Mellowing Skeptical Consumers: Processing of Sponsorship Linked Advertising Versus Non Sponsorship Linked Advertising

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This research provides insight into the complex relationship between consumer response to persuasion attempts and skepticism, suggesting that erstwhile targets may be swayed by campaigns which are pitched as a form of entertainment. We examine consumer responses to an important sponsorship leveraging tool, sponsorship-linked advertising in this context. A theoretical model of consumer response to sponsorship-linked advertising is proposed, drawing upon important resistance mechanisms in persuasion including ad skepticism, attributed advertiser motives and nature of thoughts. Results confirm existing research on consumer skepticism suggesting its transitory nature, and hence potential for advertisers to strategically temper it through specific cues in ad execution. Differential processing between sponsorship-linked advertising and traditional advertising is supported, such that sponsorship-linked advertising elicits more favorable cognitive response.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The current research examines a communication form, namely sponsorship-linked advertising, having arisen since Friestad and Wright (1994) developed their persuasion knowledge framework. Sponsorship, defined as “…investing in causes and/or events to support overall corporate objectives and/or marketing objectives” (Cornwell 1995 p.15) has developed into a mainstream communications approach in the last two decades. Sponsorship-linked advertising has emerged as a way to leverage sponsorship relationships. It is also often misappropriated by event ambushers and thus has an interestingly complex relationship with the potential development of skepticism.

Cognitive psychology theory is used to propose a model of consumer response to sponsorship-linked advertising, in terms of underlying information processing dynamics. The theoretical model used is novel in that it incorporates skepticism and attributed advertiser motives as important resistance mechanisms to persuasion. The results obtained from experimental research support the existence of widespread consumer skepticism toward advertising generally, and a propensity for consumers to infer attributions on advertiser motive depending upon contextual cues both within and ancillary to ads. Moreover, differential processing of sponsorship-linked advertising is confirmed, such that sponsorship-linked advertising is associated with more favorable cognitive outcomes, including more positive thoughts, less ad skepticism and more favorable attributions. Results support existing conceptualizations of consumer skepticism which suggest that it may be transitory, depending upon contextual cues. This study contributes to sponsorship research by offering empirical evidence of favorable consumer response to sponsorship-linked advertising, suggesting that it is a viable leveraging tool. Moreover, consumer behavior research is advanced, with the study gaining insight into the complex relationship between persuasion attempts and skepticism. Interestingly, results imply that consumers may actually derive enjoyment, or at least feel less skepticism when viewing sponsorship linked ads as compared to non sponsorship linked ads.

REFERENCES