

Effect of self-congruity with sponsorship on brand loyalty[☆]

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to extend self-image congruence research into the corporate sponsorship literature in marketing communications. We do this by developing a conceptual model showing how self-congruity with a sponsorship event affects brand loyalty. The model posits that self-congruity with a sponsorship event has a positive influence on brand loyalty, especially under two conditions: (1) when customers are aware of the firm sponsoring the event, and (2) when customers are involved with the event. The model was tested using data collected from five different surveys (total $N=1588$) involving Nextel mobile communications services (brand) in relation to NASCAR Nextel Cup Series (the sponsorship event). The results provide some degree of support for the model.

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1. Introduction

With the diversification of consumer needs, marketers increasingly use sponsorship for their marketing activities. Generally, corporate sponsorship can be defined as a firm's provision of assistance, either financial or in kind, to an activity (e.g., sport, musical event, festival, or arts) for achieving commercial objectives (Meenaghan, 1991). Recently, there has been rapid increase in sponsorship marketing as marketers try to enhance their brand image and increase brand loyalty by sponsoring various cultural and sports events (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998). According to the Performance Research 2001/IEG Study Highlights What Sponsors Want (2001), sponsors indicated that the number one objective for their sponsorships is increasing brand loyalty.

The research reported here deals with self-image congruence and makes a contribution to self-image congruence research in

consumer behavior by extending this concept into the sponsorship arena in marketing communications. *Self-image congruence* refers to the match between consumers' self-concept (actual self, ideal self, etc.) and the user image of a given product, store, sponsorship event, etc. "Self-congruity" is commonly used to mean self-image congruence. We will use "self-congruity" throughout the paper.

Consumers purchase products not only for the utilitarian benefits but also for self-expressive benefits (e.g., Park et al., 1986). The motivation to express their own self is often the driving force that prompts consumers to purchase goods and services (e.g., Sirgy, 1982). Research on self-image congruence has shown that self-congruity with a product or store (match between brand user image and consumer's actual self-image) has a positive influence on a variety of consumer behaviors such as brand attitude, brand preference, purchase motivation, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty (for literature reviews, see Bauer et al., 2006; Claiborne and Sirgy, 1990; Sirgy, 1982, 1985; Sirgy et al., 2000; Sirgy and Su, 2000). Little has been done so far on how self-congruity with a sponsorship event affects consumer behavior. This paper seeks to establish the conceptual link between self-congruity with a sponsorship event and brand loyalty. Specifically, we make the conceptual argument that

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self-congruity with a sponsorship event contributes significantly to brand loyalty, especially under two conditions: (1) when brand customers are aware that the firm is sponsoring the event, and (2) when brand customers are involved in that event. We then report data collected from five surveys to test these hypotheses.

From a managerial point of view, our research addresses the important question that many marketers raise: Should marketers invest resources in developing marketing communications campaigns designed to increase their customers' involvement with the sponsorship event and heighten their awareness that the firm is sponsoring the event? Our study provides an answer to these managerial questions.

2. Conceptual development, model, and hypotheses

Our conceptual model is graphically shown in Fig. 1. The model posits that self-congruity with sponsorship events contributes to brand loyalty, and this relationship is moderated by two factors: customer awareness (awareness that the firm is sponsoring the event) and customer involvement (involvement in the sponsorship event). In other words, customers of a particular product who can identify with the people attending the sponsorship event are likely to feel more loyal toward the brand, especially when they are emotionally involved with the sponsorship event and aware that the firm is sponsoring the event.

According to self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986), people select to purchase and use goods and services that have a user image consistent with their own self-image. Doing so allows consumers to reinforce their own personal identity, their own view of themselves (i.e., their self-concept). By holding positive attitudes toward and purchasing brands perceived to be similar to their self-concept consumers achieve “self-consistency” (cf. Aaker, 1997; Graeff, 1996; Grubb and Grathwohl, 1967). In other words, people are motivated to hold a set of beliefs about themselves (a self-concept) and act in ways (e.g., purchase and use goods and services) to reinforce their self-concepts. Behaviors and events that result in self-perceptions inconsistent with one's self-concept cause dissonance—a state of mental stress that motivates people to restore consonance. This motivational tendency has been coined as the need for self-

consistency (Epstein, 1980). The *need for self-consistency* is a self-concept motive that motivates people to behave in ways consistent with how they see themselves—consistent with their actual self. People have beliefs about their own identities, values, lifestyles, preferences, and habits. Once their “self-theories” (meta-beliefs) are established, they become highly motivated to protect them. Major threats to their self-theories account for mental breakdown and psychosis (Epstein, 1980). In the same vein, consumers' need for self-consistency motivates purchase behavior and brand loyalty. Consider the example of purchasing clothes. Most people purchase clothing outfits that fit their actual self-image, irrespective of whether these self-images reflect their ideal self. Consumers who view themselves as sloppy looking are likely to buy clothes (and repeatedly do so) that reinforce themselves as sloppy looking, even though they may not like themselves as sloppy looking (Erickson and Sirgy, 1989, 1992).

Much research in consumer behavior has demonstrated that actual self-congruity (match between consumer's actual self-image and the user image associated with a particular good, service, or store) is positively related to consumer behavior constructs such as brand attitude, brand preference, brand choice, purchase motivation, purchase intention, brand purchase, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty (for literature reviews of this research in relation to different goods, services, and stores see Bauer et al., 2006; Claiborne and Sirgy, 1990; Sirgy, 1982, 1985; Sirgy et al., 2000; Sirgy and Su, 2000).

2.1. The effect of self-congruity with sponsored events on brand loyalty

Self-congruity with a sponsorship event refers to the degree to which consumers think the image of the sponsored event matches with their own self-image. That is, self-congruity with sponsorship reflects the degree of congruity between the consumer's self-image and the image of the event. Self-congruity with a sponsorship event differs from self-congruity with the brand in that the latter reflects the fit between consumer self-image and the firm or brand image.

Brand loyalty is determined by many factors, corporate sponsorship is one of those factors (e.g., Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003; Javalgi et al., 1994; Madrigal, 2001). How does this come about? We propose that the relationship between corporate sponsorship and brand loyalty is mediated by a self-congruity process. That is, customers of a particular brand are likely to develop feelings of brand loyalty when they recognize that the firm is sponsoring an event that they can identify with (i.e., experience self-congruity with that event). Self-congruity with the sponsorship event helps create a favorable attitude toward that event, and these positive feelings spill over to the firm sponsoring the event. Such feelings are more easily transferred to the firm that the consumer recognizes as having transacted with (i.e., being a customer of that firm) than other firms (Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999).

Functional attitude theory (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Shavitt, 1990; Shavitt et al., 1992) posits that a distinct function of an attitude is to symbolize and express a person's self-image

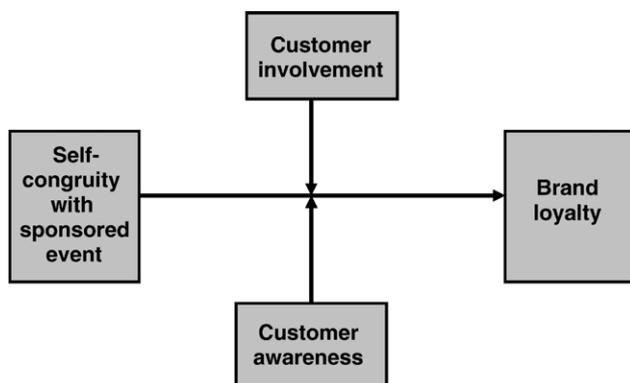


Fig. 1. A model linking self-congruity with sponsorship and brand loyalty.

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