

EXPLANATORY MECHANISMS FOR CSR-LINKED SPORT SPONSORSHIP EFFECTS

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Abstract

Sponsors of sports mega-events are increasingly linking such events to activities in the area CSR (corporate social responsibility). CSR-linked sport sponsorship may positively influence brand perceptions where consumers perceive this engagement to be sincere and the cause worth supporting (Lacey, Close, & Finney, 2010). Altruistic motive attribution – a key variable accounting for the success of sponsorships (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004) – may mediate this influence and thus leverage the sponsorship. However, it is also possible that the linking of CSR and sponsorship is perceived as thematically incompatible by consumers and causes reactance. It may lead to suspicion and skepticism about the reasons why the brand is engaging in social activities (Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009), particularly in the case of highly commercialized mega-events. In this research we examine whether linking the sponsorship of sports mega-events with CSR activities results in more favorable brand perceptions than commercial sponsorship on its own. Based on the theoretical background of schema and attribution theory, applied to sponsorship-linked marketing (Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, Weeks, & Tellegen, 2006; Menon & Kahn, 2003), we hypothesize that increases in altruistic motive attributions for the sponsorship mediate the effects of CSR-linked sponsorship communication, and perceived sponsor-event congruence moderates these effects. In a pilot field study looking at the soccer World Cup 2010 in South Africa, we test the basic proposition that consumers' attitudes to a brand are more positive when they are aware of both the brand's engagement as a sponsor and its parallel social activities, compared to when they are aware of just the sponsorship activities or aware of neither the sponsorship nor the social activities. A total of 448 individuals participated in the initial field study. Through personal interviews we identify consumers' recognition of the sponsorship activities and CSR, brand attitudes and brand familiarity. We find that consumers who were aware of both the sponsorship and the CSR activities report significantly more positive brand attitudes than those who were only aware of the sponsorship activity or aware of neither the sponsorship nor the CSR activities. The brand adidas is the only brand for which this relationship

did not hold – a first indication of relevance of the sponsor-event congruence.

To analyze this potential mechanism in more detail, a total of 127 students participated in a first laboratory experiment applying a one-factorial (content of communication: standard sponsorship versus CSR-linked sponsorship; control: CSR) between-subjects design. Sponsor-event congruence was measured via an established scale as a continuous variable. We used press releases about several brands, including the target brand Sony, as experimental stimuli.

ANOVA results show that CSR-linked (versus standard sponsorship) sponsorship communication has a positive effect on brand attitude shifts and consumers' CSR perceptions of the brand, whereas brand credibility and the behavioral tendency to recommend the brand as an employer are not directly affected. Mediation analyses reveal that CSR-linked sponsorship communication increases attributions of altruistic sponsorship motives, and that this effect mediates the positive effects on all dependent variables. In addition, the results of moderated regressions show that the perception of low congruence of the brand with the sponsored event positively affects the linking of sponsorship information with CSR.

In a second laboratory experiment we investigate whether brands engaging in CSR-linked sponsorship communication can benefit from demonstrating a high level of commitment to social activities, and how these effects are moderated by sponsor-event congruence. As in experiment 1, we used press releases for manipulation purposes. Based on the results of several pretests, we selected adidas to represent high-congruence brands and Coca-Cola to represent low-congruence brands.

The results show that motive attributions account for the positive effects of high CSR commitment on perceptions of both the brand and the sponsorship. However, a high level of CSR commitment has negative direct effects on CSR perceptions, brand credibility and sponsorship credibility. Furthermore, a tactical decrease in a brand's commitment to CSR when linked to event sponsorship is more harmful to low-congruence brands than to high-congruence brands. The results imply that a CSR-linked sponsorship strategy is particularly promising for brands with a low overall congruence to the event, where these brands follow a long-term CSR strategy. For such brands, social engagement adds meaning to the brand. If high-congruence sponsors follow such a strategy, they should ensure that the social engagement is not in conflict with consumers' expectations of the brand's behavior in relation to the event, otherwise the unexpectedness of this information may destroy consumers' consistent and harmonious beliefs about the brand.

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