



Sponsorship portfolio as a brand-image creation strategy

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ABSTRACT

The meanings held by events are sometimes transferable to a brand through sponsorship. The perceived sponsor–property fit affects brand evaluations. This research hypothesizes that in the case of a sponsorship portfolio, the source of image transfer can be composite, and brand image association may depend on the perceived fit between sponsorships. Building on theories of social cognition and categorization, this research proposes two dimensions of fit: sponsorship category relatedness and event personality fit. Two experiments show that categorical relatedness between sponsorships not only leads to the creation of a unified brand personality for the sponsor, but also enhances brand meaning consistency and clarity. Central category-related traits cue a category membership framework that integrates sponsorships in the portfolio. Under conditions of category ambiguity, the impact of event personality fit emerges. Interestingly, the findings suggest that sponsored properties having a “spiky” brand personality (having both high and low performance on dimensions) may communicate most clearly in a portfolio.

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1. Introduction

Corporate sponsorship frequently generates a favorable image for the sponsor, both at the corporate and brand levels (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). In much the same way that a product may share the image of an endorsing celebrity, meanings held by events are transferable to a brand through sponsorship (Cornwell and Cote, 2005; Gwinner, 1997). Given the success of sponsorship as a brand building tool, the use of a single sponsorship strategy is becoming increasingly rare, whereas complex portfolios with multiple sponsorship properties are becoming ubiquitous. The purpose of this research is to understand the impact of a brand's sponsorship portfolio on its brand image.

A sponsorship portfolio is the collection of brand and/or company sponsorships comprising sequential and/or simultaneous involvement with events, activities and individuals (usually in sport, art and charity) utilized to communicate with various audiences. In most cases, a brand's sponsorship portfolio includes properties that are distinctive in image, sometimes even seemingly incompatible. Samsung, for example, has numerous sponsorship properties, ranging from the Olympics to dog show Crufts to the Paralympics. While sports events may portray a masculine, vigorous, even aggressive image, theatres and arts festivals tend to give an exclusive and conservative impression (Gwinner, 1997).

Increasingly, sponsors seek to ensure that consumers are aware of their broad community engagement through sponsorship in a variety of channels. For instance, as an official sponsor of the 2004 Athens

Olympic Games, Swatch exposed event spectators to its sponsorship of UNICEF through its “Kaleidoscope” project. The project involved the auctioning of art works created by Olympians, artists and celebrities to raise funds for UNICEF (Masterman, 2007). A sponsorship portfolio is a heterogeneous phenomenon and the addition of a new sponsorship property to an existing portfolio may affect the consumer's knowledge network (Cornwell, 2008). In particular, the fit among a brand's sponsorship properties is likely to influence consumers' processing of the sponsorship portfolio and their evaluations of the sponsor's brand image. Thus, investigation of sponsorship portfolios examines the interaction between sponsorship properties of a brand.

As an analogy, consumer evaluations of brand extension depend on the degree of relatedness between different brand entities within a portfolio (Lei et al., 2008; Mao and Krishnan, 2006). While researchers show interest in multiple brand assessment (e.g., Dacin and Smith, 1994) and collective communication effects (e.g., Keller, 2001), empirical evidence concerning how consumers respond to a sponsorship portfolio remains scant. If the introduction of a brand extension can create a feedback effect to the parent brand and existing products (Lei et al., 2008; Mao and Krishnan, 2006), similar effects may occur in case of sponsorship introductions at different points of time. Consistent with current marketing thought (e.g., Keller, 1993), brand communications through a sponsorship portfolio should convey a coherent message.

The study here focuses on brand meaning (an overall assessment of what a brand represents in the mind of a consumer; Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006) and brand personality (the set of human characteristics associated with a brand; Aaker, 1997) as indicators of brand image. These are important measures because (1) brand personality allows for differentiation and competitive positioning (Aaker, 1997);

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(2) consumers select brands with meanings congruent with an aspect of self-concept, and self-image congruity has a positive influence on brand loyalty (Sirgy et al., 2008); and (3) consistency and clarity in communication allow people to know what to expect from a brand (Keller, 1993). Although researchers examine sponsorship effects on perceived brand image, prior studies primarily investigate sponsorship effects in the context of single sponsor–property pairing.

2. Consumer processing of a sponsorship portfolio

Applying associative network memory theory to the context of sponsorship portfolio, a sponsor brand's network of nodes may consist of various concepts associated with each sponsorship property. The “thematic organization packets” in memory allow connections between episodes whenever these episodes share common structures, even though their contexts are unrelated (Seifert et al., 1986). Firstly, sponsored properties in a portfolio share the brand. Furthermore, a strategy may successfully relate one property (e.g., Euro Cup Soccer) to another (e.g., the Olympic Games) in memory via features common to both sponsorships (e.g., sportsmanship, camaraderie), despite the differences in their respective program content.

When added to a brand's sponsorship portfolio, a new property is likely to activate corresponding concepts in memory that tie to the sponsor. The associative network memory theory maintains that the extent of spreading activation depends on the relatedness of brand nodes (Keller, 1993). Given the low-involvement nature of sponsorship processing, previously encoded and stored messages in memory may color present information processing and influence cognition and liking (Cornwell, 2008). Implicit measurements such as brand image tests may demonstrate this outcome. Such image evaluations form on the basis of a selective sampling of information from a cognitive representation of the brand that the individual has in memory (Feldman and Lynch, 1988). The implicit influence of a prior sponsorship represents one key difference between processing a single sponsorship and processing a sponsorship portfolio.

2.1. Perception of fit in a sponsorship portfolio

Whereas the literature advances dimensions used to assess sponsor–property fit, the sources involved in fit perceptions in a portfolio context remain unexamined. Perceived sponsor–property fit may arise from the similarity between images (e.g., Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), matching on personalities (e.g., Lee and Cho, 2008), and common associations in general sense (e.g., Pracejus and Olsen, 2004). Classic definitions of perceived fit, however, ignore the knowledge that can tie seemingly disparate entities together (Fleck and Quester, 2007). This issue becomes even more complicated for a sponsorship portfolio. As a brand adds a new property to its portfolio, the sponsorship introduces yet another set of attributes or beliefs which may/may not be consistent with the image the existing sponsorship properties already project. Thus, the present research conceptualizes perceived fit between sponsored properties as multi-dimensional.

Although assessment of perceived fit between sponsorship properties may be manifold, some dimensions are more likely than others. This research follows categorization theory and research in brand extensions to suggest that consumers process sponsorship properties affiliated with a brand on the basis of two distinct types of characteristics – category and attributes. Sponsorship categories typically refer to sport events, social causes and the arts (Gwinner, 1997). An attribute, on the other hand, is an independent property or trait of an object (Yamauchi and Markman, 2000), such as its personality. In line with this thought, the present research proposes two ways that consumers might calibrate perceived fit: (1) sponsorship category relatedness (SCR) where properties in the portfolio are from the same category, and (2) event personality fit (EPF) where

properties in the portfolio have high perceived similarity on personality dimensions.

2.2. Sponsorship category relatedness (SCR)

SCR refers to the degree of domain similarity between individual sponsorships in a portfolio. The structure of these superordinate categories (i.e., sponsorship domains) permits inference making about characteristics of subordinate categories (i.e., individual properties) (Yamauchi and Markman, 2000). For example, the Rugby World Cup and Soccer World Cup share common properties because both are sports events. Members of a category have a structure resembling a social unit (Brewer et al., 1995), which derives from a generalized image, or prototype, that represents the most common features of category members (Malt, 1989). Once developed, superordinate imagery exists at the category level, and the information about individual instances resides under this category impression (Mao and Krishnan, 2006). This superordinate structure denotes a particular group of exemplars and is instrumental in guiding attention (Yamauchi and Markman, 2000). Prototype serves as a decision heuristic, and prototype fit facilitates information processing by generating an intuitive explanation of why objects belong to the same group (Mao and Krishnan, 2006). Empirical evidence finds prototype match important in brand extensions. Specifically, a brand can extend more easily when the new category is similar to the original category (e.g., Lei et al., 2008), because consistent information meets people's expectations and hence is conceptually more fluent (Lee and Aaker, 2004).

An initial sponsorship creates a prototype on the basis of category against which consumers interpret additional sponsorships in a portfolio. Thus, categorically related sponsorships should “hang together” to augment fit perception, providing a basis for evaluating a sponsorship portfolio. People would have an “it feels right” perception, which in turn, translates to a consistent and clear brand meaning for the sponsor (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Information about category prototype, in turn, should frame the way people infer characteristics of a sponsor brand, such as its brand personality.

H1a. A portfolio with categorically related sponsorships leads to higher brand meaning consistency for the sponsor, in comparison to a portfolio with categorically unrelated sponsorships.

H1b. A portfolio with categorically related sponsorships leads to higher brand meaning clarity for the sponsor, in comparison to a portfolio with categorically unrelated sponsorships.

H1c. A portfolio with categorically related sponsorships leads to a more unified brand personality for the sponsor, in comparison to a portfolio with categorically unrelated sponsorships.

2.3. Event personality fit (EPF)

Cognitive psychologists report that seemingly disparate objects are classifiable as members of the same category and tied together on the basis of a single relational match (e.g., Murphy and Medin, 1985). While sponsored properties may possess many different features, not all features are defining. Features that have high diagnosticity (Feldman and Lynch, 1988) and are relevant to how people typically interact with instances of a concept (Murphy and Medin, 1985) are more likely to provoke greater activation during information processing. Consumers often perceive sponsorship properties in terms of event personalities; for example, consumers may describe the X Games as having an exciting and uninhibited personality (Lee and Cho, 2008).

This exemplar view of categorization suggests that impression of each portfolio member develops in an individualizing manner (Malt, 1989). Unlike the prototype capturing generalized imagery of the category, exemplars register individual sponsorship's unique concepts (Brewer et al., 1995). The present research operationally defines

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