While Adidas was the only official sponsor from the International Olympic Committee’s Top Program of the London 2012 Olympics in the sports equipment category, competitors such as Nike, Reebok, and Puma were everywhere on the fields, as they cleverly played on sponsorship levels. Adidas (main sponsor) sponsored the event whereas competitors (secondary sponsors) sponsored teams or athletes participating to the Olympics. As this example illustrates, it has become a common practice for competing brands to simultaneously sponsor events, teams or athletes. This has been identified as an ambush strategy (Meenaghan, 1998).

The impact of the interference arising from competitors’ advertising on communication effectiveness has generated a lot of attention since Burke and Srull (1988) and Keller (1991). Researchers have attempted to understand interference effects for memory and attitude, as well as the strategies to break through advertising clutters. Although sport events are increasingly becoming communication clutters through sponsoring (Quester and Thompson, 2001), research on competitive sponsorship clutters remains scant. As exclusive rights at a given sponsorship level (e.g., Top sponsors of the IOC) have been seen as an efficient barrier to competition (Carrillat, Harris and Lafferty, 2010), previous research has failed to consider interference effects caused by sponsorship at different levels and therefore, sponsorship effectiveness has not been studied in a competitive environment.

The objective of this research is to explore how the unique characteristics of a sponsoring environment affect communication interference for brand attitude. It has been repeatedly shown that congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored entity as well as sponsorship activation messages that articulate the link between the two improve the processing of sponsorship stimuli (Cornwell, Weeks and Roy, 2005). Building on advertising and sponsoring research, this study seeks to examine the effects of congruence on attitude in a competitive sponsorship clutter, and to investigate the moderating role of activation on this relationship.

Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

Coherent with schema congruity theory (Mandler, 1982), a congruence or a slight incongruence between the sponsor and the sponsored entity generates more positive sponsorship and brand attitudes than a strong level of incongruence, where differences with pre-exposition expectations are too important to be resolved. However, the simultaneity of exposition in a competitive sponsorship clutter is a key feature to understand the role of congruence. Simultaneity has been shown to reinforce the cognitive load of a communication clutter (Zanjani, Diamond and Chan, 2011). According to cognitive capacity theory, in a high cognitive load environment, consumers divide their resources between different pieces of information, which increases interference effects (Cauberghe, de Pelsmacker, and Janssens, 2010).

H1: When a main sponsor is congruent with the sponsored event, secondary sponsors’ presence has a negative effect on attitude toward (a)the main sponsor, and (b)its sponsorship program.

Yet, in an incongruent sponsor-event situation, relational processing, where consumers categorize brands based on their similarities (Törn and Dalhéen, 2008), helps consumers process information and cancels out negative effect stemming from incongruence.

H2: When a main sponsor is incongruent with the sponsored event, secondary sponsors’ presence has a positive effect on attitude toward (a)the main sponsor, and (b)its sponsorship program.

A considerable body of research has examined strategies to cut through clutter. Brand familiarity (Kent and Allen, 1994; Kumar and Krishnan, 2004), ad repetition (Campbell and Keller, 2003) and product knowledge (Lee and Lee, 2011) have been identified as efficient moderators of competitive interference. In a sponsorship environment, activation may play a similar role. In general, main sponsors articulate their sponsorship through advertisements in
order to create a unique sponsor-event link (Crimmins and Horn, 1996). Activation should therefore reduce the negative effects of congruence in a competitive sponsorship clutter.

Activation singles out the relationship between the main sponsor and the event, and stimulates a specific (versus relational) processing. In a congruent setting, this should reduce competitive interference.

H3: When a main sponsor is congruent with the sponsored event, an articulated sponsorship activation helps cut through clutter and has a positive effect on attitude toward (a) the main sponsor, and (b) its sponsorship program.

In an incongruent setting, as it reduces incongruence (Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002), activation helps consumers process information, resulting in retroactive interferences due to the presence of secondary sponsorships.

H4: When a main sponsor is incongruent with the sponsored event, an articulated sponsorship activation does not generate a more positive attitude toward (a) the main sponsor, and (b) its sponsorship program, than an unarticulated sponsorship.

Method and Contribution

A 2 (congruent/incongruent) X 2 (clutter/non-clutter) X 3 (activation/advertisement/no direct marketing communication) between-subjects experimental study was designed. The experiment is presented as a research aimed at evaluating the promotional material of the upcoming golf tournament The Canadian Open 2014 (cover story). Participants are shown a 6-page booklet with 13 pictures containing either none or up to five sponsors in order to simulate a high cognitive load and a realistic environment. In the congruent condition, the main sponsor is Adidas and the secondary sponsors are Reebok, Puma, Asics, and Fila whereas in the incongruent condition, the main sponsor is MTV and the secondary sponsors are Musimax, Galaxie, MuchMusic and MusiquePlus. In conditions of activation, the first page contains an articulation of the main sponsorship to manipulate the level of functional fit whereas in conditions of advertisement, the first page contains an ad of the main sponsor with no articulation of the sponsorship.

Subjects complete the following measures: perceived main sponsor/event congruence, attitude toward main sponsor as a brand and as a company, attitude toward the sponsorship program, as well as intention to purchase the main sponsor’s products.

This study contributes to consumer behavior research by investigating the effects of competitive interference on attitude in a sponsorship context and to sponsorship research by investigating a widespread competitive situation never studied before. It introduces congruence as a potential determinant of communication interference in a competitive clutter. Activation is also considered for the first time as a strategy to reduce the negative effects of congruence.