How Fit Connects Service Brand Sponsors with Consumers' Passions for Sponsored Events

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Executive Summary

Despite the strong trend for service brands sponsoring events, the literature provides few theory-based and field-tested guidelines for services marketing managers who are charged with selecting events to sponsor. In response, this study provides a congruity-based framework for sponsors' decision-making and tests the hypothesized model explaining linkages among service brand sponsors, a sporting event, and consumer attitudes. The study's findings help clarify not only how congruent event-sponsor fit can be realised but also the potentially valuable role that event-sponsor fit serves toward strengthening key consumer relationship outcomes.

Structural equation modeling is used to test the posited model using replicate samples of two distinct service brands (AT&T: *n*=563 and United Community Bank: *n*=435) operating at different levels of corporate sponsorship of the sixth annual Tour de Georgia (TDG) professional cycling race which drew an estimated 400,000 attendees. Investigation of the effectiveness of different brands at the same event is important to marketers as it reflects the plethora of brand messages typically communicated at sports events. The results do not reveal that tested individual brand sponsor congruity moderates consumers' attitudes toward the event or sponsor. Surprisingly, AT&T did not experience any discernable advantage of sponsorship, despite its position as the title sponsor of the TDG and its high brand equity. Based on this preliminary evidence, the results offer directional evidence that sponsors may not necessarily reap results that are commensurate with their sponsorship level or brand equity position. Thus, established regional service brands may experience sponsorship effectiveness at regional or community events where their sponsorship investments can be recognised without serving as the title sponsor.

The current study extends previous congruity research because it lays out contributing factors for establishing event-sponsor fit. As a form of fan involvement, activeness in the event domain (i.e., sports activity) is shown to positively influence how consumers assess the link between an individual service brand and the tested sponsored sports event. In addition, the results make it clear that consumers form more favourable event-sponsor linkages when they enjoy the event as consumer affect toward the event is shown to positively and directly influence their perceptions of event-sponsor fit. This finding is particularly relevant for service brands high in functional or utilitarian properties. In particular, sponsorship of hedonic events can convey similar values and imagery and/or offer a logical connection with the service brand. In addition, the hypothesized path between consumers' brand knowledge and their assessments of the sponsor's fit with the event finds multi-contextual support.

The study further demonstrates how desirable relational outcomes are positively influenced by event-sponsor fit. Specifically, congruency positively and directly influences consumer's favourable brand commitment to the sponsor's brands, which in turn, benefits the sponsor by consumers' intentions to purchase the sponsor's services. Overall, the findings show how events and service brand sponsorships synergistically facilitate and deepen consumer relationships by connecting service brands with consumers' passions for the sponsored event and its activities.

Abstract:

Given strong interest among services marketing practitioners to sponsor events, this study illustrates how events and sponsorships synergistically facilitate and deepen consumer relationships by connecting service brands with consumers' passions. Structural equation modeling is used to test a congruity theory-based framework via a field study conducted at a professional cycling event. The tested model holds for two service brands operating at different levels of sponsorship. The results demonstrate how the combination of consumers' attitudes toward the event, knowledge of the sponsor brand, and their level of activity in the event domain influences their assessments of event-sponsor fit.

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Introduction

Once regarded as an ancillary promotional activity, event sponsorships have emerged as a dominant element of the promotion mix, accounting for $48.6 billion in global sponsorship rights expenditures in 2011 (IEG, 2012). Most of the work in the event sponsorship arena is devoted to product brand sponsors; yet, with many service offerings high in experience qualities (Chang & Horng 2010), favourable brand attitudes are especially important for service brand managers to maintain via sponsorship investments. Despite recent interest among scholars (e.g., Gwinner, Larson & Swanson, 2009; Roy, 2010; Woisetschlager & Michaelis, 2012), the literature has a demonstrated need for more theory-based and field-tested guidelines for service brand managers who are charged with selecting events to sponsor. Sponsors in the services industries have arguably more hurdles to overcome than product sponsors in events; namely that it is difficult to display the service at the event as a product sponsor would do. Further, the lack of tangibility of services makes the role of fit with the event (also termed congruity, or relatedness) all the more important for service-based sponsors.

Congruity theory (Lorimor & Dunn, 1968; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) holds that sponsors should seek events that have a logical congruence, or fit with the sponsors' products (Roy & Cornwell, 2004). There is much to learn about how or whether consumers' assessments of the event-sponsor fit matters in their assessments of the sponsoring brand (e.g., Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Gwinner, Larson & Swanson, 2009). Hence, the authors build on congruity theory to develop and test a framework explaining linkages among service brand sponsors, an event, and consumer attitudes.

As there are varying levels of sponsorship and degrees of event-sponsor fit (Johar & Pham, 1999), it is beneficial to examine multiple sponsors of an event. Ruth and Simonin note that "the lack of academic attention on the topic of multiple sponsors stands in sharp contrast to practise, where many, if not most, events are sponsored by more than one firm" (2006, p. 7). Investigation of the effectiveness of distinct service brands at the same event is important to marketers as it reflects the plethora of brand messages typically communicated at events with multiple sponsors. Since high equity brands are more accessible in the minds of consumers compared to less known brands, consumers are more apt to correctly recognise prominent brands as event sponsors (Pham & Johar, 2001). Sponsor identification discrepancy between prominent brands and less-prominent brands is expected to widen when an event has more than one sponsor (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). Hence, the authors investigate the impact of multiple sponsor service brands on the hypothesized model in order to accomplish two key research objectives:

(1) Examine attendees' perceptions of service brand sponsorships to explain how their: a) activeness in the event domain, b) affect toward the event, and c) knowledge of the sponsoring brand influence their views of a congruent fit between the event and sponsor.

(2) Show how attendees' assessment of a congruent event-sponsor fit directly strengthens brand commitment and impacts purchase intent of the sponsors' services.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, the authors introduce service brand sponsor-event fit and its predicted linkages among consumers' attitudes toward the sponsored event, knowledge of the sponsor brand, and their level of activity in the sports event domain as well as key relational outcomes by reviewing relevant literature on event-sponsorship fit from services marketing, advertising, and sponsorship literatures. Second, is an overview of the field study and results. The authors then discuss the findings and provide both scholarly and managerial implications. The paper concludes with the limitations and suggestions for future sponsored event marketing research.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

Event-Sponsor Fit

Fit, or congruity, is the extent to which a consumer perceives that an event and its sponsoring brand have a similar image, values, and a logical connection (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). This definition of fit is selected as it is applicable to product and service brand sponsors alike. Consumers make a surface interpretation without relative effort, then, when they allocate the processing capacity, they adjust this inference with other accessible inputs (Johar & Simmons, 2000). Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) find that consumers tend to expect a sponsor and event to be congruent; therefore, an unexpected, low-congruity sponsorship leads to increased elaboration of the sponsorship. Such elaboration is negatively biased, and it comes with less favourable attitudes toward the sponsorship.

Meanwhile, sponsorships with a greater perceived fit with the event provide cognitive consistency. Experiments confirm that event-sponsor congruity leads to positive attitudes or affect toward the sponsor (e.g., Ellen, Mohr & Webb, 2000; Henseler et al, 2007; Roy & Cornwell, 2004). Known as the affect transfer process, the affect for the event should transfer to the attendee's perception of the sponsor(s). Scholars have documented the transfer of positive affect from events promoting public health (Close et al, 2006) and from organisations' sponsorship of not-for-profit causes (Rifon et al, 2004; Roy, 2010) to their respective sponsors. In addition to affect transfer, high event-sponsor congruence enhances brand image transfer (Gwinner, Larson & Swanson, 2009). When complementary associations of event-sponsor fit reign, service brands dominated by high cognitive elements may see its brand connect more emotionally with consumers as a result of sponsoring exciting and sophisticated sporting events (Deane, Smith & Adams, 2003). An event sponsor can more easily clarify a sponsor's

positioning when attendees feel that the sponsor and event are a natural fit (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). The event domain (e.g., sports, culture, festival, business) is important to consider in accessing fit, especially noting how active consumers are in that domain.

Depending upon the aims of the research, fit has been modeled as a mediator (Dardis, 2009; Deitz, Myers & Stafford, 2012; Fink, Cunningham & Kensicki, 2007; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010) and as a moderator (Cobbs, Groza & Pruitt, 2012; Henseler et al, 2007; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Woisetschlager & Michaelis, 2012). In the present study, event-sponsor fit serves as a mediator between consumer's affect toward the event, familiarity with the sponsor, plus activity in the event domain and their appraisal of the sponsor's services. By treating event-sponsor fit as a mediator, the authors do not manipulate this construct into high-low categories. Grouping perceived fit into various levels of moderation may be somewhat limiting in terms of theory development as it "negates the ability of researchers to investigate individual and contextual drivers of fit perceptions or examine the role of fit perceptions within a more complex nomological network of variables" (Deitz, Myers & Stafford, 2012, p. 230).

Activeness in Sports Event Domain

Consumers search for events that are in harmony with their lifestyles (Burnett, Menon & Smart, 1993). According to Meenaghan (2001), a central tenet of sponsorship is fan involvement given how sponsorship plays an interceding role between an emotional connection between consumers and their leisure/social activities. Activeness in sports is one aspect of fan involvement. Activeness in sports refers to a person's expressed level of personal involvement in sports activities, not just being a spectator (Hawes & Lumpkin, 1984). Previous empirical research demonstrates a connection between sports activity and attendance of sporting events (Thrane, 2001; Zhang et al, 1997). A consumer who participates in sports is a

better prospect for a sponsored sporting event than someone who does not; this finding holds regardless of the specific sport (McDaniel, 1999). Attendees of a sporting event who engages in sports activities also has been shown to impact their perceptions of sponsorship of a sporting event (Close et al, 2006). Moreover, the level of the consumers' activity in the overall event domain positively influence how they cognitively process the link between the event and the sponsoring brand (Johar, Pham & Wakefield, 2006; Koo, Quarterman & Flynn, 2006). Hence,

H₁: *The attendee's activeness in the sports event domain will have a positive impact on his or her perceptions of a congruent fit between the event and service brand sponsor.*

Affect Toward Event

In addition to activeness in the event domain, consumer affect towards the event can improve a service brand's sponsorship effectiveness. Affect toward the event refers to the extent to which consumers feel such events are fun, entertaining, and enjoyable (Chandon, Wansink & Laurent, 2000). Sporting events are primarily hedonic in nature, with intangible features that produce personal pleasure or enjoyment (Pons, Mourali & Nyeck, 2006). Event sponsorship is especially attractive to cognitive branded service providers because events provide channels the opportunity to form deeper personal connections with consumers via need fulfillment (Espinola & Badrinarayanan, 2010). Sponsors attempt to establish these personal connections to create ties to consumers who are passionate about the events; such ties create positive impressions of the events and strengthen sponsor brand associations (Bennett et al, 2009). Consumers form more favourable event-sponsor linkages when they feel engaged with the event (Harvey, 2001). Thus, the transfer of affect toward the event will be stronger for the sponsoring service brands that attendees perceive to match up well to the event. If an attendee really likes the event, he or she may be more inclined (consciously or not) to see it as fitting for sake of cognitive consistency.

H₂: *The attendee's affect toward the event will have a positive impact on his or her*

perceptions of a congruent fit between the event and service brand sponsor.

Brand Knowledge

While affect considers how the attendees feel, it is important to consider what the

attendees know about the sponsoring brand and its service offerings. Brand knowledge about the

sponsor represents the attendee's interest in the sponsoring brands and their level of experience,

expertise, and use associated with the brand. Here, brand knowledge is not limited to the brand's

individual or newly launching service offerings, but instead encompasses broader brand

awareness (Keller, 2003). In sponsorship terms, brand knowledge relates to the more abstract and

intangible brand associations held in the minds of consumers about the sponsor (Roy &

Cornwell, 2003). In a limited time span, service brand sponsors must establish both brand

awareness and brand associations to the sports event (Davies & Tsiantas, 2008). Brand

knowledge influences consumer response to marketing activities that link the service brand to a

sponsored event. Sponsorships can build brand knowledge via recall and recognition, evoke

feelings about the brand, and create consumer experiences (Keller, 2003). Suppose the brand

sponsor is unknown to the event attendees; attendees thus cannot make associations between the

brand sponsor and the event. Hence, the authors examine brand knowledge as a basis for the

formation of event-sponsor congruity.

H₃: *The attendee's knowledge about the service brand sponsor will have a positive impact on his or her perceptions of a congruent fit between the event and service brand sponsor.*

Commitment to Sponsor

As an integral relationship marketing process measure, commitment represents the

service brand's capacity to attract and retain customers (Hur, Park & Mingung, 2010). Here,

commitment to sponsor captures the psychological or emotional attachment to a particular

service brand within a service category (Fullerton, 2003). Brand commitment simplifies the

purchasing decision process by reducing uncertainty and the costs associated with seeking new relational exchanges with other service brands (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). Sponsored service brands that are perceived as congruent with a sponsored entity or cause can enhance the sponsor's brand equity (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Conversely, when consumers perceive that a sponsored event is not consistent with a company's image, such sponsorships may undermine consumer-brand relationships (Speed & Thompson, 2000). If consumers have a positive perception of a service brand's congruity with a sponsored event, then consumers may transfer impressions of the intangible associations (Lichtenstein, Drumwright & Braig, 2004) to a stronger commitment to the service brand's services.

H_4: *The attendee's perceptions of a congruent fit between the event and service brand sponsor will strengthen his or her commitment to the service brand sponsor.*

Purchase Intent

Sponsored events may also increase consumers' willingness to buy the sponsoring company's products. According to Meenaghan's (2001) model of sponsorship effects, favourable feelings about the sponsor are an antecedent to consumer purchase intentions. For instance, consumers may like community-based sports events and wish there were more of such events; they may feel some gratitude toward the sponsor (Chandon, Wanskink & Laurent, 2000). In such cases, positive sentiments toward the sponsored event may motivate consumers to reward the sponsor by purchasing the sponsor's products and services. A company's sponsorship efforts may have a direct bearing on purchase intentions due to greater consumers' commitment to the sponsor (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003).

H_5: *The attendee's commitment to the sponsor's service brands will increase his or her intentions to purchase the sponsor's services.*

In summary, the authors provide a framework with posited linkages among service brand

sponsors, an event, and consumer attitudes toward building and strengthening event-sponsor fit. Figure 1 displays the hypothesized model.

– Insert Figure 1 here –

Research Method

Event Marketing Context

The authors test the framework via a primary field study using data collected at the 6th annual Tour de Georgia (TDG), a free-to-view professional cycling event which drew an estimated 400,000 attendees. Much of the sports event assessment research has focused on events that spectators pay to attend, with free-to-view events receiving significantly less focus (Davies, Coleman & Ramchandani, 2010). Beyond the professional cycling race, TDG event attractions included entertainment (e.g., music, food, and beverages) and, of interest here, sponsored event marketing activities and sponsors' exhibit booths. Featuring a Health Expo, TDG promoted healthy lifestyles to the one dozen communities that hosted this seven-day event. In particular, TDG generated publicity and fundraising support for cancer research (e.g., "Livestrong" cause-related marketing championed by past TDG winner Lance Armstrong). The authors received no funding or benefits for conducting this research; the goals of this research are purely for scholarship.

As described earlier, multi-tiered corporate sponsorship adds to the realism of testing for the impact of event sponsorship effectiveness. Accordingly, the authors conducted replicate consumer samples of brand sponsors of TDG operating at different levels of sponsorship. As the title sponsor of TDG, AT&T received prominent branding on all venues during the race week as well as in all pre-event promotions and on the TDG website. As part of its sponsorship agreement, AT&T enjoyed the naming rights to the AT&T Leader jersey, awarded after each

stage of the seven-staged event. While AT&T held the highest brand sponsorship position at the TDG, a variety of brands supported this event as lower tiered corporate sponsors, including United Community Bank (UCB). Designated as a major local corporate sponsor of TDG, UCB's sponsorship included ownership of the "King of the Mountain" presentation jersey and rights to consumer promotions across portions of the USA Southeast region.

Samples and Field Research Procedures

Similar to other event sponsor studies (Irwin et al, 2003; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010), several aspects of event sponsorship effectiveness were captured using intercept surveys during the TDG. The authors trained and supervised a field-research team consisting of volunteers from the local communities and junior and senior business majors (who chose to participate as an option for course extra credit). The research team wore official volunteer shirts to signify their role in the event to attendees. Separate AT&T and UCB surveys were distributed seven consecutive days throughout all twelve TDG host venues. Adults who were attending the race were approached by field researchers and asked to complete one of the two randomly assigned surveys and received incentives (official tour shirts, restaurant discount cards, and fans) for participating.

In aggregate, 1,196 attendees took the survey with 682 of the attendees asked for their reactions to AT&T and the remaining 514 for UCB. After eliminating surveys that were missing too many variables, AT&T's and UCB's adjusted sample sizes are 563 and 435, respectively. Nonresponse rate was just over ten percent, measured by tracking attendees approached versus the number administered, which is comparable to other sporting event sponsorship field surveys (Alexandris, Tsaousi & James 2007; Gwinner, Larson & Swanson, 2009; Irwin et al, 2003). The predominant reasons for nonresponse were either that the attendees had already participated or

that they were on their way to visit an exhibit.

Descriptive Statistics

Among the 563 AT&T survey participants, 27.2% are current AT&T customers. This number is consistent with AT&T's regional market share. Similarly, while most of the 435 UCB survey participants did not bank with UCB, 30.1% of the sample includes current UCB customers. The majority (54%) of the pooled survey participants are male, which has face validity as professional cycling is more of a male-oriented sport and the TDG is a men's competition. Almost 45% of the participants are between the ages of 20-39 years old and about one-third fall into the 40-60 years old age category. Over half of the participants reported annual household incomes exceeding $60,000. Eight percent of the samples traveled from another country. International respondents included representation from Mexico, Germany, Columbia, England, Scotland, Jamaica, Canada, France, Bosnia, Australia, Belgium, and Japan. Demographic characteristics for the two samples taken at the TDG are displayed in Table 1.

– Insert Table 1 here –

Measurement and Scale Items

Understanding event sponsorships requires that researchers measure event attendees' perceptions. Attitudes and opinions are measured using a 5-point scale (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The authors modified a five-item scale tapping Event-Sponsor Fit from Speed and Thompson (2000). Lumpkin and Darden (1982) provided the three measures of Activeness in Event Domain. Chandon, Wansink and Laurent (2000) developed the multi-scale items used to measure Affect toward the Event. The authors adapted Bloch, Sherrell, and Ridgway's (1989) scale to measure Brand Knowledge. Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000) provided the three scale items that measure Brand Commitment to the Sponsor. Finally, to capture

Purchase Intent, the authors adapted four scale items from Baker and Churchill (1977). Table 2 lists the scale items.

– Insert Table 2 here –

Data Analysis Methods, Reliability and Validity

The hypothesized relationships were tested using the two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) procedure advocated by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). This method of measurement and testing relationships allows for rigorous testing of measurement reliability and validity of the data before subjecting the structural model to tests of fit. A covariance matrix was created using the pooled data and subjected to confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.80. Results from the measurement model exhibited acceptable levels of fit. As expected with a large sample, the overall model fit as indicated by the chi-square statistic was unsatisfactory ($\chi^2_{(174)} =$ 733.07, $p = .00$). As the chi-square test is sensitive to sample size (Bentler & Bonett, 1980), researchers are advised to focus their attention on other absolute and incremental fit measures (Gerbing & Anderson, 1982; Hu & Bentler, 1999). These measures include non-normed fit index (NNFI) = .99, comparative fit index (CFI) = .99, incremental fit index (IFI) = .99, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .057. The NNFI, CFI, and IFI values exceed the recommended cutoff of .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The RMSEA value is more favorable than the conventional threshold of .08 (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

The exogenous construct measures of the hypothesized model yield sound reliability and validity properties (Table 2). Analyses provided evidence of convergent validity in each construct with the parameter estimates ranging from $\lambda = .88$ to .98. In addition, Bagozzi and Yi (1988) suggest strong evidence of convergent validity results when the factor loading on an item of interest is significant. The squared multiple correlations for all of the items in the model were

large, ranging from .77 to .96. Discriminant validity was addressed by comparing the variance

extracted for each construct to the square of each off-diagonal value within the phi matrix for

that construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Average variance extracted ranges from .82 to .93, with

each measure exceeding the .50 benchmark (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Finally, all latent constructs'

composite reliabilities are .93 or greater, indicating internal reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein,

1994). Table 3 presents the correlations, means, and standard deviations for the AT&T and UCB

samples and pooled data.

– Insert Table 3 here –

Findings

The authors analysed the structural model for both samples, using the measures resulting

from the measurement model analysis. Structural model results for each data set are in Table 4.

The overall fit statistics suggest a good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed

data. Beginning with the AT&T sample, the proposed structural model exhibited acceptable

levels of fit with NFI=.97, NNFI=.97, CFI=.98, IFI=.97, and RMSEA=.078. However, the chi-

square statistic was significant ($\chi^2_{(181)}$=853.86, p=.00). Given the satisfactory fit of the model,

the authors then examined the estimated coefficients for the hypothesized relationships. Each

predicted path is highly significant ($p<.001$). The proposed structural model for the UCB sample

also demonstrated good fit with NFI=.96, NNFI=.97, CFI=.97, IFI=.97, RMSEA=.08, and $\chi^2_{(181)}$

= 753.4 (p=.00) and the standardised coefficient for each predicted direct relationship reconfirms

the stability of the hypothesized model.

– Insert Table 4 here –

As an additional test, the authors conducted multi-group structural equation modeling

analysis to examine any differences between service brand sponsorship (AT&T versus UCB). As

prescribed by Joreskog and Sorbom (2006), the authors constrained structural parameters to be equal across service brand sponsors, thereby generating an estimated covariance matrix for each sponsor and an overall chi-square value for the sets of sub-models as part of a single structural system. Next, parameter equality constraints allow the program to estimate the paths freely and independently; this produces a second chi-square value with fewer degrees of freedom. For the tested sponsors, the difference between the two chi-square values is significant; therefore, one may reject the null that structural parameters are identical across the service brand sponsors (parameter invariance). Then, a series of multi-group structural equation model tests determined what is responsible for unequal covariance structures. No moderating evidence is found that service brand sponsorship impacts the relationship between the hypothesized direct paths of the structural model. Table 5 displays the multi-group results.

– Insert Table 5 here –

Discussion and Managerial Implications

This study's results improve our understanding of how events and sponsorships synergistically facilitate and deepen consumers' passions for the sponsored event and its activities. Services marketing managers seek an understanding of event sponsorship to guide decisions regarding the substantial sums of money spent on sponsorship; thus, the authors provide a congruity-based framework for sponsors' decision-making. The authors contribute a tested model holding real world marketplace applications that confirms and extends event sponsorship knowledge predominately gained from artificial lab experiments and student samples (e.g., Chien, Cornwell & Pappu, 2011; Johar & Pham, 1999; Koo, Quarterman & Flynn, 2006; Speed & Thompson, 2000). As these studies typically focus on product-oriented brand sponsors (e.g., Chien, Cornwell & Pappu, 2011), it is a valuable contribution to examine if and

how event-sponsor fit is likewise applicable in the service brand sponsorship context. The study's findings help explain not only how congruent event-sponsor fit can be realised but also the potentially valuable role that event-sponsor fit serves toward strengthening key consumer relationship outcomes.

Congruity theory holds that the value of a less-positive element (e.g., a big corporation such as AT&T) can be offset when linked to a more positively-valued element (e.g., a community-based sports event such as TDG). This result holds only if there is some salient characteristic that links the sponsor to the event. Following the congruence research tradition, event-sponsor fit is an antecedent of relational outcomes instead of a consequence. Support for the current rationale regarding the causal direction comes from other recent marketing studies that use congruence as an antecedent of attitude or behaviour (Harris & Fleming, 2005; Roy, 2010; Zhang & Bloemer, 2008).

The current study extends previous congruity research because it lays out contributing factors for establishing event-sponsor fit. The examination of tested linkages begins with the level of the consumers' activity in the overall event domain. Activeness in the event domain (i.e., sports activity) is predicted to be positively influence consumers' assessments of the sponsor's fit with the event (H_1). As a form of fan involvement, activeness in the event domain is shown to positively influence how consumers assess the link between an individual service brand and the tested sponsored event.

The study's results make it clear that consumers form more favourable event-sponsor linkages when they enjoy the event as consumer affect toward the event is shown to positively and directly influence their perceptions of event-sponsor fit (H_2). While this particular result may seem obvious, the implications of this finding is particularly salient for service brands high in

functional or utilitarian properties (e.g., telecommunications and financial services) when considering sponsorship of hedonic events. Event-sponsor fit may be achieved when cognitive service brands choose to sponsor hedonic events possessing otherwise similar values and imagery and/or offering a logical connection with the service brand, such as strong corporate employer ties to the sports event location or surrounding areas.

The hypothesized path between consumers' brand knowledge and their assessments of the sponsor's fit with the event (H_3) also finds multi-contextual support. Indeed, comparative results of the coefficient estimates for both service brand samples suggest that brand knowledge of the sponsor contributes more to event-sponsor fit than do either activeness in the sports event domain or affect toward the sponsored sports event. Based on the study's results, more established service brands are particularly well positioned to leverage their brand recognition in the formation of event-sponsor congruity. For less-known brands or new brands, marketing managers have considerably greater challenges quickly building brand knowledge while also establishing brand associations to the sponsored sports event.

The study's results further demonstrate that desirable relational consumer outcomes are positively influenced by event-sponsor fit. Moreover, consumers' favourable psychological attachment or emotional connection to the service brand produces strong behavioural intentions. In the model, congruency positively and directly influences consumer's favourable brand commitment to the sponsor's brands (H_4), which in turn, benefits the sponsor by consumers' intentions to purchase the sponsor's services (H_5). Commitment to the service brand shows a pronounced positive linkage to purchase intent for both samples tested, providing especially strong empirical support for this predicted path.

By separating the collected data into two replicate samples (AT&T and UCB) it is

possible to explore how the model holds for two service brands that operated at distinct levels as brand sponsors of TDG. The multi-group structural model results do not reveal that tested individual sponsor congruity moderates consumers' attitudes toward the event or sponsor. Although no *a priori* hypotheses were formally stated, based on research by Pham and Johar (2001), it would be anticipated that AT&T's brand prominence would have a positive moderating effect on the direct linkages of the tested model. Wakefield and Bennett (2010) noted that for prominent brands, such as AT&T, "the rich get richer in the realm of sponsorships (p. 108)," and that less-known brands must invest at higher levels in order to make inroads into the minds of consumers. Interestingly, the findings of the present study indicate that in the context of a community-based sports event, AT&T did *not* experience any discernable advantage of sponsorship, despite its position as the title sponsor of the TDG and AT&T's much higher brand equity, compared to UCB. Indeed, AT&T and UCB generated similar levels of affective response among sampled consumers. Based on this preliminary evidence, the results offer directional evidence that sponsors may not necessarily reap results that are commensurate with their sponsorship level or brand equity position. Thus, established regional service brands may experience sponsorship effectiveness at regional or community events where the sponsorship investments can be recognised without serving as the title sponsor.

Limitations and Future Research

The current USA study examines a sponsored event in the domain of sport; this is appropriate as sporting activities account for more than two-thirds of all sponsorship spending in North America (IEG, 2012). A limitation is that the hypothesized model is tested via a professional cycling event. For sponsors it would be informative to investigate if relationships found using this tested event are generalisable to other sporting events. Moreover, understanding

how this study translates into events outside of a sporting context should be investigated in future sponsorship research.

In an effort to more realistically assess sponsorship effects, the authors conducted parallel samples of two distinct service brands operating at different levels of corporate sponsorship. Yet as is frequently the case, the tested event featured many other brand sponsors which were not included in this study. Future field studies should extend beyond just two levels of tiered sponsorship to more accurately reflect real word practises. While sponsors stand to benefit when consumers perceive a high degree of event-sponsor fit, it would be beneficial to compare the tradeoffs marketing managers face in examining congruity, sponsorship costs, and brand exposure. Such insights could be instrumental for helping managers determine how to allocate their event-marketing resources.

The results presented are based on field survey data. Because the model's measures were not experimentally manipulated, strong evidence of causal effects cannot be unequivocally concluded. A major trade-off when conducting a real world study is the researcher's inability to control for event sponsorship information possessed by respondents, including information held from previous sponsorship associations.

This study provides a field tested model explaining relationships among events, sponsors, and attendees' interests and attitudes toward building and strengthening event-sponsor fit to supplement and extend event sponsorship knowledge for service brand sponsors. Future models should be expanded into other individual consumer, event and sponsor-related variables of interest. Commitment to buy the sponsor's products and purchase intentions were selected as the sponsorship outcomes of this study. While commonly used by researchers as surrogate variables for purchase behaviour, the authors recognise that neither of these tested measures guarantee

actual purchase behaviour.

Given that there has been so little research into the transfer process, marketing scholars are well advised to expand efforts in this area. For example, researchers could conduct empirical studies to verify that low-congruity event sponsorships do not transfer as well as high-congruity sponsorships. Further, if researchers eventually establish that low-congruity sponsorships are harmful, it would be interesting to measure the negative impact of such sponsorships and determine whether the negative effects last over time.

To extend the results of this study, it would be revealing to revisit with consumers in order to understand the role congruity plays on memory. In the advertising literature, more elaboration about congruity is linked with higher recognition and recall of a promotion after viewing the promotion (e.g., Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Wansink & Ray, 1996). Results from a meta-analysis on the topic (Stangor & McMillan, 1992) reveal that memory is more accurate for expectancy-incongruent than expectancy-congruent information recognition and recall measures. This may be because a more unusual event-sponsor relationship lends to more thinking about the relationship, and can even add some shock value. With recall measures, it would be interesting to see if, and under what boundary conditions, sponsors that are incongruent with sponsored event attendee expectations last longer or stronger in the attendee's memory. Revisiting attendees could also be useful in that it would give researchers an opportunity to assess actual versus intended purchases of the sponsors' services.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	AT&T Sample Percent	UCB Sample Percent
Gender:		
Male	.543	.538
Female	.457	.462
Age:		
Under 20	.093	.099
20-39	.447	.447
40-60	.383	.365
Over 60	.077	.089
Household Income:		
<$20,000	.15	.133
$20,000-39,999	.129	.195
$40,000-59,999	.204	.154
$60,000-79,999	.158	.21
$80,000-99,999	.117	.144
$100,000+	.242	.164
Residence:		
USA Resident	.919	.915
Non-USA Resident	.081	.085
Current Customer:		
Yes	.272	.301
No	.728	.699

Table 2
Scale Items and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

	Lambda Loadings[1]	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Activeness in Event Domain		.93	.82
I cycle, play tennis, golf, or engage in other active sports a lot.	.92		
I exercise regularly to stay fit.	.88		
Sports are a big part of my life.	.91		
Affect Toward Event		.98	.93
These events are fun.	.95		
These events are entertaining.	.98		
These events are enjoyable.	.96		
Brand Knowledge		.95	.87
I have experience with [Sponsor]'s services.	.94		
I have expertise with [Sponsor] and their offerings.	.95		
I regularly use [Sponsor] services.	.91		
Event-Sponsor Fit		.97	.88
There is a logical connection between TDG and [Sponsor].	.90		
The image of [Sponsor] and the image of TDG are similar.	.94		
[Sponsor] and TDG fit together well.	.96		
[Sponsor] reflects the values of the TDG.	.96		
It makes sence to me that this company sponsors this event.	.93		
Commitment to Sponsor		.96	.89
I consider myself to be committed to [Sponsor].	.96		
[Sponsor] would be one of my top choices.	.97		
I wouldn't seek a competitor if [Sponsor] was available.	.90		
Purchase Intent		.97	.87
I am more likely to consider keeping or trying [Sponsor].	.93		
I would like to keep using or to have [Sponsor] as my provider.	.96		
I would use [Sponsor] if it happens to be easily available.	.96		
I would actively seek [Sponsor] to be my provider.	.96		

[1]Completely standardised solutions

Table 3
Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations

(a) AT&T Sample

Constructs	Mean	s.d.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Activeness in Event Domain	3.83	1.21	1.00					
(2) Affect Toward Event	4.26	1.15	.59	1.00				
(3) Brand Knowledge	2.80	1.61	.11	.07	1.00			
(4) Event-Sponsor Fit	3.44	1.22	.31	.34	.41	1.00		
(5) Commitment to Sponsor	2.87	1.50	.16	.13	.82	.51	1.00	
(6) Purchase Intent	2.90	1.50	.17	.14	.84	.51	.94	1.00

(b) United Community Bank (UCB) Sample

Constructs	Mean	s.d.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Activeness in Event Domain	3.86	1.23	1.00					
(2) Affect Toward Event	4.29	1.09	.58	1.00				
(3) Brand Knowledge	2.73	1.57	.09	.12	1.00			
(4) Event-Sponsor Fit	3.49	1.18	.40	.41	.40	1.00		
(5) Commitment to Sponsor	2.82	1.42	.10	.11	.80	.48	1.00	
(6) Purchase Intent	2.97	1.43	.14	.13	.81	.50	.94	1.00

(c) Combined Sample

Constructs	Mean	s.d.	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Activeness in Event Domain	3.84	1.22	1.00					
(2) Affect Toward Event	4.28	1.12	.59	1.00				
(3) Brand Knowledge	2.77	1.60	.10	.09	1.00			
(4) Event-Sponsor Fit	3.47	1.21	.35	.37	.41	1.00		
(5) Commitment to Sponsor	2.85	1.46	.13	.12	.81	.50	1.00	
(6) Purchase Intent	2.92	1.47	.16	.14	.83	.51	.94	1.00

Table 4
Structural Model Results for AT&T [UCB]

Hypothesis/Path	Standardised Estimate	t-value
H_1: Activeness in Event Domain → Event-Sponsor Fit	.15 [.23]	3.07 [4.38]
H_2: Affect Toward Event → Event-Sponsor Fit	.23 [.25]	4.85 [4.79]
H_3: Brand Knowledge →Event-Sponsor Fit	.40 [.37]	10.53 [8.85]
H_4: Event-Sponsor Fit → Commitment to Sponsor	.54 [.51]	13.83 [11.33]
H_5: Commitment to Sponsor → Purchase Intent	.98 [.98]	41.14 [30.20]

NFI=.97 [.96]
NNFI = .97 [.97]
CFI = .97 [.97]
IFI = .97 [.97]
RMSEA = .078 [.08]

$\chi^2_{(181)} = 853.86\ [753.4]$

Table 5
Moderation Tests

	Corporate Sponsor		
	ß of AT&T	ß of UCB	$\Delta\chi^2$ (1 df)
H$_1$: Activeness in Event Domain → Event-Sponsor Fit	.16	.23	.16
H$_2$: Affect Toward Event → Event-Sponsor Fit	.19	.25	.04
H$_3$: Brand Knowledge → Event-Sponsor Fit	.41	.37	.23
H$_4$: Event-Sponsor Fit → Commitment to Sponsor	.57	.56	.02
H$_5$: Commitment to Sponsor → Purchase Intent	.98	.98	.06

Notes: ß represents the standardised path coefficient for that sponsor, and $\Delta\chi^2$ represents the difference in χ^2 between the constrained and free models for the path being tested with 1 degree of freedom.

Figure 1
Hypothesized Model
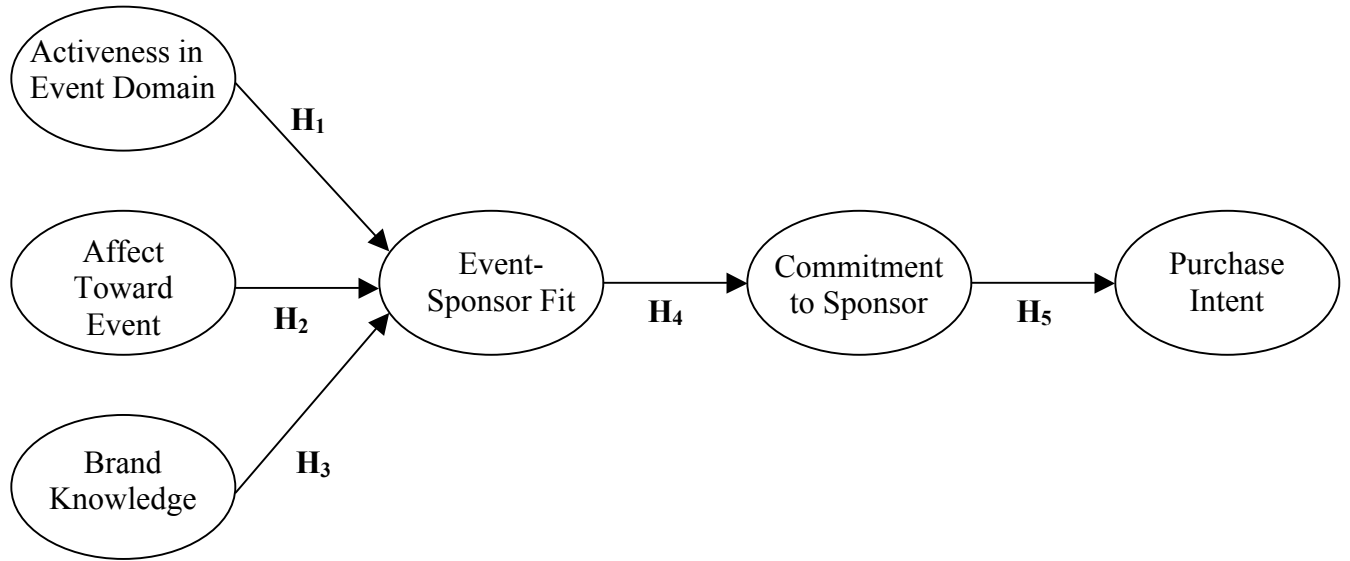
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