

# Affiliation Vs. Contribution: Sponsorship Communication Effects On Consumer Response

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## Aim of the study

Sponsorship has become an important marketing communication tool. An issue that remains debated is how sponsors should communicate their sponsorship engagement. This study identifies two approaches — affiliation and contribution — and investigates their effects on consumers' sponsorship response.

## Theoretical background and hypotheses

A sponsoring company pays a fee to a sponsored property and receives the authorization to associate itself with the sponsored property and advertise this association. If the sponsor actively communicates to its target audience predominantly the association, we call this sponsorship communication approach *affiliation*. If the sponsor actively communicates a concrete, relevant and visible contribution the sponsor provides for the sponsored property (usually originating from the company's core business), we call this approach *contribution*. The beer brewing company Bitburger, for example, uses the affiliation approach for its sponsorship of the German Soccer Association (DFB), because it advertises its association with the DFB, but communicates no concrete contribution to the DFB. The German airline Lufthansa, on the other hand, actively communicates its specific contribution to the DFB and its members, that is, all required air services. These observations lead to the research question, whether — based on theoretical grounds and empirical evidence — any approach is more effective in terms of consumer response to the sponsorship.

We use attribution theory, schema theory, and social identity theory to build our framework and explain how the affiliation and the contribution approach may differ in their impact on consumers' sponsorship response conditional on the level of identification with the sponsored property (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980; McDaniel, 1999). We suggest in line with schema theory that if a sponsor provides a concrete contribution, this enhances the fit between the sponsor and the sponsored property (H1). Information about a sponsor's concrete contribution can also help consumers perceive more altruistic sponsor motives (H2). Yet, these favorable effects are restricted to individuals at least moderately identified with the sponsored property, because only these consumers use the relevant information at their disposal to shape fit perceptions and justify altruistic sponsor motive attributions (H3, H4). Finally, in line with existing sponsorship research, both sponsor-property fit perceptions and altruistic sponsor motive attributions positively influence consumers' attitude toward the sponsor (H5, H6).

## Methodology and research design

A pre-test (n = 45) tested the stimulus material (fictitious press releases) and confirmed that consumers indeed perceived the contribution approach as more 1) concrete, 2) relevant, 3) visible and 4) originating from the core business of the sponsor than the affiliation approach.

In the main experiment 228 respondents received randomly one of the press releases and answered a questionnaire measuring their attitude toward the sponsor, attributed sponsor motives, perceived sponsor-property fit, and level of identification with the sponsored property with established multi-item scales (Cronbach alphas: 0.69–0.95). The manipulation check again confirmed that the affiliation/contribution manipulation was successful.

## Results, discussion, and implications

To test the hypotheses, we performed a moderated mediation analysis using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 7, bootstrap sample = 5,000). The manipulated communication approach (0 = affiliation, 1 = contribution) served as the independent variable (X), perceived sponsor-property fit and attributed sponsor motives served as the mediators (M), and attitude toward the sponsor served as the dependent variable (Y). We found a significant index of moderated mediation for both perceived fit and attributed sponsor motives, supporting H1, H2, H5, and H6. We tested the mediation effects at different identification levels and found significant mediation for perceived fit (sponsor motive attributions) only if identification was above the mean (at or above the mean). Supplementary analyses using Johnson-Neyman significance regions indicated an identification value of 1.86 (1.29) as sufficient for significant positive effects of contribution to occur on perceived fit (sponsor motive attributions). These results support H3 and H4.

Sponsors can use this information for selecting appropriate sponsorships and aligning the sponsorship communication strategies accordingly. On a more general level, the study provides a practicable approach for sponsors to differentiate themselves from ambush marketers, as ambushers can never communicate a concrete contribution for the property they want to be associated with. While some limitations — in particular with regard to the external validity of such an experimental design and the generally low levels of identification — remain, this study can be an important step in investigating how companies should communicate their sponsorships to maximize sponsorship effectiveness.

## References

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