The Effect of CSR-Centric Sports Partnership on Consumer Responses

Meimei Yan, Florida State University
Yong Jae Ko (Advisor), University of Florida
Akira Asada (Advisor), Texas Tech University
Joon Sung Lee (Advisor), University of Florida
Daewhan Kim (Advisor), Seoul National University

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Calling for public attention to social causes has become a popular marketing approach for sponsors. In the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR)-centric partnerships, consumer responses have been tested to better understand the effectiveness of marketing campaigns (Irwin et al., 2003). However, it remains unclear how a partnered CSR engagement between sponsor and sponsee affects perceived sponsor-sponsee fit and subsequent consumer reactions (i.e., attitudes toward sponsor and WOM intention). Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to test the impact of CSR association on the perceived fit between sponsor and sponsee and consumer responses.

Based on the associative network memory model (Collins & Loftus, 1975), we believe each node (i.e., the information in memory) representing sponsee and sponsor is linked with a CSR node, while the association between sponsee and sponsor may also be linked with CSR. Because of the association between sponsor and sponsee, consumers may perceive a greater fit between the focal objects and a CSR node (Roy & Cornwell, 2003). Additionally, the greater fit may enhance the transfer of the positive image to the sponsor resulting from the prosocial activity. As such, we hypothesized that CSR association (CSRA) has positive effects on consumers’ positive responses (H1) and perceived fit (H2), and that perceived fit mediates the effects of CSRA (H3).

We conducted an experiment with a one-factor three-level (CSRA: high vs. low vs. control) between-subjects design. We recruited 152 US residents through Amazon Mechanical Turk. To manipulate CSRA, we provided information about a prosocial campaign conducted by a hypothetical marathon event and its sponsor. Adding to the partnership message in the control condition, the two CSRA conditions included campaign information with different longevities (2 years vs. 11 years) and donation sizes ($1,000 vs. $500,000; 0.1% vs. 20% of registration fee). After reading the scenarios, the participants completed measures of perceived CSRA, attitude toward sponsor, WOM intention, and perceived fit. Issue involvement and sport involvement were also measured and used as covariates.

Evidence from a series of ANCOVAs (N = 152) indicated H1 and H2 were partially supported (attitude: F (2, 140) = 7.77, p < .05; WOM intention: F (2, 141) = 3.57, p < .05; perceived fit: F (2, 141) = 3.27; p < .05). The high CSRA condition had the highest mean scores for attitude (MAtt = 6.14), WOM intention (MWOM = 4.90), and perceived fit (MFit = 4.81). The low CSRA condition had higher scores (MAtt = 5.52, MWOM = 4.67, MFit = 4.38) compared to the control condition (MAtt = 5.35, MWOM = 4.04, MFit = 4.71). We confirmed H3 through Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS Model 4, showing the partial mediating effect of perceived fit based on the significant indirect (β = .03) and direct effects (β = .45).

These results extend the conceptualization of CSR Associations that has been developed on the basis of the associative network memory model and offer meaningful managerial implications for the CSR oriented sponsorship practices.