Consumer Response to Multi-sponsored Sport Event Sponsorship: The Moderating Effect of Fit between Co-sponsors

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Sport event sponsorship research has focused on the effect of event-sponsor congruence, relying on schema congruity theory (Mandler, 1975). Schema congruity theory suggests that the degree of similarity between two entities will affect people’s judgment of those entities (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Therefore, previous sponsorship research tends to focus on the fit between the event and the sponsor and the impact on consumer attitudes toward the sponsoring firm’s brand(s) (e.g., Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Johar & Pham, 1999; McDaniel, 1999; Meenaghan, 1999). As seen in recent times, two or more sponsor brands co-sponsor many events (especially mega-sport events) due to high costs. For example, there were over 11 Worldwide TOP Partners (sponsors) of the London Olympic Games, including Acer, BP, Coca-Cola, EDF, Samsung, and Panasonic (IOC, 2012). In addition to these top sponsors, over 100 local sponsors participated to make this worldwide event happen. Along those lines, it makes sense that a company or organization wishing to sponsor such an event should consider other sponsors. No longer are associations with the event the only considerations; there are now associations between existing sponsors and a potential sponsor that may affect information processing. Yet there is a dearth of research (e.g., Pentecost & Spence, 2009) examining sport event and sponsor brand image congruity (event-sponsor congruity) and between sponsor image congruity (sponsors-sponsors image congruity) with a holistic approach.

The aim of this research is therefore to understand how the degree of fit between sport event and sponsorship brand image influences consumers’ attitudes toward the sponsoring brand. More specifically, this study will argue that the level of image congruity between the sponsor and the event will affect consumers’ attitudes toward the sponsor and their purchase intentions. We will also test the moderating effect of “between-brand” image fit. Assuming there is a spillover effect of sponsor image in multi-sponsored events (Pentecost & Spence, 2009), the effect of sponsor brand–sponsored event image congruity will differ by the level of sponsor–sponsor image congruity.

Some sponsorship researchers have suggested that event image can be linked with and transferred to a brand through sponsorship activities (Gwinner, 1997, 2005; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Keller, 1993). McDonald (1991) argues that a perceived match between sponsor and event influences consumers’ responses to the sponsorship activity. Consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions are influenced by the level of perceived fit between event and sponsor (Becker-Olsen, 2003; Koo et al., 2006). Scholars also found that the image congruence between sponsor brand and sponsored sport event has a positive influence on purchase intention and brand value (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Miyazaki & Morgan, 2001). A higher level of brand–event image congruence strengthens the positive brand image and allows consumers who are exposed to the sponsorship activity to be interactive and intimate with the brand (Ericksen & Sirgy, 1989). Contrarily, a low level of brand–event image congruity might negatively affect the brand attitude. Lee & Cho (2009) found that the perceived personality congruence between a sponsor brand and a sport event was the most significant predictor of attitudes toward the sponsoring brand. In line with the previous research, our first hypothesis (H1) is:

H1: The higher the level of congruity between the sponsor brand and the sponsored event, the more positive attitudes toward the sponsor brand.

Previous researchers suggested there would be a promotional advantage effect when a brand collaborates with a certain brand entity that has a positive association (Aaker & Keller, 1990; Keller, 2003). In the sponsorship context, Pentecost and Spence (2009) suggest that fit between sponsors would influence brand judgments (e.g., attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions) and may have an even greater influence on brand outcomes than fit has on the event. Guided by the findings from previous literature about spillover effects in a multi-sponsored events context, we propose that the level of congruity between sponsors (a primary/existing sponsor and a start-up
sponsor) will moderate the effect of brand–event congruity on consumers’ purchase intentions and attitudes toward the sponsor brand.

H2: The level of congruity between the sponsor brand and the sponsored event has an effect on brand attitudes under high between co-sponsor congruity conditions, but there is no difference under low co-sponsor congruity conditions.

A 2 (the level of sponsor–event congruity: high and low) x 2 (the level of between-sponsor congruity: high and low) between-subjects experimental design will be employed. A hypothetical newspaper article that states that a certain brand supports a certain sporting event will be presented in the first part of the questionnaire, along with the fact that there is another sponsor for the event. After reading the article thoroughly, the respondents will be asked to answer questions regarding brand attitude and purchase intention. The new sponsor brand for the experiment will be Mercedes Benz because it is globally recognized and sponsors large sport events over time. In addition, Mercedes Benz is known as a high-end luxury brand, which makes it useful for selecting events and brands with good/bad fit (Pentecost & Spence, 2009). Prior to the main experiment, pretests for manipulation check will be conducted to verify the selection of two events (high fit and low fit with Mercedes Benz) and two brands (high fit and low fit with Mercedes Benz) using a group of 20 students from Southeastern University. Data for the main experiment will be collected from general public using Amazon Mechanical Turk, with 50 participants in each condition. Data will be collected in January 2015, and the results will be presented at the conference.

The proposed model suggests that the image congruence between the sponsor brand and sport event directly affected the attitude toward the brand. The expected result is that the level of congruence between the sponsor brand and the sponsored event contributes to consumers’ attitudes about sponsor brand. Additionally, more positive attitudes toward the sponsor brand will be found when there is a better image congruence between sponsors. In a low between-sponsors image congruence situation, no difference in terms of sponsor–event image congruence will exist. If all the proposed hypotheses are supported, event managers and sponsorship executives should consider the level of image congruence between the brand and a sport event as well as the image fit with other sponsors. In addition, changes in attitude toward the brand should be managed as a key outcome when a corporation evaluates the outcome of sport sponsorship activities.