



Sponsorship effects on brand image: The role of exposure and activity involvement[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Sponsorships capture a significant proportion of marketing budgets. In firm evaluations of the effectiveness of sponsorship engagements, image improvements represent the most important company objective. This study develops and tests a framework for explaining how exposure and activity involvement moderate the effects of event image, event–sponsor fit, and event commercialization on sponsor image. Using empirical data collected at a large sporting event with multiple sponsors, the authors show that increased sponsorship exposure reduces sponsor image if respondents perceive a low fit between the event and sponsor or high levels of event commercialization. Involvement in the sponsored activity improves the sponsor's image, in that the effect of event commercialization is positive for highly involved persons. This paper concludes with some reasons for the findings, implications for the choice and design of sponsorships, and further areas for research.

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1. Introduction

The humble beginnings of sponsorship as a marketing communication tool in the 1970s led to a period of rapid growth in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s (e.g., Meenaghan, 2001). Increased sponsorship activities and expenditures paralleled a deepened understanding of what sponsorships could and could not achieve. This growing body of knowledge fostered a shift in sponsorship objectives; modern sponsorships are particularly successful in changing or strengthening consumers' perceptions and brand images, because of their credibility (Balasubramanian, 1994), ability to create goodwill toward the sponsor (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; McDonald, 1991), and avoidance of blatantly obvious commercial intentions (Quester & Thompson, 2001). When companies support specific activities, the image of the sponsored event can transfer to the sponsor and benefit the image of that sponsoring company (Gwinner, 1997; IEG, 2003). Consequently, managers rank the promotion of corporate and brand image as their most important sponsorship goals (e.g., Schnitka, 2011; Tomczak, Mühlmeier, Brexendorf, & Jenewein, 2008).

Existing research confirms that sponsor image is a function of the image of the sponsored activity and the fit between the event and the sponsor (e.g., Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), though the role of event

commercialization is less clear. Lee, Sandler, and Shani (1997) suggest that increased commercialization might harm sponsor image, but McDaniel and Mason (1999) cannot find empirical evidence of this proposition. Confusion also remains about the role of two important components of consumer responses to sponsorship; exposure to the sponsorship and involvement in the sponsored activity.

This study aims to clarify the (moderating) role of sponsorship exposure and activity involvement in the sponsor image formation process. No prior research investigates the moderated relationships of event image, event–sponsor fit, event commercialization, sponsorship exposure, and activity involvement, and this study thereby contributes to a richer understanding of the mechanisms underlying sponsor image formation. The following sections provide a theoretical rationale for the framework, describe the hypotheses, and then detail the empirical test of these hypotheses in relation to a large sponsored sporting event, with many different sponsors and respondents with varying levels of sponsorship exposure and activity involvement. From a theoretical perspective, developing and testing a framework of sponsor image, drivers, and moderators enhances understanding of conditions in which sponsor image improvement is likely. Companies can benefit from the findings that provide suggestions about how to conceptualize and execute sponsorship programs to improve firm images effectively.

2. Sponsorship research: literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Brand image

According to Aaker (1992, pp. 109–110), brand image is “a set of associations, usually organized in some meaningful way.” Associations constitute pieces of information consumers hold about a particular

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brand, which comprise product-related or non-product-related attributes; functional, experiential, or symbolic benefits; and overall brand attitudes (Keller, 1993). Some brands position themselves as corporate social responsibility brands (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007), that is, they focus on social benefit associations.

Sponsorships aim to improve brand image on these dimensions. Socio-sponsorship, or the sponsorship of charitable organizations and causes, is particularly useful for changing social benefit associations and overall brand attitudes (e.g., Dean, 2002; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Professional sports sponsorships instead primarily strengthen brand image by providing links to specific brand benefits and attributes (e.g., Grohs, Wagner, & Vsetecka, 2004; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999). Sport events communicate a desired brand personality to the target market of the event, through the emotions and feelings that the event evokes (i.e., user and usage imagery; Keller, 1993), as well as convey benefits, such as prestige and status, that are inherent to certain types of sport events (symbolic benefits; Keller, 1993). Brand image improvement through sponsorship depends on influential factors related to the sponsored activity, the sponsor, and the individual consumer. Fig. 1 depicts the effects of event image (a factor related to the sponsored activity), event–sponsor fit (related to the sponsor), event commercialization (related to the sponsored activity), as well as sponsorship exposure and activity involvement (both related to the individual consumer) on sponsor image.

2.2. Drivers of sponsor image

2.2.1. Event image

Similar to brands, sporting events and art exhibitions share specific associations and characteristics. In line with Keller's (1993) definition of brand image, an event image includes the perceptions of an event, as reflected by the event's associations held in consumers' memory.

Two theories are predominantly used to explain how event image influences sponsor image: classical conditioning theory and the meaning transfer model (e.g., Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). Using classical conditioning research in advertising, Speed and Thompson (2000) suggest that pairing a sponsor (conditioned stimulus) with an event (unconditioned stimulus) results in event associations becoming attached to the brand in the consumer's memory. The meaning transfer model (McCracken, 1989) implies that cultural meanings move to a brand that is linked to a widely accepted symbol with a particular meaning. In a sponsorship context, meaning transfers to the sponsor by a link of the brand to the sponsored event (Gwinner, 1997), through their simultaneous presentation. Several empirical studies also support the image transfer concept in a sponsorship context (e.g., Otker & Hayes, 1987; Stipp & Schiavone, 1996). Therefore,

H1. Perceptions of the event image positively affect perceptions of the sponsor image.

2.2.2. Event–sponsor fit

The fit between a sponsored activity and a sponsor depends on consumer perceptions and consists of functional and image dimensions (Gwinner, 1997). Functional fit is high if a sponsor's product might be used at the event (e.g., a tire manufacturer sponsors a car race). Image fit is high if attributes associated with the event overlap with attributes associated with the sponsor (e.g., a prestigious car manufacturer sponsors a high-class golf tournament).

Most research suggests a positive relation between perceived event–sponsor fit and perceived sponsor image (Gwinner, 1997; Meenaghan, 2001), according to the product match-up hypothesis from advertising research. This hypothesis states that prominent product endorsers are more effective if their image matches the product's image (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Ohanian, 1991). Stimulus relatedness also exerts positive effects on consumer evaluations of an advertised product (Lynch & Schuler, 1994). For example, Till and Busler (2000) report a positive influence of a perceived fit between a celebrity spokesperson and a product on consumer attitudes toward the endorsed brand. For sponsorships, the match-up hypothesis implies that the degree of perceived similarity between the sponsor and sponsored event exerts a positive influence on consumer responses (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; McDaniel, 1999). In addition, d'Astous and Bitz (1995), Gwinner and Eaton (1999), and Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) show empirically that sponsor image improves when recipients perceive a high event–sponsor fit. Therefore,

H2. Event–sponsor fit positively affects perceptions of sponsor image.

2.2.3. Event commercialization

Event commercialization refers to the sponsor-initiated commercial activity surrounding special events (Lee et al., 1997), including the communication activity of all sponsors in relation to the sponsored event. Attitudes toward event commercialization reflect consumer reactions to these activities (Lee et al., 1997). Growing concerns suggest that well-known events are losing their identity by becoming over-commercialized (e.g., Lee et al., 1997; Murphy, 2007), which may cause spectators and consumers to develop negative attributions of sponsorships (Dean, 2002). Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li (2004) find that an attribution of self-serving company motives (e.g., enhancing company profits or reputation) is related to consumer perceptions of corporate exploitation. Although no detailed analysis describes the relationship of event commercialization, corporate sponsorship exploitation, ascribed company motives, and attitudes toward sponsors, several authors posit that increased event commercialization harms the overall consumer experience and triggers negative attitudes toward the sponsor (Dean, 2002; Lee et al., 1997; Rifon et al., 2004). Of the few empirical assessments of the effects of event commercialization (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2005), McDaniel and Mason (1999) find no direct effect on sponsor image. In line with attribution theory though, the present study maintains:

H3. Event commercialization negatively affects perceptions of sponsor image.

2.3. Moderator analysis

2.3.1. Sponsorship exposure

Sponsorship exposure refers to the amount of time spectators receive exposure to a sponsor message (Sandler & Shani, 1989). Exposure might occur directly during the sponsored event or in the mass media after the event. In line with classical conditioning theory, which posits that more pairings increases the strength of the association between an unconditioned and conditioned stimulus (Pavlov, 1927), the impact of event image on sponsor image should be greater at higher levels of sponsorship exposure. The meaning transfer model remains silent about specific effects of exposure (McCracken, 1989). In a conceptual article, Gwinner (1997) discusses potential moderators of the meaning

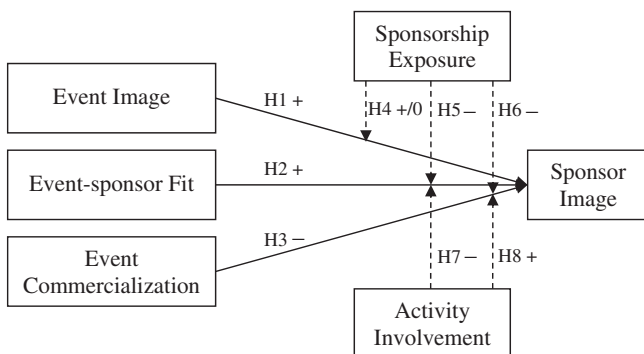


Fig. 1. Proposed model of sponsor image formation.

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