

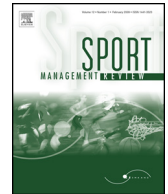


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# Sponsor-event congruence effects: The moderating role of sport involvement and mediating role of sponsor attitudes

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### ABSTRACT

The authors examine the moderating effect of sport involvement in the association between sponsor-event congruence and consumer responses. University students ( $N = 118$ ) took part in the experiment. The partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) results show that sport involvement moderates the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on sponsor credibility, influencing attitude toward the sponsor and intention to purchase the sponsor's product. Research findings imply that a sponsorship campaign, in which sponsor-event congruence occurs, may have the power to deliver a product relevant message to consumers who are involved in sports via a central route.

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## 1. Introduction

Companies spend an astronomical amount of money on sponsorships every year. International Events Group (IEG) (2017) reports that total global sponsorship expenditures in 2016 and in 2017 are \$60.1 billion and \$62.8 billion, respectively. Amongst the sponsorship spending, sports account for a significantly large amount. The records regarding North American sponsorship spending by different types of sponsored properties indicate that sport sponsorship accounts for approximately 70% of the overall North American sponsorship market in 2017, followed by entertainment (10%), causes (9%), and arts (4%) (IEG, 2017). The Rio 2016 Summer Olympics and Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics collected \$848 million and \$1.19 billion in sponsorship, respectively (International Olympic Committee, 2017). Yet, questions remain as to the suitability of certain sponsorship activities, such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola as Olympic sponsors, since sport event sponsorship supported by fast food and sugary drinks companies enhance obesity (Clark, 2012). In addition, public unease generated by unsuitable sponsorship may bring harm to a sponsor's brand image.

It is widely supported that sponsorship is effective in enhancing awareness of a sponsoring brand and establishing brand image in a sport setting. To establish or strengthen an image of the sponsoring brand, it is important to increase the fit between the sponsoring brand and the sponsored event. In this sense, many academic researchers have studied the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on consumer responses (e.g., Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006).

Sponsor-event congruence and involvement are important factors, which affect outcomes of sponsorship-linked marketing communications (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). The effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence (Gwinner &

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Bennett, 2008; Lee & Cho, 2009) and that of consumers' involvement (Ko, Kim, Claussen, & Kim, 2008; Meenaghan, 2001) has been identified by many prior studies. Although McDaniel (1999) has suggested the interaction effect between these two variables (i.e., sponsor-event congruence and involvement), subsequent studies have rarely attempted to examine this particular effect empirically.

Meanwhile, the elaboration likelihood model is a persuasion model that is broadly employed in the field of marketing communications (Lee & Park, 2014). According to the elaboration likelihood model, peripheral cues are more important than issue-relevant argumentation under conditions of low involvement, whereas the opposite is true under high involvement (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). Previous celebrity studies have empirically identified that match-up effects vary depending on consumers' involvement levels (Lee & Koo, 2016). Similar effects are possible in the domain of sponsorship studies. Several researchers argue that sponsorship acts as a peripheral cue that is most effective in low involvement conditions (Cornwell et al., 2005; Gwinner, 1997).

Other researchers denote that sponsorship is also effective for high involvement conditions, adding a value of product attributes when congruence between a sponsor and an event exists (Cunningham & Taylor, 1995; McDaniel, 1999). For example, when a sport brand sponsors a sport event, the attributes the two entities have in common may generate strong issue-relevant argumentation. This effect may be more pronounced for those who have high sport involvement than for those who do not since people with low sport involvement may not recognize the close relationship between the sponsor and the sponsee and/or may not have high interest in sports. Thus, each individual's involvement levels in sports may affect the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on consumer responses in a sponsorship campaign. However, lack of empirical research regarding the moderating role of sport involvement between sponsor-event congruence and consumer responses still limits general understanding of sponsorship studies, particularly in the context of sports.

In the present study, we investigate how sponsor-event congruence influences consumer responses depending on the different levels of sport involvement. To investigate these effects, the hypothesized model in the current study contains sponsor credibility, attitude toward the sponsor, and purchase intention as outcome variables. Previous scholars have identified the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on attitude toward the sponsor and purchase intention (Lee & Cho, 2009; Rodgers, 2003). Meanwhile, sponsor credibility has been rarely measured despite its important role in sponsorship campaigns as Meenaghan (2001) stressed. Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li (2004) additionally identified the significant and positive path from sponsor credibility to attitude toward the sponsor. The significant and positive path from attitude toward the sponsor to purchase intention was also supported by Gwinner and Bennett (2008), and Lee and Cho (2009). Thus, we investigate the mediating role of attitude toward the sponsor in the relationship between sponsor credibility and purchase intention.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Congruence effect between sponsor and event on consumer responses

Congruence theory suggests that similarity or relatedness between certain images affects storage in memory and retrieval of information (Cornwell et al., 2005). Endorsement advertising researchers have developed this concept prior to sponsorship research. Kahle and Homer (1985) first proposed the match-up hypothesis suggesting that a fit between an endorser and an endorsed product generates a more effective endorsement, and researchers have subsequently drawn from this framework on numerous occasions. Kahle and Homer (1985) identified that higher brand attitude was produced when an attractiveness-relevant product (i.e., razor blades) was endorsed by an attractive rather than an unattractive celebrity. Till and Busler (2000) demonstrated the endorser-product congruence effect on brand attitude, and Koernig and Boyd (2009) additionally found evidence to support the effectiveness of athlete endorser-product congruence on attitudes toward the advertisement and the brand, and purchase intention. More recently, Fink, Parker, Cunningham, and Cuneen (2014) identified athlete-product fit positively affected purchase intention. These studies have developed the concept of the match-up effect theoretically and empirically in the context of advertising and sport marketing research.

The development of the match-up hypothesis in athlete endorsement has led sport marketing researchers to examine the effectiveness of sponsor-event congruence on consumer responses (e.g., Doyle, Pentecost, & Funk, 2014; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Lee & Cho, 2009). The schema paradigm provides the conceptual underpinnings for supporting the sponsor-event congruence effect (McDaniel, 1999). Koo et al. (2006) conceptualized the theoretical background of the sponsor-event match-up effect based on Fiske's (1982) theory of schema-triggered affect. A schema, defined as an active organization of experiences in a consumer's mind, influences her or his processing of a sport sponsorship (Koo et al., 2006). In particular, the congruence between images of a sponsoring brand and a sponsored event might generate consumers' favorable cognitions and conations toward the sponsor through the schemas, which have already been accumulated in their minds. In line with the schema paradigm, Gwinner and Eaton (1999) employed Keller's (1993) associative memory process in which brand associations are built during sponsorship activities. Lee and Cho (2009) subsequently suggested that consumers remember congruent information associated with their prior experiences such as memorized information and its retrieval. This particular effect is influenced by similarity or relatedness between a sponsor and a sponsee. In this sense, sponsor-event congruence seems to be an appropriate strategy to enhance the effectiveness of sponsorship, making an associative connection in the consumers' minds.

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