

The Role of Team Identification in (Not) Processing Sponsor Information: Applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model

Elizabeth Delia, Florida State University

Jeffrey James (Advisor), Florida State University

Marketing

Thursday, May 30, 2013

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 412)**

Abstract 2013-012

8:55 AM

Team identification has been defined as the degree of psychological connection with a sports team or event (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). In the realm of sponsorship, team identification has been used to explain behavioral and affective sponsorship response. Compared to consumers with low team identification, high team identification can lead to greater sponsor recall (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003), greater product purchase intention (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Deitz, Myers & Stafford, 2012; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2000; Madrigal, 2001) and positive attitude toward the sponsor (Deitz, Myers & Stafford, 2012; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy (2005) suggested the need for researchers to evaluate both cognition and effect in sponsorship studies. Despite the extensive literature on team identification and effect (i.e., sponsorship response), few studies have examined the role of cognition in a team identification-sponsorship context. Specifically, there is limited research on how team identification influences the process of persuasion and attitude change. According to elaboration likelihood model (ELM) theory, consumers develop or change attitudes by following a central or peripheral route to process information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). The central route to persuasion involves critical thought and evaluation of the argument(s) presented, such as the content or quality of a message. Alternatively, peripheral route processing involves relying on cues such as attractiveness of credibility to evaluate information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Central processing requires both motivation and ability to elaborate, thus suggesting highly involved consumers are more likely than less involved consumers to use central processing when evaluating a message or argument (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Because consumers with high team identification are, by definition, more invested and engaged with a team or event, they should exhibit a greater motivation to centrally process sponsorship information. However, there is reason to speculate that highly identified consumers may use peripheral rather than central route processing to evaluate sponsorship information, as these consumers are more likely to form sponsor product purchase intentions based on perceived group (i.e., team or event) objectives (i.e., what is believed to be best for the group) rather than personal attitude toward the sponsor (Madrigal, 2001). Supporting a company that is a partner (through sponsorship) of the team of interest provides an additional way for highly identified consumers to reinforce their association with the team. This perhaps impulsive support suggests consumers with high team identification may lack the motivation to centrally process sponsorship information as a result of a peripheral cue (i.e., positive linkage between sponsor and team or event) used to assess the information.

Considering the degree of elaboration involved in central route processing, attitude change is presumed to be stronger and more long-term than peripheral route processing (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). However, if consumers with high identification rely on peripheral cues to evaluate information, this could suggest that, in a sport-specific context where high levels of identification are involved, peripheral route processing is equally (if not more) effective in persuasion. Alternatively, it could suggest that if consumers with high (or low) team identification use peripheral cues to evaluate sponsors, the positive sponsor response exhibited by consumers with high (or low) team identification is more short-term and less resistant to counter arguments (e.g., sponsor turnover or ambush marketing).

The preceding reveals a need for a better understanding of the relationship between team identification and the process of persuasion and attitude change regarding sponsorship information. Because research in this area is limited, I will begin by conducting a pilot study with consumers with varying levels of team identification to evaluate cognitive activity regarding sponsorship information. I will conduct the study in a classroom setting using a convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate students at a large southeastern university in the United States.

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

A major league baseball team in the southeastern United States will serve as the team of interest. Participants will complete a questionnaire to measure the constructs of team identification and awareness of and attitude toward two companies (one sponsor company and one non-sponsor company). Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants will watch two television commercials – one sponsor company commercial and one non-sponsor company commercial. After viewing each commercial, participants will be asked to list all of their thoughts regarding the commercial they watched. Such a thought-listing technique (Cacioppo, von Hippel, & Ernst, 1997) allows the researcher to gauge cognitive processing immediately following exposure to sponsorship information. Following data collection, the thoughts generated by participants from each commercial will be analyzed for content. I will use descriptive statistics to analyze questionnaire responses (i.e., team identification, sponsor and non-sponsor company awareness and attitude, and demographic measures). Subsequently, I will compare responses to uncover differences between groups, such as low and high team identification or sponsor and non-sponsor company. I predict that – based on a positive link formed between the team and company – consumers with high team identification will use peripheral cues (rather than central processing) to evaluate information from the sponsor company. Irrespective of this hypothesis, the pilot study will provide insight on the relationship between team identification and sponsorship information processing and subsequently guide future research in this area.

Team identification has been used to explain behavioral and affective sponsorship response, but research on the role of team identification in cognitive processing of sponsorship information is lacking. ELM theory – a concept used to explain how consumers develop and change attitudes – postulates that highly involved consumers are more likely than less involved consumers to follow a central route to process information. However, there is reason to speculate that highly identified consumers may use peripheral cues to evaluate sponsorship information. The exploratory research I have proposed will serve as a first step to understanding the role of team identification in cognitive processing of sponsorship information.