CrossFit Athletic Identity’s Relationship to Sponsorship Recall and Recognition

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Background/Introduction
The CrossFit Games Open (the Open) is a fitness competition that allows CrossFit athletes from across the globe to remotely compete against one another in tests of functional fitness. The Open consists of 5 different workouts over the course of 5 weeks, where participants complete the workouts at their CrossFit affiliate gym, and then upload their validated scores to an online leaderboard. In its first years, the Open achieved significant scale and has experienced rapid growth. The first ever CrossFit Games Open was held in 2011 and began with around 26,000 people participating. By its 4th year in 2014, the Open had 209,585 participants enrolling to compete (Achaear, 2014). These formative years spent accumulating a mass audience coincided with the origination of a 10-year title sponsorship contract in late 2010 with footwear and apparel manufacturer Reebok. Reebok became the CrossFit Games title sponsor and they would have the exclusive rights to create CrossFit-branded shoes and apparel. Since that time Reebok’s training category has nearly doubled, and is now nearly 34% of Reebok’s net sales, while the 4th quarter of 2015 marked the 11th consecutive quarter of growth for the brand overall (Markelz, n/d).

Aside from this title sponsorship, the Open has a substantial list of approximately 15 supporting sponsors that are featured on the Open website that participants must interact with on at least a weekly basis during the event. This sport sponsorship mechanism is unique in that it is a sport event sponsorship arrangement that is absent any broadcast, team, or live event interaction, but rather rests exclusively as integrated sponsor messages repeatedly delivered to a captive audience on the participation website. It is a remote, web based interaction with sport and exercise media, while at the same time a sporting competition. No apparent studies have examined participant sport event sponsorship effectiveness in such a context, i.e. the case where sponsor messages are primarily, and almost exclusively, delivered through online website content rather than live event or exposures during sport spectating. The unique feature that the athletic contest occurs in a virtual platform presents new questions related to sponsorship effectiveness. Specifically, (1) are sponsoring brand messages recognized at higher rates than in-person events, and (2) do factors that influence sponsor recall, recognition, and purchase intent at “in-person” athletic events also impact online participants?

One example is the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS). The AIMS was created to reflect the strength and exclusivity of an individual’s identification with an athlete role (Brewer, Raalte, & Linder, 1993). We posit that athletic identity establishes a person’s connection to a sport or activity in an affective domain, i.e. a personal emotional involvement. If we further consider that some neuromarketing and advertising research suggests that the coding of memories, and/or subconscious consumer behavior influences, may be influenced by positive emotional arousal (Hubert, & Kenning, 2008; Ambler, & Burne, 1999; Dolcos, LaBar, & Cabeza, 2004), this would suggest that participants that are more highly identified with an activity might be more effectively targeted by related sponsorship messaging. For example, in a study using a modified AIMS for participants in a marathon event, the participants’ total running identity score was positively related to sponsor recall, recognition, and purchase intentions (Lough, Pharr, & Owen, 2014). Here, we hypothesize that individuals participating in an ongoing website interface related to an activity they highly identify with will similarly have higher rates of sponsorship recall and recognition, controlling for overall exposure. In terms of exposure, more recent research into sponsorship effectiveness has emphasized the importance of visual attention as well (Breuer & Rumpf, 2012). To that end, a qualitative validation for exposure and visual attention patterns is warranted to assess the actual visibility of the stimulus.

Purpose
The primary purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between athletic identity and the rates of sponsorship recall, recognition, and purchase intention in the context of an athletic competition hosted on an interactive online platform (website). Additionally, this study will qualitatively explore visual attention patterns.
associated with the event’s website interactions.

Methods
A cross-sectional survey research design will be employed with a qualitative treatment validation. A minimum target sample of N = 200 survey responses will be collected based on a convenience sample of local CrossFit participants during the winter of 2017. Using member e-mail lists for 11 CrossFit affiliates, approximately 700 participants will be solicited to participate in the study beginning one day after the online phase of the CrossFit Games Open competition concludes, with one follow up reminder email delivered approximately one week later. The survey instrument will consist of the AIMS items (10 items, \( \alpha = 0.87 \)), an unaided sponsor recall task, an aided sponsor recognition task (with distractors), previous brand consumption history, future purchase intent items for identified brands, self-reported frequency of competition website utilization, and standard demographic items. Data will be analyzed using multivariate logit regression (panel) with STATA IC v.14.

Additionally, a subset of five subjects (randomly selected) will undergo testing in an eye-tracking laboratory during the middle of the competition phase to qualitatively assess the attention and viewing patterns associated with their typical interaction with the website interface. A Tobii Pro X3-120 screen based eye tracking system will be used to record gaze coordinates and visual fixations, while Tobii Studio software will be used to analyze areas of interest (brand images) and visual heat maps.

Discussion
The findings of this study will provide insight into sponsorship effectiveness and brand viewing behaviors within an online application setting for participant sport competitions. The findings are relevant and important both for sponsoring brands, e.g. evaluating ROI and identifying targeting participant-audience segments, but also for online competition designers, e.g. optimal application/web interface design.