The Effects of Dramatic Sports Programming and Congruence on Television Advertising Effectiveness: An Examination of Emotional and Cognitive Priming Effects using Psycho-Physiological Approaches

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Over the years, scholars have examined sport marketing communication (e.g., sponsorship, endorsement, advertisement) through several theoretical frameworks such as the match-up model (e.g., McDaniel, 1999), image transfer theory (e.g., Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), and mere exposure theory (e.g., Lee & Pedersen, 2011). There is a need, however, to explain how those endeavors work in conjunction with distinctive features of the sport industry. For example, it has long been known that sport consumption is strongly associated with immediate and intense emotional responses (e.g., Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). More recently, scholars have proposed that emotions experienced during/after sport consumption can result in different persuasive information processing of a following promotional stimuli (e.g. Kwak, Kim, & Hirt, 2011). Following this emerging line of study, the current investigation empirically tested how the dramatic and emotional nature of sports influences the effectiveness of subsequent ads.

Based on affective priming theory (Yi, 1990), which posits that hedonic reactions have an impact on subsequent evaluations, it was hypothesized (H1) that an ad placed after a pleasant situation (i.e., favorite team’s victory) would elicit greater effectiveness than the ad placed after an unpleasant situation (i.e., favorite team’s defeat). Moreover, H2 was guided by arousal transfer theory (Zillmann, 1971), which suggests that arousal may enhance the evaluation of subsequent stimuli. Hence, it was expected that an ad placed after an exciting situation (i.e., tight game) would produce greater effectiveness than the ad placed after a boring situation (i.e., lopsided game). Further, match-up hypothesis (e.g., McDaniel, 1999) based upon schema theory – which has been identified as the most driving factor (i.e., congruence/fit) in advertising/sponsorship effectiveness (Kim et al., 2015) – was tested in order to assess whether sport event primed schemas (i.e., sport themed ad vs. non-sport themed ad) would enhance the effectiveness of an ad (H3).

In order to test the three propositions, a 2 (game outcome priming: pleasant, unpleasant) × 2 (game process priming: arousing, calm) × 2 (advertising schemas: sport-theme, non-sport theme) within-subject design was developed and the study was conducted in an experimental laboratory housed within a Midwestern University. Seventy-two undergraduates were shown a total of eight sporting program-ad combinations. After watching each program-ad combination (an ad randomly placed after the university’s basketball game), subjects were asked to report their emotional states as well as their attitudes toward the ad and the advertised brand. Also, half of the subjects’ physiological responses (corrugator, skin conductance level) during the viewing of the stimuli were recorded to assess their emotional responses.

The results of the repeated measures of ANOVA firmly supported H1, H2, and H3 such that the game outcome, process, and advertising schemas had significant main effects on self-reported ad and brand evaluations. Also, similar patterns were observed in the psychophysiological data. The findings suggest that the same ad can result in different persuasive impacts, depending upon the emotional and cognitive context of the preceding program (Yi, 1990). The study offers new insights to the existing sport marketing communication literature by examining emotional and cognitive priming effects in the context of sport media programming.