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An Associative Learning Account of Branding Effects of Sport Sponsorship

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Sponsorship as an integrated marketing communication platform to be used for branding purposes is no longer in need of extensive justification (Masterman, 2007). Corporations spend millions of dollars acquiring sponsorship rights, and planning and implementing sponsorship marketing activities. In the United States alone, 96 corporates spent more than \$15 million on sponsorship in 2006 (IEG, 2008). The average expenditure for each TOP sponsor of the recent Olympic Games exceeded \$60 million (IOC, 2012). In most cases, sponsors garner some rights of being associated with the sponsee in return for their contributions. It is believed that the message of alliance would have an impact on consumer's perception and attitude towards the branded products and activate their choice decisions towards the sponsor's brands.

Many information processing mechanics have been proposed in an attempt to explain the branding effects of sport sponsorship (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Pracejus, 1998). Two most notable theoretical accounts that have been frequently cited in sponsorship literature are mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968) and image transfer (e.g., Gwinner, 1997; McCracken, 1989). The central theme of mere exposure theory is that when an individual is repeatedly exposed to a stimulus, the mere exposure is capable of creating a positive attitude or preference for this stimulus, which is independent of the cognition system (Zajonc, 1968). Following this concept, exposure is fundamental in evaluating sponsorship effectiveness as it is of ultimate importance to brand recall and recognition (Pham, 1991). However, the mere exposure approach only considers sponsorship as an inexpensive substitute for theme advertisements and the "association" value of sponsorship has been overlooked. By contrast, the image transfer theory rightly considers the association between an event and its sponsoring brand, and aims to explain the mechanism by which brand image is to be impacted through sponsorship activities. Based on McCracken's (1989) celebrity endorsement meaning transfer model, Gwinner (1997) posits that the image of an event (i.e., meanings and associations attributed to an event) is transferrable to the sponsoring brand, and consumers acquire the meanings of the event through the consumption of the sponsoring brand. Although Gwinner proposed the image transfer process and identified several variables moderating this process, this researcher failed to elaborate what the transfer process essentially would be and how it would take place.

In this study, we make the argument that associative learning (i.e., "the learning of the ways in which concepts are related"; Van Osselaer, 2008, p. 699) is the mechanism underlying the branding effects of sponsorship. Pairing a brand with a sporting event may lead to more positive brand evaluation because the brand name itself may have acquired a positive halo as a result of associative learning. There is a difference between choosing a product because one likes its search characteristics and choosing a product because its search characteristics allow one to predict a consumption experience (Van Osselaer, 2008). The present study includes: (a) an analysis of two ways of associative learning in sponsorship: evaluative conditioning and predictive learning (Van Osselaer, 2008; Van Osselaer & Janiszewski, 2001); and (b) an examination of their impact on perceived product quality and attitudinal loyalty toward the sponsoring brand. Specifically, sponsorship literature suggested that event involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988; Zaichkowsky, 1985), emotional experience (Hansen, Halling, & Christensen, 2006), event-brand congruence (Chien, Cornwell, & Pappu, 2011; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), attitude toward the sponsored event (Speed & Thompson, 2000), and brand knowledge (Johan & Pham, 1999; Roy & Cornwell, 2004) would be common determinants of learning sponsorship associations. This study explored the impact of these variables on perceived quality and brand loyalty from an associative learning perspective.

A survey study was carried out to investigate the research questions. Participants (N = 296) were students in a university located in a large metropolitan area of East China. Because the university accepts students from all over China, the respondents represented a wide range of geographical locations. Given that university students form a predominant segment of spectators and TV viewers of sporting events in China, and because the purpose of this

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study was to gain a more general theoretical understanding of associative learning on branding effects, studying a student sample was deemed relevant and appropriate (Calder, Phillips, & Tybout, 1981). Of the respondents (N = 296), 43.2% were female and 56.8% male. In terms of geographic locations where participants mostly lived before attending the university, 28.2% grew up in metropolitan cities, 29.5% in medium size cities, 40.9% in small towns or countryside, and the remaining 1.4% either lived in multiple urban settings or did not report.

A canonical correlation analysis was conducted using eight associative learning factors as predictors of the branding effects variables to evaluate the multivariate shared relationship between the two variable sets (i.e., associative learning and sponsorship effect). The analysis yielded six functions. The first two functions were significant at $\alpha=.05$ level and considered noteworthy in the context of this study (49.7% and 9.5% of shared variance, respectively). Regarding the predictor variable set in Function 1, emotional experience, image relatedness, event involvement, and event attitude were the primarily contributors to the synthetic predictor variable, with function relatedness, brand favorability, and familiarity making secondary contributions and sport involvement making no additional contribution to the synthetic predictor variable. This conclusion was supported by the squared structure coefficients.

The research findings were generally supportive of the theoretically expected relationships between associative learning and branding effects. They were also suggestive of the process of the first way of associative learning; consequently, Function 1 was labeled as “evaluative conditioning”. Regarding Function 2, the coefficients suggested that the only criterion variables of relevance were perceived quality indicators. Brand familiarity and favorability were the dominant predictors, along with a secondary contribution of function relatedness. As Function 2 explains the deviance of Function 1, it is suggestive of the presence of a second process that is independent of the first way of associative learning; thus, Function 2 was labeled as “predictive learning”. The findings of this study were generally consistent with the theoretically expected relationships between predicative learning and branding effects, and the two proposed distinctive associative learning processes. With understanding the fundamental branding mechanism through sponsorship, marketers can tailor their marketing communication toolkits to facilitate associative learning processes based on learning principles. The predictive learning process also suggests that marketers should avoid blocking effects due to cue interference or competition as consumers only alter their beliefs in an adaptive way.