



Communicating CSR-linked sponsorship: Examining the influence of three different types of message sources



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ABSTRACT

As the demonstration of corporate goodwill through mega event sponsorship becomes increasingly challenging, sponsors often link their sponsorship to corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. However, finding adequate ways to communicate CSR-linked sponsorship is challenging. This research examines the relative effectiveness of three message sources from which CSR-linked sponsorship information can be communicated to consumers: the sponsor, the sponsored property, and the news media. Drawing on the Persuasion Knowledge Model, this study proposes differences between these message sources regarding their level of persuasion knowledge activation, which affects consumers' CSR perceptions of and attitude toward the sponsoring brand. The results of an experimental study show that CSR-linked sponsorship information from both the sponsor and the sponsored property result in higher persuasion knowledge activation than when this information comes from the news media. The results also reveal that the two serial mediators, persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception, transfer these effects of message source to consumers' attitudes toward the sponsor.

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1. Introduction

Sponsors of mega events such as the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup and the Olympics increasingly link their sponsorship activities to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives surrounding these events. For example, former FIFA sponsor Sony announced an educational football project for over 14,000 children in Latin America to leverage its sponsorship of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil (Sony, 2014). CSR-linked sponsorship (i.e., the linkage of sponsorship with CSR activities) enables sponsors to demonstrate corporate goodwill and enhance their brand image (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer, & Groeppel-Klein, 2014).

To obtain positive brand effects, relevant stakeholders (e.g., customers) have to be aware of the company's CSR-linked sponsorship activities. Information about such activities can be passed on through a variety of channels. These include channels controlled by the company, such as corporate advertisements, and channels controlled by third-party sources, such

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as media reports. While a growing body of academic research addresses several issues of CSR in sport management (e.g., Godfrey, 2009; Walker & Parent, 2010), little effort has been made to examine how different message sources affect the success of CSR communications (for an exception see Inoue, Mahan, & Kent, 2013). This is particularly true for previous work on CSR-linked sponsorship communication, which ignores message source effects and only examines CSR-linked sponsorship effects per se (Uhrich et al., 2014). This is an important shortcoming because research shows that different message sources have specific characteristics, which are important determinants of message acceptance (e.g., Priester & Petty, 2003). Importantly, CSR communications via company-controlled message sources (vs. message sources beyond the company's control) can lead to less favorable brand perceptions (e.g., Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). This effect is due to the fact that information from the company is usually regarded as more biased than information from independent message sources. However, the differentiation of unbiased third-party sources and biased company-controlled message sources does not fully cover the specific circumstances of linking sponsorship to CSR. In CSR-linked sponsorship, another potential message source has to be considered (i.e., the sponsored property). The FIFA website, for instance, includes several reports about social initiatives of its major sponsors (FIFA, 2014). The sponsored property as a message source has an ambiguous role because it is neither entirely independent of nor entirely dependent on the sponsor. Extant knowledge on the effects of independent vs. dependent message sources is therefore insufficient to explain the role of the sponsored property as a message source.

Against this background, the goal of this study is to examine the effects of three different types of message sources (i.e., sponsor, sponsored property, news media) on the efficacy of CSR-linked sponsorship. This extends previous research both in general business (e.g., Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006) and sport management (Inoue et al., 2013) that has primarily focused on the dichotomy between clearly unbiased and clearly biased message sources. Following a persuasion knowledge perspective (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we show that message source indirectly affects customers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand via two serial mediators: persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception of the sponsoring brand.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the following section, we briefly summarize previous work on CSR in the field of sport management and position our study within the current state of research. Next, we characterize the three message sources examined in our study and develop hypotheses regarding their influence on perceptions of the sponsoring brand. Then, we present an experimental study that tested our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss our findings and provide avenues for future research.

2. Conceptual background and hypothesis development

2.1. CSR research in the sport management literature

In recent years, several CSR-related research studies have appeared in the sport management literature (e.g., Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013; Inoue & Kent, 2012b; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell & Clark, 2003; Walker & Heere, 2011). The majority of this research addresses the development of CSR in sport organizations such as teams, leagues or governing bodies. Many of these studies focus on definitions (e.g., Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Walker & Parent, 2010) or different manifestations of CSR in sport (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Walker, Kent, & Vincent, 2010). Other studies examine the influence of CSR in sport on both society (e.g., Inoue & Kent, 2012a, 2012b) and the sport organizations themselves (e.g., Inoue et al., 2013; Walker & Kent, 2009). Relatively few studies examine how companies can engage in CSR through the medium of sport (Dowling et al., 2013; Levermore, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). This is surprising as sport is a suitable vehicle for companies to develop social initiatives that enhance their social and economic development (Levermore, 2010). Along these lines, Irwin et al. (2003) as well as Irwin, Lachowetz, and Clark (2010) showed that sponsors can benefit from cause-related sponsorship (e.g., through a positive impact on customers impression of the sponsor). Irwin et al. (2003, p. 132) define cause-related sponsorship as the linkage of "a sports event, corporate sponsor, and benefitting charity in a single event". In cause-related sponsorship, sponsors affiliate with a sport event that supports charitable causes (e.g., FedEx St. Jude Classic professional golf tournament, cf. Irwin et al., 2010). Cause-related sponsorship must be distinguished from CSR-linked sponsorship, which refers to situations where sponsors link their sponsorship to a cause that is not directly associated with or supported by the sponsored event.

The present research focuses on linking CSR to commercial sponsorship in the context of sport and examines the relative effectiveness of different message sources in communicating this linkage. CSR-linked sponsorship may help sponsors benefit from the sponsorship and at the same time take advantage of CSR activities in a sport context, which bear unique features such as passion and opportunities for stakeholder management (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009).

2.2. Message sources in CSR-linked sponsorship communication

Sponsors often use company-controlled channels such as corporate websites, annual reports, newsletters, or advertisements to communicate CSR-linked sponsorship. Such channels are fully under the sponsor's control; that is, the sponsor is the message source and can directly influence the communication content (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). However, using company-controlled channels can have negative side effects such as customer skepticism (Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005) and lower degrees of communication credibility (Du et al., 2010). This can be explained by the sponsor's self-serving interest in the success of the communication, which drives perceptions of message source bias.

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