Is Breaking Up Hard to Do?: an Investigation of Consumer Response to Sponsor Exit

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Building on sponsorship research and relationship theory, this research investigates conditions affecting consumer response to a brand terminating a sponsorship. Results of two experiments show that exit generally harms consumer attitudes toward the departing brand. However, a brand well-liked prior to exit can be protected through consumer perceptions of the brand’s motives, sponsorship duration, and number of remaining sponsors.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Most sponsorship research focuses on consumer response to the initiation and maintenance of arrangements between brands and properties they sponsor (Johar and Pham 1999; Pope, Voges, and Brown 2009; Ruth and Simonin 2003, 2006). Less research examines how consumers respond to brands that end sponsorship arrangements. This lack of research is surprising given that sponsor turnover is common and that consumers are exposed to information about the end of sponsor-property relationships.

We investigate consumer responses to a brand’s decision to end or “exit” a sponsorship arrangement. Relationship research suggests that severing a relationship is a negative act that harms attitudes (Duck and Wood 1995; Fournier 1998; Impett et al. 2010). We expect that consumers will perceive sponsorship exit as a negative act that will transfer negative affect to the departing brand. Research also suggests that pre-existing brand attitudes shape how consumers receive and evaluate new information about a brand (e.g., brand alliances; Simonin and Ruth 1998), and so we incorporate this characteristic into theory building.

Extant sponsorship research shows that consumers are affected by their perceptions of the brand’s motives in entering sponsorship relationships (Rifon et al. 2004), and prior brand attitudes can moderate these effects (Javalgi et al. 1994). Based on this and other extant sponsorship research, we propose an interaction effect of prior attitudes toward the brand and sponsor motives on attitudes and purchase intentions toward the departing brand. Likewise, given that numbers are used as heuristics (Goldberg and Hartwick 1990), we develop hypotheses regarding the role of duration of the brandsponsorship relationship and roster size.

Two studies investigate the effect of the extent to which the brand was well-liked initially, the brand’s motives associated with exit, sponsorship relationship duration, and number of brands that remain as co-sponsors upon sponsor exit. Findings suggest that sponsor exit has negative effects on attitudes toward the departing brand, especially among consumers who initially perceive the brand favorably. Sponsor motives, sponsorship duration, and remaining roster size moderate these effects.

REFERENCES


