hyatt, 2007; Wann, 2006). One fan commented, 'I don't even feel like following cycling any more, after 15 years of cheering for the orange underdogs. A damn sad day' (User 20). Another fan on the forum simply stated, '2013, the year that cycling died. F\*\*\* this sport' (User 21). While other Basque cycling fans were able to maintain a sense of hope and pride regarding Euskaltel-Euskadi's accomplishments and the future of Basque cycling, some could not help but face their reality: a reality that Basque cycling – and thus, their view of all cycling – was forever changed by the event unfolding.

For many Basque cycling fans, Basque cycling had become a component of their identity – an identity as a fan of Basque cycling. As such, eliminating Euskaltel-Euskadi largely changed the sport of cycling for many of these fans. One fan commented:

It's weird. I've always distinguished myself as a sports fan through cycling's Euskaltel-Euskadi. An exclusive club. Now I find myself lost. Without a team, a compass. Pro cycling's been in a year of transition for me. Haven't much cared for it. Only thing keeping me tied to it was the ever loyal boys in Orange. (User 22)

Another reader more simply wrote, 'Following cycling without the iconic orange jersey in the peloton simply won't carry the same emotions for me' (User 23).

It is evident Euskaltel-Euskadi had not only served as a way for Basque cycling enthusiasts to celebrate their interest in the team on an international level, but also as a way to instil and develop such sentiments. When or if an individual's identity hinges on the specificity of the team and its cultural significance, the threat of that team no longer existing is inherently threatening to the identity of the fan. In the case of Euskaltel-Euskadi fans, it seems the significance of the loss of the Basque team forced many fans to reconsider their cycling fandom in general, suggesting the loss of the team might result in an overall de-escalation of fandom, as discussed by Hyatt and Foster (2015). As a result of this consideration, evaluating sentiment towards the exiting sponsor (Euskaltel) was a lesser priority for these fans.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine fans' reaction to a real-world sponsorship termination, which left a team with no funding and ultimately led to the team dissolving. Through digital ethnography, fan reaction to the disbanding of Euskaltel-Euskadi in 2013 was analysed. While fan reaction to the occurrence certainly resulted in negative thoughts and attitudes towards the future of Basque cycling and professional cycling in general, fans did not explicitly discuss positive or negative feelings towards Euskaltel in regard to its terminated sponsorship. Rather, it was evident fans had grown attached to Euskaltel as a sponsor, and that the company's signature colour orange had become symbolic of the Basque Country in the cycling realm; they were appreciative of the company's support over two decades. In the remainder of this article, the theoretical and managerial implications of the current study on the sponsorship literature are discussed. In addition, suggestions for future research are offered, along with limitations of the current study.

## Theoretical implications

A majority of the literature pertaining to the relationship between sponsorship effectiveness and its relation to identification has focused on consumer sentiment during the sponsorship. In these studies, scholars have found a positive relationship between team identification and a variety of sponsorship effectiveness measures (see, e.g. Cornwell et al., 2005; Deitz et al., 2012). However, inquiry into sponsorship effectiveness and identification when a sponsorship is terminated is scant (Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012). Given that nearly all sponsorships do eventually come to an end, this is an area where research is warranted.

In the current study, it was apparent the individuals whose comments were analysed identified as fans of Euskaltel-Euskadi. Given that Euskaltel's terminated sponsorship of the team led to the team disbanding, one might believe identified fans would have negative attitudes towards the telecommunications company (as suggested by Grohs et al., 2016). However, in analysing fan comments in reaction to the event, no animosity towards Euskaltel was found. Instead, any mention of Euskaltel was largely positive, with fans proudly (and frequently) remembering the team through Euskaltel's corporate colour. It seems that the longevity of the partnership – which lasted more than 15 years – led to fans embracing Euskaltel as part of the team they were identified with. In addition, because the geographic fit of Euskaltel (as a Basque company) seemed to allow for the intermeshing of the Basque cycling team and its sponsor, this also may have also contributed to the lack of animosity towards Euskaltel. Indeed, Euskaltel-Euskadi's signature colour orange, the corporate colour of Euskaltel, had become a symbol of Basque cycling over time, and to some extent the Basque Country. Fans appeared to be more appreciative of what Euskaltel had provided to the team over the years, rather than focusing on the fact that the loss of Euskaltel as a sponsor ultimately sealed the fate of the team; such a finding aligns with the sponsorship research on gratitude (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Kim et al., 2010).

The circumstances under which Euskaltel entered and exited its sponsorship may have also contributed to the general lack of negative response from fans. That is, Euskaltel had stepped in to sponsor the team in the late 1990s, allowing the unique Basque professional cycling team to continue competing at the elite level. Considering the termination of the sponsorship, Ruth and Strizhakova (2012) emphasised how sales-oriented motives of sponsorship termination can contribute to negative attitudes towards the exiting sponsor. In the current study, when it became known that public funds (which supplemented Euskaltel's contribution to the team budget) would be withdrawn from the budget in 2013, Euskaltel increased its team funding to cover the budget for that season; however, financially, they could not withstand the increased amount. Indeed, the efforts of Euskaltel in 2013 to keep the team competing may have actually added to fans' feelings of gratitude towards the company for how it had contributed to the Basque team over the years.

In terms of fan response to sponsorship termination, the findings of the current study lend support to the findings of Ruth and Strizhakova (2012) in that the longevity of Euskaltel's sponsorship (i.e. nearly two decades) may have contributed to the general lack of negative response among fans analysed. In addition, because the case of Euskaltel-Euskadi was one of a sponsor exiting with no replacement sponsor available, the fact that fans did not express negative attitudes towards Euskaltel counter the findings of Grohs et al. (2016). Given that the fans commenting in the current study were identified with the team and more broadly, Basque cycling and the Basque country, it is likely that fans' identification with these entities allowed them to appreciate how Euskaltel – a Basque company – had supported the Basque cycling project for years. The Basque Country has a distinct national and cultural identity based on its history and people of the region, and all of this was seemingly reflected in Euskaltel-Euskadi. As a sponsor, Euskaltel fit with the values of the team and its Basque heritage, indeed becoming part of the team's history over time, which likely aided in fans' positive thoughts about the telecommunications company. Rather than blame Euskaltel for the team's demise, fans appeared to feel more negatively towards other (Basque) companies that did not step in to replace Euskaltel

as sponsor, as well as the larger structure of professional cycling. Nonetheless, the case of Euskaltel-Euskadi highlights the potential significance of long-term sponsorships involving identified fans, in that over time, elements of the sponsor company (e.g. a colour, logo) can become symbols of the team-related identity, thus resulting in the team and sponsor becoming intermeshed in the mind of the consumer. Just as Hyatt (2007) discussed the legacy of the relocated Hartford Whalers among the team's fans, the case of Euskaltel-Euskadi suggests that a strong team-sponsor partnership may allow a sponsor to be part of that legacy as well.

### ***Managerial implications***

Based on the current study, sponsorship in professional road cycling seems to be a double-edged sword. When sport has the backing of multinational or global corporations to advance itself, the (business-oriented) benefits of sponsorship seem undeniable. Sport entities reap sponsorship benefits through increased revenue streams, and thus sport consumers are theoretically provided an enhanced experience. However, when corporations can just as easily exit the sport sponsorship arena (even acknowledging contracts that discourage such), it can make sport entities and consumers particularly vulnerable. While corporate sponsors can allow cycling teams (and their fans) to flourish, their ability to walk away from partnerships leaves teams susceptible to deterioration. Subsequently, these actions can leave fans questioning their commitment and loyalty to the sport.

Sport entities are often vulnerable to sponsor turnover and/or inability to secure replacement sponsors (as with Euskaltel-Euskadi) and such occurrences may challenge the fandom of some individuals. As such, it is important for management within leagues to remain cognisant of the extent to which their teams rely on sponsorship dollars for funding, and how each team's fans contribute to the overall success of a league (Hyatt, 2007). In situations like that of professional cycling, where teams cannot exist without sponsors, it could be helpful for league management to assist in seeking and/or securing replacement sponsors when existing sponsors exit.

Separately, the current study highlights the potential positive effects of long-term sponsorship even when sponsorships are terminated. Inevitably, most sponsorships come to an end, and the findings of this study (along with those of Ruth & Strizhakova, 2012) suggest that fan response to the termination of long-term sponsorships may not be negative. Thus, managers of companies entering (or already engaged in) sponsorships should consider not only the amount they will contribute the sponsored property, but also how long they will be able to sponsor the property, knowing that the effects of sponsorship may be maximised (both during and after the partnership) if the partnership is long-term. In addition, the fact that Euskaltel's corporate colour orange became symbolic of the team (and to some extent, the Basque Country) illustrates how a sponsor can become part of the history and psychological meaning of a sport entity with a strong attention to the culture of the team and its supporters.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

Considering the current study, four limitations are worthy of noting. First, the sponsorship analysed was a long-term partnership, with Euskaltel sponsoring the Basque professional

cycling team for more than 15 years. As such, it would be beneficial for future researchers to examine fan sentiment regarding more short-term sponsorship terminations, and perhaps any differences in sentiment regarding the dissolution of short-term versus long-term sponsorships. Second, while this study was the first to examine sponsorship termination in a real scenario, use of digital ethnography as a method did not allow for direct interaction and conversation with fans regarding the ending of a sponsorship. While the use of digital ethnography was intentional as it allowed for the analysis of fan reaction to the event as it occurred, scholars might consider conducting interviews with fans as soon as a sponsorship and/or team dissolves, as such could allow for a deeper, more pointed study of fan identity and reaction to sponsorship ending. Third, the current study was of fans' immediate reaction to a team disbanding in terms of their identification with the team, sponsor, and sport of cycling. It would be interesting to extend such a study to examine fan sentiment to such occurrences over time, considering the legacy of a (former) sponsoring company over time. Fourth, only consumer comments written in English were analysed in this study. Although a majority of the comments were written in English, the omission of non-English comments must be noted because it is not known if non-English comments may have offered a different perspective of the reaction to the sponsorship termination.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to examine fans' reaction to a sponsorship termination that ultimately led to a team disbanding. Using digital ethnography, fan comments to the ending of both a team and a sponsorship were analysed. Fans were appreciative of the years they had as Euskaltel-Euskadi fans, but were simultaneously concerned about the future of Basque cycling on the professional circuit, and their identity as cycling fans. Considering Euskaltel and its terminated sponsorship of the team, fans did not explicitly discuss negative feelings towards the company in regard to its terminated partnership. It was evident they had grown attached to Euskaltel as a sponsor, so much so that it essentially became part of the team they were connected to. Fans were appreciative of the company's support for nearly two decades, indicating the effects of long-term sponsorship of a sport entity. Collectively, the findings of the current study illuminate additional avenues to those interested in studying fan response to sponsorship termination.

## Note

1. As of March 2016, the following visitor statistics of these sites were observed: Cycling News Facebook page (501,544 likes); Cycling News professional road racing forum (1,040,660 total posts); Basque Cycling News blog (385,597 unique page views). The Euskaltel-Euskadi Facebook page was removed upon the team disbanding, and as such, visitor statistics are not available.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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