Positive Implicit Memory Effects For Event Incongruent Sponsorship

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Past studies have consistently shown that an increase of congruence between the sponsor and the event increases brand awareness. However, this result has no strong theoretical support and could, at least partly, be explained by constructive processes of sponsor identification. In order to avoid the use of such processes, we use implicit memory measures. We show that, compared to congruent sponsors, incongruent sponsors enjoy a perceptual encoding advantage under both high and low processing capacity of the sponsors as well as a conceptual encoding advantage under high processing capacity of the sponsors. Congruent sponsors only enjoy a conceptual encoding advantage under low processing capacity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12738/volumes/v34/NA-34

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

One of the main goals of sponsors is to increase awareness (Walliser 2003). Congruence between the sponsor and the event sponsored is one important factor influencing awareness. Congruence can be defined as the perceived fit between a sponsor and the event sponsored (Speed and Thompson 2000). Several authors have shown that an increase in congruence improves aided and unaided awareness (Grohs et al. 2004; Quester and Farrelly 1998; Rodgers 2004). However, this result has no strong theoretical support (Stangor and McMillan 1992) and it may partly be explained by constructive processes of sponsor identification (Johar and Pham 1999).

Johar and Pham (1999) showed that sponsor identification is biased toward sponsors that are perceived as congruent to the event. Consumers will identify sponsors based on the fact that they find it more logical if an event is sponsored by congruent sponsors (whether true or not). Thus, when assessing sponsor recall and especially recognition, subjects may construct an artificial response according to their existing expectations. It is nevertheless important to assess sponsor awareness without the presence of such bias. The use of implicit memory measures enables to suppress this bias.

Implicit memory is defined as the non intentional and non conscious retrieval of information previously encoded in memory (Schacter 1987). Two types of implicit memory can be distinguished: perceptual implicit memory and conceptual implicit memory (Lee 2002). Perceptual implicit memory rests on an encoding of the physical proprieties of the stimulus whereas conceptual implicit memory rests on an encoding of the semantic proprieties of the stimulus. Implicit memory measures enable verifying the encoding of information and are not influenced by conscious retrieval strategies. However, implicit memory measures are not explicit memory measures (i.e. recall or recognition) without biases.

We used the associative network model (Crocker et al. 1984) and the encoding flexibility model (Sherman et al. 1998) to develop hypotheses on the relative encoding of congruent versus incongruent sponsors. The encoding flexibility model proposes that it is because consistent information is easily understood and confirms prior expectations that it will receive little attention and that the perceptual details of this information is not well encoded. After having extracted the basic gist of consistent information, individuals will direct their attention to other information harder to comprehend such as inconsistent information. Following the research of Lee (2002) we also chose to develop hypotheses concerning sponsor choice. Lee showed that perceptual implicit memory influences stimulus based choices and that conceptual implicit memory influences memory based choices.

We tested the hypotheses in an experiment on sports events sponsorships by brands. The experimental design used was the following: congruence (low vs. high) x processing capacity (low vs. high) x type of implicit memory measure and type of choice (perceptual implicit memory and memory based choice vs. conceptual implicit memory and stimulus based choice). Participants were exposed to 23 sponsorships of international events (8 congruent, 8 incongruent and 7 filler sponsorships). Half of the participants was under mental load whereas the other half was not. Implicit memory measures were introduced as a new test of brand awareness.

Participants were asked to identify brands flashed briefly (40 ms) on the center of the screen. Subjects had to identify 67 brands among which 7 congruent and 7 incongruent target brands. For perceptual implicit memory measures, the 14 target brands were the sponsoring brands. For conceptual implicit memory measures, the 14 target brands were brands in the same product categories as the sponsoring brands. Indeed, conceptual implicit memory of a brand rests on the activation of the link between the brand and semantically related concepts such as the other brands in the product category. The choice tasks consisted of 6 memory based or 6 stimulus based choices.

An awareness check questionnaire enabled us to classify 111 subjects as non conscious. We started by assessing criterion validity of the implicit memory measures used by showing that the perceptual implicit memory measure is not affected by a diminution of processing capacity but that the conceptual implicit memory measure is affected (Muligan 1997, 1998).

For the memory measures, the dependent variable of interest was the proportion of congruent and incongruent target brands correctly identified. As hypothesized, for perceptual implicit memory measures, we found a main effect of congruence such as incongruent sponsors are better encoded (M=.534) than congruent sponsors (M=.435) and that whatever the level of processing capacity. For conceptual implicit memory measures, as hypothesized, we found a significant interaction between the type of sponsor and the processing capacity such as when capacity is high conceptual implicit memory is higher for incongruent sponsors (M=.436) than for congruent sponsors (M=.399) and when capacity is low conceptual implicit memory is higher for congruent sponsors (M=.335) than for incongruent sponsors (M=.318).

For stimulus based choices, we found that incongruent sponsors have more chance of being chosen than congruent sponsors (44% vs. 28% of choices) but, contrary to our hypothesis, only when processing capacity is high. For the memory based choices, we found, contrary to our hypothesis, that congruent sponsors and incongruent sponsors have the same chance of being chosen.

The results of this research suggest that some existing findings showing that an increase in congruence improves aided and unaided awareness may have been polluted by new response construction biases. Recognition measures, which mainly rest on perceptual processes, are particularly likely to have been polluted (Roediger 1990). This should however be tested in a follow up experiment using explicit memory measures corrected for response biases as dependent measures.

The use of implicit memory measures is nevertheless important as implicit memory can influence judgments and choices of consumers (Trendel and Warlop 2005). Moreover, the memory record of the association between a sponsor and the event sponsored is often weak (Walliser 2003). Thus, it is often the information encoded in implicit memory that will influence behavior and judgment of consumers and it appears that incongruent sponsors are often better encoded in implicit memory than congruent sponsors.

REFERENCES


