Increasingly more companies without a good natural sponsor-event fit sponsor sport events and spend substantially on activating and leveraging their sponsorship to make a creative image match with the sport entity. Sponsorship-linked advertising (SLA), a common leverage strategy and an explicit communication form of a sponsorship link, is proved to elicit more favorable cognitive response than traditional advertising by promoting perceived fit between sponsor and property (created fit); nevertheless, how the mechanism works in terms of two different types of functional and image fits in TV commercials remains unclear. The purpose of this study is to understand how functional and image fits are perceived in SLA and how they might differently influence attitudes toward the sponsor and the sport property by focusing on the sponsorship case of the Kumho Tire that is a relatively unfamiliar brand as an official tire of the National Basketball Association (NBA).

The premise of sport sponsorship lies in that the sponsor would benefit from the successful association with a sport property (e.g., facility, event, league, broadcasting program). More often than not, there is no well-portrayed message describing a reasonable association of the names of the sponsor and event, subsequently leaving the matter to individual consumers to decipher the message and give it meaning (Fleck & Quester, 2007). With the impletion of SLA, consumers can have other source of information to help them understand and interpret the message. With the potential of establishing or articulating a congruence and fit between a sponsor and a property into target consumer's mind, many corporations commit a large amount of financial resources to utilize and leverage their sponsorships through advertising and promotion. If the goal is to establish a link, then it needs to “tell a story that makes the link understandable” (Cornwell, 2014, p. 48) for the viewers of SLA.

The effect of sponsor-event fit on sponsorship effectiveness has been discussed extensively and previous studies generally reported that increasing the perceived fit between sponsor and property would help improve overall sponsorship effectiveness (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Fleck & Quester, 2007; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Jagre, Watson, & Watson, 2001; McDaniel, 1999; McDonald, 1991; Speed & Thompson, 2000). These previous studies have well-addressed on when the sponsor’s product or service shares the technical and/or functional image-fit with the sponsored property; even so, the extent to which these findings are applicable to settings where sponsors are not of a natural tie with the property is unknown. How to establish or even develop a link through creative messages remain to be an issue that needs to be investigated.

Many of previous studies examining the fit between the sponsor and the property have assumed that sponsors are attracted to sport organizations that offer functional or image congruence with the product or service that corporations seek to promote (Prendergast, Poon, & Douglas, 2010). Research findings indicate that sponsors benefit from a positive impact if sponsor and event are congruent in image and a negative impact if there is no or low congruence between sponsor and event (McDonald, 1991). Good fit between the sponsor and the property enhances more favorable cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses (Koo, Quarterman, & Flynn, 2006), such as better recall of the sponsor (Johar & Pham, 2000), positive attitudes towards sponsorship, and positive attitude toward the product (McDaniel, 1999), and positive purchase intention (Rodgers, 2003). In essence, good fit between the sponsor and the property improves overall sponsorship effectiveness (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). When individuals perceive similarity between the sponsor and the property in terms of functional attributes or image, they might find a link or some relevance between them (Fleck & Quester, 2007). This link can stem from a native fit or a created fit. The native fit is the extent to which the sponsor and the property are perceived as fitting together inherently without any communication and the created fit derives from communication, articulations, and meaning or value explorations (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002).
Researchers have suggested that the negative effects of low native sponsor-event fit can be mitigated through articulation of the sponsorship relationship (Coppetti et al., 2009). Thus, for a sponsor with low native sponsor-event fit, a reasonable communication strategy is to increase its created sponsor-property fit through SLA. While previous SLA studies mostly adopted printed ads as stimuli (Dudzik & Gröppel-Klein, 2005; S. Kelly, Cornwell, Coote, & McAlister, 2017; Kelly, Bettina Cornwell, Coote, & McAlister, 2012; Koo et al., 2006; McDaniel, 1999; Prendergast et al., 2010), it is relatively rare to focus on TV commercials, which is a more common and frequently adopted advertising form of sponsorship. How functional fit and image fit influence perception of the targeted consumers who watch TV commercial is a critical issue to further understand the mechanism of SLA and transform a relatively low native fit to a high created fit.

This study intends to know how to create a congruence image for a sponsorship lacking natural fit with a sport property. The NBA is selected as the property of interest in this study because sponsorship spending on the NBA and its 30 teams was already up to $799 million during the 2015-2016 season, which is an 8.1% increase from the previous year. The increase rate was higher than IEG’s projected 4.5% increase in the overall North American sponsorship spending in 2016 and it appears apparent that the NBA is leading other three major professional leagues in the U.S. (IEG, 2016). As for sponsor, the Kumho Tire is selected and deemed appropriate for this study because it is relatively unfamiliar to U.S. consumers when comparing Kumho Tire with other five leading brands (i.e., Michelin, Continental, Pirelli, Bridgestone, and Goodyear) in the global tire market (Ito & Rose, 2002). Also, tire is not the most active category of product sponsoring the NBA; insurance companies are 3.2 times more likely than the average of all products or service to sponsor the league, which is followed by restaurants, travel, non-alcoholic beverages and medical services (IEG, 2016).

This study is a multivariate factorial analysis of covariance experimental design, with one independent factor (experimental vs. control) and one repeated measure factor (i.e., three pre- and three post-treatment assessment). The covariates include team identification, familiarity with the sponsor and the property, involvement of advertisement and product, and attitude toward advertisement and commercialization of sport sponsorship. As a between-subject design, all participants will randomly be divided into two groups (control/experimental). Currently, an online survey is being conducted. After signing the informed consent form, all voluntary participants are directed to view video clips and provide opinions on advertisements for a new tire brand (Kumho Tire). All participants then respond to items measuring native sponsor-event fit. Each group responds to items measuring perceived functional/image fit, sponsor recognition, attitude to sponsor, attitude to property, and purchase intention to sponsor product before watching one of two TV commercials (created image with fit cue, created image with functional and image fit cue). Immediately after watching a TV commercial for three times, participants respond again to items measuring created sponsor-event fit, functional/image fit, sponsor recognition, attitude to sponsor, attitude to property, and purchase intention to sponsor product. Items in the post-treatment survey are re-ordered randomly. In addition, participants are required to rate scale items assessing covariates. Students from a major southeast university have been recruited to participate in this investigation, with approximately 600 respondents. It is expected that the entire study will be completed in March 2018. The implications of this study should be beneficial for sport marketers and sponsors when a brand does not have logical functional or image relationships with the sport property and needs to effectively articulate an association through creative messages in TV commercials.