In the natural setting of a sport (tennis) event, this research puts into evidence a dual path increasing the likelihood of sponsor brands to be part of spectators’ stimulus-based consideration set. While one path is "conscious" and mediated by the recognition of the brand-event link, the other is "non-conscious" (without recognition). As a consequence, sponsorship impact may be stronger and also different than measured in many previous studies focusing on the conscious path only. Besides, results call for a change of sponsorship measurement approaches. If conscious and unconscious sponsorship effects occur simultaneously, both have to be taken into account.

[to cite]:

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Sponsorship effectiveness evaluation relies heavily and mainly on recall and recognition tests (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Walliser, 2003). The legitimacy of these tests lies in the assumption that brand-event recognition is a necessary condition for sponsorship success (Sandler and Shani 1989). Such an assumption can however be challenged on at least two points. First, sponsorship messages can be considered peripheral elements (YdeWalle and Tasmin 1993) for the spectator and may not be retrievable during a direct memory search (Shapiro, MacInnis, and Heckler 1997). Second, recall and recognition tests focus more on the control of the brand-event association, than on the perception of the sponsor brand per se (Holden and Vanhuene 1999).

Authors investigating incidental exposure effects in marketinging (Acar 2007; Holden and Vanhuene 1999; Janiszewski 1988) postulate that the effect of exposure without memory of the exposure itself operates through familiarity or perceptual fluency. Among the effects that appear to be mediated by perceptual fluency or familiarity, the mere exposure effect indicates that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases stimulus likability even in the absence of stimulus recognition (Zajonc 1968). Fang, Singh, and Ahluwalia (2007) consider affect as a key process underlying the mere exposure effect and deduct a strengthening of these effects under resource-constrained decision-making situations characterizing many marketplace environments. It is thus expected that spectator exposure to a sponsor brand during an event increases the likelihood of the brand to be included in the spectator’s stimulus-based consideration set, even if the spectator does not recognize the brand as sponsor (H1).

Stipulating a non-conscious sponsor effect does not exclude the existence of a conscious sponsorship effect which may become manifest in the spectator’s ability to recognize the sponsor brand. Most major concepts and mechanisms identified in the literature to explain sponsorship effects (Cornwell et al., 2005)—such as for example perceived congruency and its articulation to “create fit” (Becker-Olsen and Simmons 2002), Heider’s balance theory (1958), meaning transfer (McCranke 1989), social identification (Gwinner and Swanson 2003), and attribution theory (Dean 2002; Rifon, Choi, and Trimble 2004)—rely on the consciousness of the brand-event link. Even if sponsorship is characterized by numerous incidental exposure occasions, there are moments when the spectator is less absorbed by the “primary task”. An arrival on site before the (sport) action starts as well as interruptions at halftime are examples of occasions favouring the consciousness and a semantic processing of the brand-event link. It is thus expected that spectator exposure to a sponsor brand during an event increases the likelihood of the brand to be included in the spectator’s stimulus-based consideration set, through the recognition of the brand as sponsor (H2).

Data collection took place over four days of a one-week international tennis tournament. Face-to-face interviews were conducted before the spectators entered the stadium (control group) as well as inside the arena after spectators had assisted to one or several matches (experimental group). No significant differences between both groups are observed.

In order to determine the stimulus-based consideration set, respondents were given a list of 16 brand/company names within the target product category, including the sponsor name (Shapiro et al. 1997), and were asked which of these brands/companies they would consider for personal use or recommend to a friend. Subsequently, sponsor recognition was tested on a list of 16 brands including four “dummy” brands.

Following a series of successive (logistic) regressions analyses recommended to test for the existence of mediating effects (Baron and Kenny 1986), a significant positive effect of exposure (Expo) on the target brand’s likelihood (Cset) to be included in the consideration set (p=.02, odds ratio $\text{Exp}(\beta)=3.6$), as well as on the presumed mediator process ($p=.002$) are observed. Exposure simultaneously multiplies the likelihood of the target brand to be included in the stimulus-based consideration set by a factor close to 3.5 and the chances to recognize the sponsor brand by a factor greater than five.

The presumed mediating variable Reco (recognition) is found to have a significant influence ($p<.001$, odds ratio $\text{Exp}(\beta)=6.4$) on the variable Cset when controlling for the influence of exposure. Thus, the target brand’s recognition appears to mediate the influence of exposure on the target brand’s likelihood to be included in the stimulus-based consideration set, supporting H2. Concerning the partial vs. complete mediation test, a significant positive effect ($p=.029$) of brand exposure on the likelihood of the sponsor brand to be included in the consideration set is observed if the sponsor brand is not recognized. Compared to the control group, the likelihood for the sponsor brand to be part of the consideration set under conditions of exposure without recognition is multiplied by a factor greater than four, supporting H1.

A dual route of sponsorship impact seems to exist. Sponsorship increases the chances of a brand to be part of the stimulus-based consideration set of spectators, both for persons conscious and unconscious about the brand-event link. Since most previous studies on sponsorship effectiveness concentrated on conscious effects only, sponsorship impact may have been underestimated in the past. In advertising, improved perceptual fluidity of brands as a consequence of increased (unconscious) exposure is found to positively influence stimulus-based brand choice (Lee 2002). If the same was true for sponsorship, sponsors whose products or services are typically chosen based on cues available in the physical purchase environment (Reilly and Parkinson 1985) would greatly benefit from their sponsorship investment. Furthermore, the results of this study call for a change of sponsorship measurement approaches. If conscious and unconscious sponsorship effects occur simultaneously, both have to be taken into account.

REFERENCES


