Empirical Support for an Item and Relational Conceptualization of Sponsorship

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This paper outlines how commercial sponsorship can be conceptualized using an item and relational information framework, and supports this with empirical data. The model presented allows for predictions about consumer memory for sponsorship information, and hence has both theoretical and practical value. Data are reported which show that sponsors considered congruent with an event benefit by providing consumers with sponsor-specific item information, while sponsors considered incongruent benefit by providing sponsor-event relational information. Overall the provision of sponsor-event relational information is shown to result in superior memory to the provision of sponsor-specific item information, which is superior to basic sponsor mentions.

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Brand Stereotypes and Consumer Judgments: The Automatic Shifting of Standards in Brand Evaluations

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Applying the social psychology precepts of the Shifting Standards Model (Biernat, Manis, and Nelson 1991) it is shown that—depending on a marketer’s particular choice of eliciting consumer feedback—a brand that fares objectively better than another on a specific attribute can in fact be perceived as equal or even relatively worse than the same brand on that very attribute. Such anomalous explicit response originates in consumers’ use of different stereotypical standards for the competing brands. Unless brands are directly juxtaposed (objective judgment), evaluative standards are implicitly more relaxed for the inferior brand, allowing it to match or even surpass its competitor in subjective judgments.

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Many marketers rely on commercial sponsorship as a means of promoting brand awareness or enhancing brand image, and many events rely on sponsorship as a source of funding and would potentially cease to exist without it (Gardner and Shuman 1988, Lardinoit and Derbaix 2001). Despite a growing body of research aimed at investigating various aspects of sponsorship, such as potential outcomes and measures of effectiveness (see Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005 for a discussion), few researchers have proposed fully developed psychologically-based conceptual models of how commercial sponsorship might function to affect its audiences. Without such models, predictions about sponsorship success can be difficult to make, and firms that might otherwise invest in worthwhile events may be reluctant to do so (Lardinoit and Derbaix 2001). This paper uses theory from the item and relational information memory literature (e.g., Einstein and Hunt 1980, Hunt and Einstein 1981) to explain how commercial sponsorship can be conceptualized. Further, it reports empirical data in support of this conceptual model, and illustrates that the model can be used to predict memory for various types of sponsorship information. This theoretical framework has been presented in Weeks, Cornwell, and Humphreys (forthcoming) and the empirical support from the current study demonstrates its validity.

Item information is that which is encoded to represent specific events or objects in memory, while relational information is that which is encoded to represent the relationships between events and objects. If both brands and events (the two key components of a sponsorship) can be considered forms of item information, and the relationship a brand holds with an event (a sponsorship) can be considered relational information, then an item and relational information framework should be a valid way to conceptualize commercial sponsorship. Item and relational theory suggests that item information is encoded in such a way that item-specific features are stored which make the item distinctive from other information represented in memory (Einstein and Hunt 1980). Relational information, on the other hand, is encoded such that features shared across items are stored, thereby enabling the representation of relationships among items in memory (Einstein and Hunt 1980). Memory for the relationship that a brand holds with an event (a sponsorship), is therefore dependent upon the encoding and storage of both sponsor-specific item information (which distinguishes the brand as a sponsor) and sponsor-event relational information (which ties the brand to the event). Congruent sponsorships (e.g., where a sporting goods manufacturer sponsors a sporting event) may be at an advantage to incongruent sponsorships (e.g., where a mineral water brand sponsors an electronics fair) in that relational information is more readily available given that a relationship is more obvious. Market competitors can also be conceptualized in this model, as sources of information (also encoded as item or relational information) that can potentially interfere with the storage of the target (sponsor) information.

The current study used an experimental design to test the predictive value of this model. Since sponsorship information is likely to be processed as peripheral information (Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983, Pham and Vanhuele, 1997), participants were exposed to
a series of radio-like press announcements detailing upcoming event sponsorships, which were embedded among distracter announcements outlining horoscope predictions and weather forecasts. Participants were asked to rate the announcers in terms of effectiveness and suitability to be radio presenters rather than focus on content, and at the end of the session they were given an unexpected recall task. In total, 196 student volunteers took part in the study and received course credit for doing so.

The study used a 4 (competitor information type) x 3 (sponsor information type) x 2 (sponsor-event congruence type) mixed factorial design. Participants heard twelve announcements, each containing a description of a fictitious upcoming event, one of four levels of competitor information (no competitor, competitor mention, competitor-specific item information, competitor-event relational information) in order to assess the effects of competitor information interference, and one of three levels of sponsor information (sponsor mention, sponsor-specific item information, sponsor-event relational information). Each level of competitor information was presented between groups, while the three levels of sponsor information were presented within groups. Half of the announcements that participants heard detailed congruent sponsors and competitors, and half detailed incongruent sponsors and competitors. All conditions were counterbalanced to avoid possible order effects. Memory for the sponsorship information was assessed using cued recall where the event name served as the recall cue.

Results lend support to conceptualizing sponsorship within an item and relational information framework. In general, the provision of sponsor-specific item information produced superior memory performance to simply having a sponsor mention, and providing sponsor-event relational information was generally superior to providing sponsor-specific item information. As predicted, sponsor-specific item information facilitated recall for the already-related congruent sponsors, but did little to improve recall for the unrelated incongruent sponsors. Sponsor-event relational information enhanced recall for incongruent sponsors, and improved recall for congruent sponsors to a similar extent as sponsor-specific item information. Although it was expected that higher levels of competitor information would result in greater interference and hence reduced memory for sponsors, marginal means tended to suggest relatively stable levels of overall recall across the four competitor information conditions.

The data provided here, although preliminary, lend considerable support to an item and relational information conceptualization of commercial sponsorship. The model is able to predict, based upon the type of sponsorship information a consumer receives and the congruence between an event and sponsor, just how well the consumer will remember that information. If these results can be replicated in future studies, this model will prove valuable to both marketing researchers and practitioners alike. Although memory for sponsorship information is an important outcome of sponsorships, whether the model is able to predict affective and behavioral outcomes must also be considered in future work.

References

Elaboration, Imagination and the Misinformation Effect
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Consumers’ recollection of their consumption experience has been shown to be open to suggestion and susceptible to external influence. For instance, recollections about product quality as well as product type have been shown to be open to misleading suggestions from print advertisements (Braun, 1999; Cowley & Janus, 2004). While these initial studies have demonstrated the presence of the misinformation effect in the consumer behavior context and some boundary conditions for the same, they have also raised important questions regarding the nature of the effect, the level to which it extends to and processing strategies that might enhance or mitigate the effect. For instance, one important question that is raised is whether consumers’ false recollections are limited to the actual misinforming stimulus or do they extend to confabulations that go beyond the misinforming intrusion. The objective of this study is to investigate this possibility.

Previous studies in the decision making literature have shown that extended processing of information may not always lead to accurate judgments and might, in some cases, reduce judgment accuracy. In addition to this, evidence from the eyewitness testimony and cognitive psychology literature suggests that when individuals are placed in situations that elicit extended recollection, they are prone to greater