Understanding the Domains and Roles of Fit in Sport Event Sponsorship

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The purpose of this study was to understand sport consumers’ perceptions of sponsor–event fit and to explore the domains of fit as constructs. Individuals’ perceptions of fit between sponsors and sponsored entities are important because of its influence on consumers’ responses to the sponsorship activity. Consumer sponsorship responses include brand awareness and recall, brand image, brand attitude, and behavioral intention. Consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral intentions are influenced by the level of the perceived fit between the event and the sponsor. Despite the importance of fit in sponsorship research, the conceptualization of fit as a construct is not clear. Although there are scales that evaluate level of similarity (e.g., Gwinner, 1997; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), relatedness (e.g., Johar & Pham, 1999), match (e.g., McDaniel, 1999), or fit (e.g., Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Speed & Thompson, 2000), it is still unclear what dimensions of fit sport event consumers care about. Individuals often have a feel for whether a sponsor and an event fit together even if they have difficulty in defining which components of the sponsorship make it work. The difficulty in defining fit probably emerges from the wide range of definitions in the literature, many of which are rather vague (Gwinner, 2014). The foundation for the public’s perceptions of fit between sponsor and object has received much less attention. Very little empirical work has been done on the facets or dimensions underly the overall construct of fit (e.g., Olson &Thjomoe, 2009; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, & Stanley, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to understand sport consumers’ perceptions of sponsor–event fit and to explore the domains of sponsor–event fit in their minds in the context of three mega events and one major sport event. Individuals’ perceptions of sponsor–event fit were explored by focus groups using cognitive mapping technique. The following questions were addressed:

RQ1: What are the dominant sponsor–event fit themes among sport event spectators?

RQ2: What are the sponsorship outcomes in sport consumers’ perceptions?

RQ3: How does sponsor–event fit link to sponsorship outcomes?

A qualitative grounded theory approach using focus group interviews a total sample of N = 35 participants in six groups was adopted to answer the three research questions. Considering that audiences of sport event sponsorship are the general public who watches such events in person or via broadcast, anyone over the age of 18 who has watched at least one recent mega or major sport event either in person or via broadcast was eligible to participate in the study. Participants were recruited via flyers posted on a southern US university campus (e.g., board in front of the main library) during summer 2015. Facebook group webpages for the student of the same university were also used to post the research invitation. Potential participants interested in this study were directed to complete a short online screening questionnaire that asked them about their prior experiences with recent mega sport events (the 2012 London Summer Olympic Games, 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games, and 2014 FIFA World Cup) and one recent major sport event (the 2015 Wimbledon Championship) and demographics. Four sport events were preselected as recent mega or major sport events considering the large amount of global attention paid to these events and their impacts on the global community (Ferrand et al., 2012). A cognitive mapping technique which allows the investigation to go deeper into individual’s core perceptions of the object was employed for this study. A cognitive map is a representation of the relationships among elements of a given situation (Ahmad & Azman, 2003). Participants in each group were asked to place visual cards representing three mega sport events (summer and winter Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup) and one major sport event (the Wimbledon Championship) and 30 sponsoring brand names on the table to reflect how well (or not) each
entity fit together in a sponsorship context. Then the top ten sponsoring brands of each sport event (were selected considering the size of the sponsorship agreement (i.e., sponsorship fee).

This study has shown that the sponsor-event fit is a multidimensional construct containing three main themes: image-based similarity, functional-based similarity, and brand characteristics. The first theme, image-based fit, can be defined as the similarity between the event image and the brand image. In most cases, an image-based fit was described with adjectives such as active, energetic, global, and prestigious. The results revealed that image-based fit can be classified into four subthemes: active and healthy, caring community, prominence, and socioeconomic status of the consumer. The second theme, functional-based fit, pertains to consumers’ beliefs about sponsors’ helping the event to be successful by offering their products or services (Gwinner, 1997). In other words, brand usage by event participants (e.g., athletes, event organizers, and spectators) tends to capture the higher functional-based fit. The findings suggested three subthemes for functional-based fit: athlete use during the game, operational use, and audience consumption during the game. The third theme, brand characteristics, explains sponsor–brand association based on the sponsoring brand’s features rather than the brand’s perceived image. Four subthemes were identified in brand characteristics: symbolic features, geographical characteristics, product coverage, and long-term relationship as a sponsor. The research findings posit a similar view with more recent work which has considered fit as a multidimensional construct (e.g. Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Jagre, Watson & Watson, 2001; Olson and Thjomoe, 2011). In addition to the sponsor-event fit construct, this study revealed sponsorship outcomes as cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The hypothesized grounded theory model which shows three themes of sponsor-event fit, sponsorship outcomes, and the relationships among themes will be presented at the presentation.