Intern. J. of Research in Marketing 31 (2014) 16–29

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Intern. J. of Research in Marketing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar

The role of sponsorship fit for changing brand affect: A latent growth modeling approach

Marc Mazodier [a,b,*], Pascale Quester [c,1]

[a] University of Nottingham Ningbo, Ningbo 315100, China
[b] ISG Business School, Paris, France
[c] University of Adelaide Business School, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
First received in 12 July 2012 and was under review for 6 months
Available online 5 October 2013

Area Editor: Martijn G. de Jong

Keywords:
Sponsorship
Congruence
Event involvement
Attitudes toward sponsorship
Latent growth modeling

ABSTRACT

Using a latent growth modeling (LGM) approach, this study examines the controversial role of perceived sponsor–event fit in inducing changes in brand affect. On the basis of two longitudinal studies related to the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the 2012 London Olympics, the authors determine that fit and brand affect increase linearly over time. Resolving an apparent conflict in the marketing literature, the results show that the initial level of fit relates positively to the initial level of brand affect, but relates negatively to the subsequent increase in brand affect. Moreover, a significant and positive association emerges between the change trajectories, such that a steeper increase in perceived fit results in a faster rate of brand affect improvement. Furthermore, the initial level of brand affect is associated with subsequent increases in neither brand affect nor fit. Therefore, incongruence resolution is key to ensuring that sponsorship improves brand affect. Finally, both attitude toward the sponsorship and event involvement have positive impacts on subsequent increases in both brand affect and perceived fit.

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1. Introduction

The vast majority of major sporting events are sponsored in some way. In the past 40 years, sponsorship has evolved from the traditional, short-term corporate donations that were designed to boost management egos into long-term, economic-based relationships between sponsor and sponsored properties and that are typically grounded by complex legal agreements (Quester & Thompson, 2001). Sponsorship spending has increased significantly from $2 billion worldwide in 1984 (Sponsorship Research International, 1996) to an estimated $48.6 billion in 2011 (International Events Group, 2012).

Extensive research has therefore sought to establish how sponsorship affects brand awareness, affect, trust, and loyalty, in addition to consumer purchase intention (for a review, see Cornwell, 2008). However, the majority of research refers to sponsorships in static terms, whereas the cumulative nature of sponsorship effectiveness suggests the need for a longer-term perspective and the use of longitudinal methodologies. The relevant data should be collected periodically to record the changes in consumer brand affect over time (Pham, 1991).

Research confirms that attitudes toward sponsorships (Quester & Thompson, 2001), event involvement (Lardinoit & Derbaix, 2001; Meenaghan, 2001), and sponsor–event fit (Johar & Pham, 1999; Olson & Thjømøe, 2011) are critical factors of sponsorship effectiveness. Fit is a powerful predictor of sponsorship persuasion, which is consistent with schema theory. Sponsorships exhibit high levels of fit when they are consistent with the consumer expectations for a firm, increase the likelihood that spectators will identify the sponsors correctly (Johar & Pham, 1999; Johar, Pham, & Wakefield, 2006), encourage positive brand attitudes (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), induce favorable purchase intentions (Olson & Thjømøe, 2009), and increase brand equity (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). However, Olson and Thjømøe (2009), using realistic sponsorship stimuli, and Trendel and Warlop (2007), using implicit measures, demonstrate that sponsors with a low level of fit may enjoy stronger identification than sponsors with a high level of fit, primarily because people find some degree of incongruence interesting. Low fit sponsorships can generate positive effects (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), particularly among spectators with a high need for cognition (Masterson, 2005) and those who view the sponsorship as philanthropic (D'Astous & Bitz, 1995) and consider the event to be significant (Speed & Thompson, 2000) or the association to be entertaining and creative. However, Prendergast, Poon, and West (2010) find no influence of image congruence on brand affect.

These conflicting results may arise because fit changes over time, even though congruence literature conceptualizes it as a generally static variable. Prior research offers a wealth of knowledge regarding the fit construct, its antecedents and its consequences, but a fundamental premise remains untested: Does a person's perception of congruence

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[*] Corresponding author. University of Nottingham Ningbo, Ningbo, 315100, China, and Adjunct Professor at ISG Business School, Paris, France. Ph: +86 574 8818 3042.
E-mail addresses: marc.mazodier@nottingham.edu.cn (M. Mazodier), pascale.quester@adelaide.edu.au (P. Quester).
[1] Tel.: +61 8 8303 3986.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2013.08.004

change over time? If so, is that change indicative of a subsequent change in the brand affect caused by sponsorship? The potential impact of these questions is significant. Academics and practitioners have long relied on fit to explain sponsorship (Olson & Thjomoe, 2011; Quester & Thompson, 2001). If fit perceptions can change, then certain interventions could enhance the perception of this fit. Therefore, this study examines the effect of incongruence resolution that might result from an acceptance of incongruent brand–event associations. A study by Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy (2005) calls for the empirical validation of a sponsorship's ability to resolve initial incongruence and the testing of the positive attitudes that could result. Many companies seek to improve their brand image by sponsoring an event that might not fit with their current brand image but that offers beneficial associations (Smith, 2004). The decision to sponsor events that do not share a natural fit with the brand is both common and intentional. Therefore, we study the effect of sponsorship on perceived brand–event fit and examine the impacts of two individual variables, attitudes toward the sponsorship and event involvement, on the process of incongruence resolution. This study also examines the relationship between changes in perceived fit and brand affect over the course of a sponsorship. Using latent growth modeling (LGM), we disentangle the static (initial status) and dynamic (change) components of these variables. To achieve greater external validity, we also conducted two studies to collect data from the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the 2012 Olympics for three successive occasions in each case (i.e., before the event, at the beginning of the event, and at the conclusion of the event). Specifically, we studied Sony's sponsorship of the 2010 FIFA World Cup and EDF's sponsorship of the 2012 London Olympics. This study elucidates the role of fit in defining the change in brand affect that can result from sponsorship.

This study provides an overview of the sponsorship and congruence literature that serves as the foundation for our hypotheses development. We then present the results and conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological implications of our findings.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. The sponsorship-linked marketing activities

The sponsorship involves an exchange between a sponsor and the event property; the property sells the right to associate with the event to the sponsor, thereby providing leverage opportunity to the sponsor to exploit its communications to consumers (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Sponsorship-linked marketing is a subset of event-related marketing and is distinguished by the presence of sponsorship contracts that authorize certain entities to associate with the event in an official way (Cornwell, Humphrey, Maguire, & Weeks, 2006). Keller (2003) suggests that sponsorship, through an association with an event, builds brand equity more effectively than traditional marketing communications such as advertising. Cornwell et al. (2005) also emphasize the importance of examining sponsorship-linked marketing and recommend theoretically grounded research into sponsorship processing.

Certain studies demonstrate that sponsorship can enhance a sponsor's brand affect (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). The mere exposure effect (Olson & Thjomoe, 2003) that spreads activation through an associative network (Pham & Vanhuele, 1997) and transfer models (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Keller, 2003) attempt to explain how sponsorships improve brand attitudes. However, none of these studies elucidate the relationship between sponsorship-linked marketing and any brand affect *improvement*. For example, the role of repetition for communication effectiveness has gained considerable research attention, and the leading theory advocates a curvilinear relationship between message repetition and message effectiveness (Anand & Sternthal, 1990; Batra & Ray, 1986). However, Campbell and Keller (2003) demonstrate that brand affect increases linearly with message repetition for familiar brands. Additional processing, as a result of repetition and brand unfamiliarity, may lead to fewer positive thoughts over time. Moreover, consumers may use more extensive processing to consider the inappropriateness of advertising tactics for unfamiliar brands when the advertisements appear to be repeated more frequently (Campbell & Keller, 2003). The sponsors of large events are often familiar brands (e.g., Adidas, HSBC, and Sony). We hypothesize the following:

H1. The consumer brand affect, over time and at the individual level, increases linearly as a result of sponsorship-linked marketing from familiar brands.

2.2. Fit and sponsorship effects

Sponsorship research focuses on the idea of fit (or congruence, relatedness, or match) between a sponsor and the sponsored event or activity. Congruence refers to the extent to which the sponsor and the event are perceived as similar, whether on the basis of functionality, attributes, images, or other key associations (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Congruence appears in many studies across different areas of marketing, including some early definitions in the brand extension literature. For example, Park, Milberg, and Lawson (1991) define perceived fit as a process of categorization by consumers that determines the suitability of a new product introduced under a given brand name. Most literature conceptualizes congruence as uni-dimensional (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000), though certain scholars suggest a multi-dimensional approach (Fleck & Quester, 2007; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010). For this research, we adopt a dominant, uni-dimensional conceptualization for parsimony and simplicity (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

According to Becker-Olsen and Simmons (2002), the link between a sponsor and an event can be apparent from the mere juxtaposition of their names ("native fit"), or the association may require some explanation in dedicated communication ("created fit"). This study investigates both native and created fit with respect to the sponsorship-related impact on brand affect. The potential negative effects of incongruence represent another important issue for managers of sponsoring companies that lack a logical or natural link to the sponsored events. Hoeffler and Keller (2002) suggest that high levels of company–cause fit bolster a company's existing brand associations, but low levels of fit are more conducive to both augmenting current associations and creating brand differentiation. Finally, certain firms may engage in sponsorships simply to support a worthy (though ill-fitting) event (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Cornwell et al., 2006; Olson & Thjomoe, 2011; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006).

2.2.1. Fit and sponsorship effects in the short term

The effect of congruence and its various definitions have been examined extensively to produce a range of documented effects. For example, many studies demonstrate that high levels of native fit lead to more favorable responses to sponsorship, including sponsor recall and recognition (Johar & Pham, 1999), image transfer from event to sponsor (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), and brand equity (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). To account for these positive effects of congruence, most prior research employs spreading activation theory (Anderson, 1983) or Heider's (1958) balance theory. According to Heider's (1958) balance theory, incongruent information tends to be ignored (Aaker & Sengupta, 2000). When people are exposed to sponsorship information, they access event and brand schemas from memory and compare them, which determines their judgment with respect to the appropriateness of the sponsorship (McDaniel, 1999). A match leads to more positive evaluations because affect moves from the event schema to the brand schema (Perrachio & Tybout, 1996). Additionally, when consumers elaborate on the sponsorship and discover a level of congruence, they experience a sense of cognitive satisfaction that influences their

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