

INFLUENCE OF MESSAGE SOURCE IN CSR-LINKED SPONSORSHIP – EXPLAINING ADVERSE EFFECTS BY CONSUMER'S PERSUASION KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract keywords

sponsorship, CSR, mega-event, message source, persuasion knowledge, brand attitude, CSR perception

Aim of abstract

Sponsors of mega-events like the FIFA Football World Cup increasingly link their sponsorship activities with corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives surrounding these events (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer, & Groeppel-Klein, 2011). In addition to achieving traditional objectives of sponsorship (e.g. increasing brand awareness or brand image), the practice to communicate these two activities simultaneously (henceforth referred to as CSR-linked sponsorship) may help sponsors to demonstrate their corporate goodwill, an increasingly important goal of sponsorship. Hence, CSR-linked sponsorship could be considered as a strategy to comply with the requirement of leveraging commercial sponsorships. While CSR-linked sponsorship has become common practice among mega-event sponsors, little is known about the conditions under which this strategy positively affects consumer perceptions of the sponsor brand. The present study attempts to partially fill this gap by examining the influence of the message source through which consumers learn about the linkage of sponsorship and social engagement. More specifically, the study examines how message sources with varying degrees of perceived bias (e.g. high bias = sponsor communicates vs. low bias = newspaper article) affect the influence of CSR-linked sponsorship on brand perception.

Theoretical background

Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1989) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994) provide the theoretical basis for this study. According to the PKM, consumers accumulate knowledge about persuasion attempts of market actors during their lives. By using these knowledge structures, they are able to recognize persuasion attempts and to cope with them appropriately. A biased message source should activate a consumer's persuasion knowledge leading to skepticism towards the underlying motive of the source's activities (e.g. Forehand & Grier, 2003). Querying the sincerity of the underlying motives to engage in CSR-programs could finally result in a less favorable evaluation of the activities and the organization (e.g. Walker et al., 2010; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006).

Methodology, research design and data analysis

Based on the theoretical insights, it's hypothesized that the communication of a CSR-linked sponsorship by a biased message source (i.e. the sponsor is the source) results in lower consumer CSR perceptions than an unbiased source (H1) and that this effect is mediated by the activation of the consumer's persuasion knowledge (H2). Because prior research identified consumer CSR perception as a key driver of brand attitude (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer, & Groeppel-Klein, 2011) the effects of message source on brand attitude should be mediated through consumer's persuasion knowledge and CSR perception (H3), resulting in a multiple mediation model with two serial mediators.

The hypotheses were tested in a scenario based experimental study. A total of 132 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to a one factorial (message source bias: high, medium, low) between-subject design. In addition, a "sponsorship only" condition was included as control group. The FIFA Football World Cup sponsorship of a fictitious brand labeled Primo Lux linked with the support of an aid project for children served as the context of the study. To manipulate the perceived bias of the message source, the participants were instructed to read short reports about the sponsor's activities. In the "high bias" condition, the participants were informed that the report stems from the sponsor's website ("medium bias" condition: from the event's website, "low bias" condition: newspaper article). The control group received a report about Primo Lux's sponsorship with no linkage to CSR. Based on preliminary analyses testing the experimental manipulation (i.e. correct assignment of messages sources), several cases were excluded from the dataset leading to a final sample size of 96 (58% females).

Results, discussion and implications

Supporting H1, ANOVA results revealed a significant effect of message source on CSR perception ($F(2, 64) = 3.75, p = 0.029$). Post-hoc tests show that communicating a CSR-linked sponsorship via a newspaper article leads to higher CSR perception compared with communicating via the corporate website ($p = .05$) and – at a marginal level – compared with communicating via the event website ($p = .06$), too. No differences could be observed between the "high bias" and "medium bias" conditions. In support of H2, a mediation analysis demonstrates the hypothesized role of activated persuasion knowledge as the underlying mechanism for the aforementioned adverse effect of a biased message source. Taken the "low bias" condition as reference group, participants in the "high bias" as well as in the "medium bias" condition perceived a stronger persuasion attempt resulting in lower consumer CSR perception of the sponsor. The indirect influence of the message source on brand attitude, as stated in H3, could also be verified.

In sum, the present study reveals that the brand effects (i.e. CSR perception, brand attitude) of a CSR-linked sponsorship message depend on the source that communicates the linkage. The findings also contribute to the literature by identifying the underlying mechanism of

this effect. From a practical point of view, sponsorship managers should take into account that CSR-linked sponsorship communication does not automatically result in favorable perceptions of the brand. It should be considered that communicating such activities via biased message sources can nullify the generally positive effects. With respect to the limitations of this study, we use a student sample which makes it difficult to generalize the empirical results to basic populations. Therefore, further investigations should prove the replication of our results with a more heterogeneous sample.

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