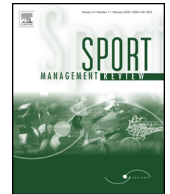




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Quantifying the effect of sponsor awareness and image on the sports involvement–purchase intention relationship



Catherine Bachleda^{1,*}, Ahlam Fakhar^{1,2}, Zineb Elouazzani^{1,3}

School of Business Administration, Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane 53000, Morocco

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ABSTRACT

Despite the exponential growth of corporate expenditure on sponsorship, to date there has been little exploration of the degree to which sports involvement influences purchase intention of sponsor products and how much of this effect can actually be ascribed to an indirect effect through sponsor image and sponsor awareness. Using a multiple mediation model, this research explored the mediational role of sponsor awareness and sponsor image in the sports involvement–purchase intention relationship. Results revealed that while sponsor image is an effective mediator of the sports involvement and purchase intention relationship, sponsor awareness acts as a suppressor. Moreover, per the ratio of indirect effect to total effect, sponsor image accounts for 90% of the total effect of sports involvement on purchase intention. These findings should assist sponsors and sport event managers to capitalize on sponsorship opportunities more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Sports involvement, defined broadly as the perceived interest in and personal importance of sports to a consumer (Shank & Beasley, 1998; Zaichkowsky, 1985, 1994), has been linked to a variety of sponsor outcomes, notably purchase intention (e.g., Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008). Both academics and practitioners have shown an interest in how sports involvement can be used in the development of marketing campaigns aimed at increasing purchasing intention, particularly intention to purchase a sponsor's product (e.g., Madrigal, 2000). This interest would appear to be based on the premise that there is a direct causal relationship between sports involvement and purchase intention. However, sports involvement has also been shown to have a direct link with sponsor image and sponsor awareness (e.g., Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007; Lascu, Giese, Toolan, Guehring, & Mercer, 1995). Furthermore, there is some evidence that sponsor image and sponsor awareness may be positively related to purchase intention (e.g., Eagleman & Krohn, 2012; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2010; Pope & Voges, 2000; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Whilst it has been acknowledged that sponsorship is a complex phenomenon (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009; Walliser, 2003), to date there has been little exploration of the degree to which sports involvement influences purchase intention and how much of this effect can actually be ascribed to an indirect effect through sponsor image and sponsor awareness. Thus, the exact relationship between sports involvement, sponsor image, sponsor awareness

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +212 0535 86 2336; fax: +212 0535 86 2060.

E-mail addresses: c.bachleda@au.ma (C. Bachleda), a.fakhar@au.ma (A. Fakhar), z.elouazzani@au.ma (Z. Elouazzani).

¹ These authors equally contributed to this work.

² Tel.: +212 0535 86 2348; fax: +212 0535 86 2060.

³ Tel.: +212 0535 86 2000; fax: +212 0535 86 2060.

and purchase intention remains unclear. Given corporate expenditure on sports sponsorship, which can be defined as a commercial organization providing either financial or in-kind assistance to a sporting activity for the purpose of achieving commercial objectives (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Meenaghan, 1983), has grown exponentially over recent decades (Akaoui, 2007; Olson, 2010), identifying and validating mediators of the sports involvement–purchase intention relationship may assist sponsors and sport event managers to capitalize on sport sponsorship opportunities more effectively. Therefore, this study sought to contribute to the literature by scrutinizing the sports involvement–purchase intention relationship in an attempt to uncover its underlying mechanisms. More precisely, the mediational role of sponsor awareness and sponsor image was explored and quantified. In the next section, the concepts of sports involvement, sponsor awareness, sponsor image and purchase intention, as well as their relationships, are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sports involvement

Zaichkowsky (1985) defines involvement as “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests” (p. 342). While involvement has been categorized in a number of ways in the literature, the dyad classification of enduring involvement and situational involvement remains popular (Houston & Rothschild, 1978; Tsiotsou, 2013). Within the context of sports, enduring involvement reflects an individual’s ongoing interest in a specific sport (such as tennis or soccer) based on values and past experience with the sport (Rothschild & Houston, 1980; Tsiotsou, 2013). In contrast, situational involvement pertains to the amount of involvement evoked by a specific sports game (Bloch & Richins, 1983; Havitz & Mannell, 2005). Many sport and recreational activities generate high levels of both enduring and situational involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Havitz & Howard, 1995). Indeed, enduring involvement has been associated with the more cognitive dimensions of involvement, reflecting personal relevance from a functional or utility perspective (e.g., watching tennis is valuable/worthless), whereas situational involvement has been associated with affective states, reflecting personal relevance from an emotional or expressive perspective (e.g., watching tennis is boring/exciting; Laczniak, Kempf, & Muehling, 1999; Park & Young, 1986; Tsiotsou, 2013; Zaichkowsky, 1994). Thus, a consumer can be emotionally as well as cognitively involved with either the sport of tennis and or with a game of tennis and the characterization of sports involvement related to personal relevance remains unchanged (Zaichkowsky, 1994). For the purpose of this study, sports involvement reflects a consumer’s overall subjective feeling of personal relevance toward sports (Celsi & Olson, 1988).

2.2. Sports involvement and purchase intention

One of the most common outcomes sought by sponsoring firms is purchase intention (e.g., Alexandris et al., 2007; Crompton, 2004). Purchase intention reflects the extent to which a consumer is willing to make an effort toward purchasing a sponsor’s product (Ajzen, 1991; Alexandris et al., 2007). Moreover, purchase intention is seen to be an antecedent to actual purchase behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). A number of authors have found that those involved in a sporting activity are more likely to express an intention to purchase a sponsor’s products (e.g., Bennett, 1999; Dees et al., 2008; Meenaghan, 2001). Dees et al. (2008), for example, found a direct positive relationship between sports involvement and intention to purchase a sponsor’s products when evaluating sponsorship of an elite intercollegiate football program. On the other hand, Alexandris et al. (2007), who used the dimensions of attraction and centrality to measure involvement in their study of a Greek basketball all-star game found there was no relationship between purchase intention and the attraction component of involvement, and only a secondary relationship between purchase intention and the centrality component of involvement. Such inconsistent results raise the question of to what degree does sports involvement influence purchase intention? In answering this question, it might be useful to consider two other commonly sought outcomes of sponsoring firms; namely image enhancement and increased brand awareness (Crompton, 2004). These two variables have also been linked to sports involvement and purchase intention. Is it possible, therefore, that part of the sports involvement and purchase intention effect could be ascribed to an indirect effect through these two other variables? This question is explored further in the sections below.

2.3. Sponsor image and the sports involvement–purchase intention relationship

Sponsor image refers to the ‘associations’ a consumer holds in their memory about a sponsoring firm. Such associations include perceptions, attitudes and other information (Keller, 1993, p. 2). There is abundant research that links sponsor image with both sports involvement and purchase intention. In terms of the sports involvement and sponsor image relationship, Alexandris et al. (2007), for example, found that a consumer’s involvement with the sport of basketball significantly predicted basketball sponsor image outcomes, and Meenaghan’s (2001) focus group study found more involved individuals, if satisfied by a sponsor’s behavior toward their favored sport, transferred their image values of the sport to the sponsor. In terms of the sponsor image and purchase intention relationship, Speed and Thompson (2000) reported sponsor image, in the form of positive attitudes toward a sponsor, was associated with willingness to consider a sponsor’s product, Filo et al. (2010) found sponsor image contributed to purchase intent for a charity sport event sponsor’s products, and Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009), in their study of a Greek basketball team’s fans, found sponsor image was the strongest direct determinant of intention to purchase a sponsor’s products. However, what is lacking in the literature is an examination of the

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