

The Mediating Role of Animosity in Chinese Consumers' Responses to Sport Sponsorship by Foreign Companies

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Previous literature has documented how sponsorship influences consumers' attitudes, beliefs and behavioural intentions (McDaniel 1999; Speed and Thompson 2000; Meenaghan 2001; Madrigal 2001). A number of studies have been conducted to explain sport consumer behaviour (Madrigal 1995; Trail et al. 2000; Kwon and Armstrong 2004; Caro and Garcia 2007), and indicated that emotions influence sponsorship effectiveness (Hansen et al. 2005; Koo et al. 2006). Although it is evident that sponsorship markets in Asia-Pacific have been growing dramatically (IEG 2008), little academic attention has been paid to Eastern emerging markets, such as China.

Hosting the 2008 Olympic Games represented China's emergence on the world stage. The Games provided an opportunity for international companies to communicate with 1.3 billion potential consumers in China and improve their brand awareness and corporate/brand image (Cornwell 1995; Tripodi 2001). However, in this particular collective cultural context (Hofstede 2001), how consumers' hostile feelings towards certain countries would influence their perceptions of foreign sponsors and subsequent purchases still remain unclear. To bridge these gaps, this study explores the role of consumer animosity (Klein et al. 1998) in influencing Chinese consumers' responses to sports sponsorship by foreign companies. It is posited that there are causal relationships between event involvement, attitudes towards the sponsor and willingness to buy from the sponsor (Speed and Thompson 2000; Meenaghan 2001; Gwinner and Swanson 2003; Alexandris et al. 2007; Ko et al. 2008). Additionally, the study proposes that part of the effect of event involvement on attitudes towards the sponsor is mediated by the impact of consumer animosity. Utilising the Beijing Olympic Games as an example, 11 TOP (the Olympic Partners) sponsors from 6 countries are used in the analysis viz. Japan, the U.S., South Korea, France, Canada, and Switzerland.

The purpose of study is twofold: First, to develop and validate three measurement scales which assess event involvement, consumer animosity and attitudes towards the sponsor, in an Eastern collective cultural context. Second, to explore how Chinese consumers' involvement with a sport event would influence their attitudes towards the foreign sponsor when taking into consideration the mediation effects of consumer animosity. Furthermore, to assess whether different levels of purchase intentions of the sponsor's products are influenced by their country-of-origin. Event involvement was measured by Zaichkowsky's 10-item 7-point Product Involvement Inventory (PII, 1994). Consumer animosity was assessed by a 6-item 7-point Likert scale modified from Klein et al.'s (1998) study. In terms of the measure of attitudes towards the sponsor, a 7-point semantic differential scale was used which combined 4 items modified from Speed and Thompson's (2000) study and 3 items modified from MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) study. Finally, a single item 7-point Likert type scale was applied to measure the construct of willingness to buy from the sponsor.

To avoid construct bias (Van de Vijver and Hambleton 1996), a qualitative study involving 10 interviews with Chinese marketing professionals, academic researchers and consumer representatives were conducted to ensure the relevance of hypothesized relationships and construct characteristics in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, in order to minimize method bias and item bias (Van de Vijver and Hambleton 1996), a pilot study with 20 postgraduates in a Chinese university was carried out before the full questionnaire survey to check the interpretability and comprehensiveness of the measurement items. Minor revision was adopted relating to the instructions and translations in the questionnaire.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to a broad cross section of the Chinese population prior to the Olympic Games. The analysis was based on 811 valid questionnaires. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was employed for the measure development. Principal component analysis (PCA) following Kaiser's criterion (the eigenvalue rule) was chosen for factor extraction (Pallant 2003). Reliability of the measures was assessed by Cronbach's alpha coefficients computed in SPSS (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994) and validity of the measures was evaluated by confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using AMOS. Linear regression was used to examine the relationships between event involvement, attitudes towards the sponsor and purchase intention. Moreover, the Sobel test (Preacher and Hayes 2004) was used for assessing the significance of mediation. The data is currently being analyzed and the results and findings will be presented.

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This study contributes to the sponsorship literature by validating the measurement scales in the Chinese context, and providing the linear and mediation relationships between emotions, attitudes and behaviours. From a managerial perspective, it offers insights into the factors contributing to Chinese consumers' sponsorship influenced purchase behaviour. A number of sponsorship and sponsorship-linked marketing strategies will also be suggested. It is hoped that the study will help international companies to understand and overcome the potential domestic country bias in the Chinese marketplace.