Effects of Message Elaboration Derived from Authenticity on Consumer Attitude and Emotion Toward Sporting Events

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The presence of unhealthy product sponsors at sporting events has risen and has not necessarily been positively received (Danylchuk & McIntosh, 2009; Kelly, Baur, Bauman, King, Chapman, & Smith, 2010; Macniven, Kelly, & King, 2015; McDaniel & Heald, 2000). While several studies have noted problems with unhealthy product sponsors, they are continually used to support sport events and serve as a source of revenue for the event. Because of negative perceptions stemming from an unhealthy product sponsor's association with the sporting event, CSR may be utilized as a strategy to improve consumer assessments of the sporting event (Close, Finney, Lacey, & Sneath, 2006; Walker & Kent, 2009). However, benefits of CSR may not apply to sporting events and sponsors when the relationship seems dishonest or is viewed as extremely incongruent. Additionally, the level of cognitive effort and elaboration exerted by consumers is influenced by message persuasion, which is derived from sponsorship associations and is increased to form evaluations of the event.

To better understand outcomes stemming from unhealthy product sponsor and sporting event partnerships, the Elaboration Likelihood Advertising Model (ELAM) can be employed as a theoretical framework to explain the impact of sponsorship associations for the current study. Prior research has supported the notion that contrasting sponsorship partnerships will cause consumers to elaborate more on messages to resolve inconsistent relationships, such as unhealthy product sponsors of sporting events (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2007; Jagre, Watson, & Watson, 2001; Pappu & Cornell, 2014). Furthermore, ELAM includes the examination of attitudes as well as emotions to predict event-related behavioral intentions.

The purpose of this study is to: (1) examine differences in authenticity, elaboration, attitudes, and emotions stemming from sponsor and sport event partnerships; and (2) assess the impact of consumer attitudes and emotions on sport event-related behavioral intentions. This study intends to expand research specific to sporting events and extend a new line of research related to the sponsor. Also, by determining how sponsorship associations may influence sporting events, practitioners will develop a better understanding of event evaluation metrics that should be implemented when considering certain sponsors. Since sponsors represent an important source of revenue, the current study seeks to maximize sponsorship value for sport events.

A between-group design was utilized to evaluate three fictitious sponsorship experiments that were developed and included: a.) McDonalds and Olympics, b.) McDonalds and Olympics and CSR, and c.) Subway and Olympics. Each scenario was created to determine how consumers evaluate sponsorship partnerships concerning healthy and unhealthy product sponsors as well as the effectiveness of CSR. A total of 303 university students voluntarily participated in the survey and were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions. Of the 303 students, a total sample of 270 students were used for further analysis due to incompleteness. More specifically, the total sample consisted of 90 students in each experiment and included 43% (n=116) male and 57% (n=154) female students with an average age of 20.22 years.

Three online surveys were used to measure each sponsorship experiment and consisted of the following sections for respondents to answer a.) demographic information and b.) questions related to authenticity, message elaboration emotion, attitude, and event-related behavioral intentions. The demographic questions included students’ age, classification in school, and gender, while subsequent questions related to the study were taken from previous research.

The data analysis was conducted using the SPSS 23.0 and EQS 6.0 programs. First, an evaluation of psychometric properties concerning the survey measures was performed to examine the valid structures between the items and latent factors through the stepwise modeling procedure recommended by Rindskopf and Rose (1988). Second, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and multiple regression were employed to examine the proposed hypotheses. For ANOVA, sponsorship associations (i.e., healthy, unhealthy, and CSR) were considered as categorical independent variables, while authenticity, elaboration, attitude, and emotion were considered the dependent variables. Finally, attitude and emotion were the independent variables and event-related behavior was the dependent variable for multiple regression analysis.

The first hypothesis revealed that consumers perceive an unhealthy product sponsor and a sporting event as less authentic in comparison to a healthy product sponsor and a sporting event regardless of CSR initiatives. The second hypothesis examined how elaboration was different for an unhealthy product sponsor and CSR association in comparison to healthy product sponsor associations. Significant differences were only found between the unhealthy product sponsor that was paired with CSR initiatives and healthy product sponsor associations. The third hypothesis examined differences between attitudes for all three experiments. Findings revealed that an unhealthy product sponsor and a sporting event were viewed less favorably in comparison to a healthy
product sponsor and a sporting event regardless of CSR. The fourth hypothesis did not reveal significant differences between any of the experiments for emotion. Although emotion was not significant, the fifth hypothesis did prove that emotion was positive and significantly related to event-related behavioral intentions for all three experiments, while attitude was significant only for the healthy experiment.

Overall, results of the current study support the notion unhealthy product sponsors are perceived as unauthentic despite CSR initiatives. In turn, unauthenticity can be linked to elaboration because consumers exhibited higher levels of cognitive effort when interpreting unhealthy product sponsors and CSR initiatives. Although, events are using unhealthy product sponsors for monetary support, findings indicate that consumers are aware of the contradictory relationship between an unhealthy product sponsor and sporting event. Even though results were inconclusive in linking attitude and event-related behavioral intentions, the general findings indicate that consumers develop stronger and a more unfavorable attitude toward the event due to higher elaboration concerning unhealthy product sponsors and CSR associations with a sporting event. Event managers should be aware of how sponsorship associations can be damaging to their event through cognitive and affective evaluations to maximize consumer based event equity.

The findings significantly contribute to current sponsorship literature concerning consumer information processing toward the event; however, there are some limitations in the current study that can be used to guide future research. For example, future research may want to evaluate small scale events, utilize a broader sample size, and develop a better framework to explain the role of emotions in consumer information processing of sport sponsorship.