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“I support your team, support me in turn!”[☆] The driving role of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity in explaining behavioral effects of sport sponsorship leveraging activities

Jean-Luc Herrmann^{a,*}, Mathieu Kacha^a, Christian Derbaix^b^a CEREFIGE, University of Lorraine, IUT of Metz, Ile du Saulcy, CS 10628, 57045 Metz Cedex 01, France^b LABACC and CCMS, Catholic University of Louvain-Mons, 151 chaussée de Binche, 7000 Mons, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The sponsorship literature has only briefly examined the combined effects of leveraging activities with sponsorship. Although consumers' responses to sports sponsorship are expected to depend on the type of audience, no prior research has investigated the “driving” role of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity to explain the combined effects of leveraging activities with sponsorship. Drawing on social identity theory, this research – based on an experiment involving 2540 subjects – shows that a sponsor's sales-oriented leveraging activity (i.e. a promotional direct mail) containing an explicit statement of its sponsorship link with a sponsored sports entity, increases fans as well as non-fans' awareness of that link. However subsequent patronizing behaviors of the sponsor's stores and purchases in these stores are restricted to fans of the sponsored entity.

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1. Introduction

The idea that a sponsor needs to invest in marketing and communication related to the association with a sponsored entity in order to exploit the value of this association is the core of sponsorship leveraging. Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan (2008, p.639) define sponsorship leveraging as “the act of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and sponsor”.

However, according to Cornwell (2008) and Kelly, Cornwell, Coote, McAlister (2012), up to now the sponsorship literature has only briefly examined the combined effects of promotional activities with sponsorship. Previous research supports that leveraging activities that are more able to engage consumers (i.e. activation activities) generate more positive outcomes than non-activation ones (Carrillat & d'Astous, 2013; Sneath, Finney, & Close, 2005; Weeks et al., 2008). On this point, some authors like Bal, Quester, and Plewa (2009) bring to the fore the need to build on spectators' affective driven relationships

with the sponsored event or entity. This position echoes the widely accepted idea that consumers' responses to sponsorship depend on the type of audience targeted (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998), particularly in terms of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored activity (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Meenaghan, 2001).

In the marketing literature, Madrigal (2001) and Cornwell and Coote (2005) draw on social identity theory to conceptualize consumers' affiliation with a sponsored entity, respectively in sports sponsorship and cause sponsorship contexts. However existing research has not yet shown that consumers' affiliation – conceptualized in the sense of social identity theory – with a sponsored entity (e.g. a soccer team) could lead them to behavioral responses such as patronizing the sponsor's stores and purchasing the sponsor's products. In fact, and more specifically, no prior research has investigated the “driving” role of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity in explaining the combined effects of leveraging activities with sponsorship.

The framework of sponsorship-linked activities, particularly in terms of ecological validity, is useful for examining the relevance of this theoretical explanation based on consumers' identification with the sponsored entity. Apart from building or restoring awareness of the link between the sponsor brand and the sponsored entity (Cornwell, 2008), sponsorship leveraging activities, especially when sales-oriented, aim to produce behavioral outcomes. Such leveraging activities therefore provide the opportunity to pinpoint the driving role potentially played by consumers' identification with a sponsored entity when these consumers patronize a sponsor's products or stores.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 676286638.

E-mail addresses: jean-luc.herrmann@univ-lorraine.fr (J.-L. Herrmann), mathieu.kacha@univ-lorraine.fr (M. Kacha), christian.derbaix@uclouvain-mons.be (C. Derbaix).

Accordingly this research proposes to highlight the role of consumers' identification with a sponsored sport entity to explain the behavioral outcomes of sales-oriented sponsorship leveraging activities. More specifically this study examines (a soccer team's) fans and non-fans' awareness of the sponsorship link and their subsequent behaviors in response to a sponsor's promotional direct mail that mentions (or not) this sponsorship link. These outcome behaviors capture both actual patronage and purchases. In order to test the hypotheses an experimental design is carried out with 2540 subjects (i.e. representative samples of a soccer team's fans and non fans) taking advantage of a three week direct mail campaign implemented by the sponsor using two promotional direct mails containing either an explicit mention of the sponsorship link or not (baseline/control condition).

In response to a strong call in the sponsorship literature for using consumers' actual behavior (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Maroco, & Ross, 2013; Cornwell et al., 2005; Madrigal, 2001; Ngan, Prendergast, & Tsang, 2011; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009), this study focuses on fans' and non fans' actual behavior in response to a sponsorship-linked promotional direct mail of a well-defined sponsor. This research thus goes beyond consumers' self-reported attitudes and purchase intentions and contributes to meet managers' ultimate interest in increasing patronizing and purchasing behaviors (Meenaghan, 1996, 2001).

2. Leveraging sponsorship: the “driving” role of consumers' affiliation and hypothesis development

2.1. The “driving” role of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity

According to Cornwell et al. (2005), most research on consumer-focused sponsorship has mobilized the framework of an associative memory model. Thus “most sponsorship research has focused on improving the recall, recognition, or brand associations held in memory” (p. 22). The transfer of favorable associations or consumers' personal meanings toward a sponsored property (e.g. fun, dynamism, performance) to the sponsor brands or companies if consumers are aware of the sponsorship link (Derbaix, Gérard, & Lardinois, 1994; Meenaghan, 2001), is one of the predominant underlying mechanisms of sponsorship effects. Different theoretical backgrounds exist in sponsorship image transfer research such as McCracken's (1986) celebrity endorsement model, schema congruity theory, or classical conditioning (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Grohs & Reisinger, 2014). Cornwell and Coote (2005, p. 269) explain that “despite theoretical differences, a common theme in image transfer research is devotion to understanding the match or relationship between the event and the product. Consumers of the sponsored event (including participants, attendees, and media audiences) use this pairing in forming their own personal meaning or self-image by buying products and services that are consistent with their desired image”.

However as suggested by these authors, a different explanation appears to be useful in understanding the expected effects of sponsorship links on consumers' behaviors. Referring to Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995), Cornwell and Coote (2005) emphasize that consumers may be motivated to patronize sponsors' products or stores because of their identification with the sponsored entity, rather than because of image transfer and match-up processes. Arguably, Madrigal (2000, 2001) is the first marketing academic to explicitly investigate the effects of consumers' affiliation or “social alliance” with a sponsor on their intentions to purchase sponsors' products. This author conceptualizes spectators' affiliation or social alliance with a sponsored entity in terms of social identity theory. Referring to Tajfel and Turner (1985), Bhattacharya et al. (1995, p. 47) state that “social identity consists of salient group classifications that, in turn, may be based on demographic categories, gender, or race, as well as membership in central organizations, such as clubs or religious, educational, or cultural institutions”. In this theory, the spectator's connection to a sponsored team can be defined as the individual's sense of oneness with or belongingness to a sports team, “where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) of which he or she is a member”

(Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). “Identification enables the person to partake vicariously of accomplishments beyond his or her powers” (Bhattacharya et al., 1995, p. 47). In reference to Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Cornwell and Coote (2005, p. 271) write that “according to social identification theory, individuals who identify with an organization will commit themselves to actions that support the organization”. When an individual identifies with an organization, he/she feels actively involved in its successes and failures (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For instance, for soccer fans the team is the primary identification object (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010) and “true soccer fans support their team in both good and bad circumstances, through winning and losing seasons” (Derbaix & Decrop, 2011, p. 276). In other words individuals who identify with an organization will be more likely to support the source of their identification, but also more likely to develop behaviors supporting the sponsors they are aware of (Madrigal, 2000, 2001). Otherwise stated, individuals identified with an organization are more likely to patronize its sponsors “because the success of the organization is also their success” (Cornwell & Coote, 2005, p. 269).

Findings in the marketing literature (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Lings & Owen, 2007; Madrigal, 2000, 2001; Smith, Graetz, & Westerbeek, 2008) as well as in the sports literature (e.g., Biscaia et al., 2013; Hong, 2011; Ko, Kim, Claussen, & Kim, 2008) support the hypothesis that sponsorship, because of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity, has a positive effect on purchase intentions. However, these purchase intentions are too quickly considered as the ultimate indicator. In addition, the researchers implement very different purchase intention measures. The items used to self-report purchase intentions are usually about generic sponsors (i.e., sponsors in general) or refer to a hypothetical sponsor (Madrigal, 2000), rather than referring specifically to one actual named sponsor (for exceptions, see Biscaia et al., 2013; Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009 – study 2). Finally, all the investigations are cross-sectional surveys which may potentially suffer from social desirability and demand effect bias as well as from common method variance.

Furthermore, studies examining the combined effects of promotional activities with sponsorship are scarce (Cornwell, 2008; Kelly et al., 2012). That is why the current study investigates the “driving” role of consumers' affiliation with the sponsored entity in explaining the combined effects of leveraging activities with sponsorship. Sponsorship leveraging activities are typically implemented in order to build or bring back awareness of the association between the brand and the sponsored entity (Cornwell, 2008). In their analysis of sponsorship-linked advertising (SLA) as a leverage strategy used by both sponsors and ambushers, Kelly et al. (2012) emphasize that sponsors' SLA typically contains an explicit statement of the sponsorship link. Not surprisingly ambushers' advertising contains only implicit sponsorship connections through execution cues evoking the theme of the sponsored entity (such as a picture of a soccer stadium with no mention of the sponsor status).

The sales-oriented promotional direct mails used in the current study contain either an explicit mention of the sponsorship link or no such mention (baseline/control condition). Although awareness of the sponsorship link is probably higher among consumers affiliated with the sponsored entity (Walraven, Bijmolt, & Koning, 2014), when mentioning the sponsorship-link, the promotional direct mail (here the sponsorship leveraging activity) is expected to increase awareness of the sponsorship link both among affiliated and non-affiliated consumers. However subsequent patronizing behaviors of the sponsor's stores will be restricted to consumers affiliated with the sponsored entity.

2.2. Hypothesis development

2.2.1. The influence of sponsorship-linked promotional direct mail on fans and non-fans' sponsorship link awareness

The sponsorship literature widely evokes the importance of consumers' awareness of a brand's sponsorship activities. Classical

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