IMAGE TRANSFER IN CORPORATE EVENT SPONSORSHIP: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TEAM IDENTIFICATION AND EVENT-SPONSOR FIT

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has suggested and found evidence for an event's image being transferred to a brand because of sponsorship activity. This study builds on prior work by examining how the image transfer process is impacted by spectators' level of identification and the degree to which the sponsor and event are perceived to be logically connected (event-sponsor fit). Further, the impact of image transfer on sponsorship related behavioral intentions is assessed. Using two contexts and nine different sponsors our results indicate that high levels of identification and a logical event-brand fit serve to increase image transfer perceptions. Image transfer is also found to predict intentions to purchase from event sponsors. Managerial implications and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Image transfer, event-sponsor fit, transfer perceptions, identification, team identification.

JEL: M31, M37

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on improving our understanding of the promotional effectiveness of corporate event sponsorship (i.e., firms sponsoring sporting events, concerts, festivals, etc.). Past sponsorship research has primarily focused on increasing consumer awareness of the sponsoring brand, and has virtually ignored the impact that sponsorship may have on consumers' perceptions of a brand's image (Javalgi et al., 1994). That is, the focus has been on "how many consumers will be exposed to the brand?" and not on "what type of image or message are they being exposed to?" As a result, little guidance has been available for managers seeking to use event sponsorship opportunities to aid in brand positioning.

Despite the increasing popularity of sponsorship for achieving promotional goals, the ultimate effect of sponsorship activities on important customer-related outcomes has been problematic (Clark, Cornwell and Pruitt, 2002; Harvey, 2001; Johar and Pham, 1999). Thjømøe, Olson, and Brønn, (2002) state that "there is much that remains to be learned about how sponsorship works and what makes it effective" (p. 6). Indeed, in an international review of sponsorship research, Cornwell and Maignan (1998) conclude, "research findings on sponsorship effects are ambiguous and often contradictory" (p. 17). Recent research has raised concerns over the efficacy of sponsorship investment. For example, the results of Graham's (1998) research calls into question consumers' long term recall of even title event sponsors (e.g., the *Cadillac* PGA Golf Tournament), while others have expressed concerns that sponsorship clutter (i.e., multiple sponsors being associated with a single event) lessens the effectiveness of the promotion (Pryor, 1999).

While these are valid concerns, this study will argue that positive sponsorship outcomes may be present for different *types* of consumers. Specifically, the primary objective of this study is to examine the extent to which an individual's level of identification and the degree of fit between the event and brand influences the image transfer process. While Gwinner and Eaton (1999) demonstrated the existence of an image transfer process in an experimental setting, this phenomenon has not been studied in a realistic

field setting. Given the recent call for more attention to be paid to external validity (Winer, 1999); a second objective of this project is to validate the image transfer process in a field setting. Studying this phenomenon at actual events will provide a context in which multiple brands coupled with the dynamic environment of a realistic setting can be studied. Thus, a field study will provide for a more robust test of the image transfer process. The third objective of this study is to assess the influence image transfer has on purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand. Largely sponsorship exists to influence customer behavior. However, the link between sponsorship and behaviors or intentions has not been adequately explored in the marketing literature.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the concept of the image transfer construct. Second, identification and event-brand fit are discussed and hypotheses proposed with regard to their influence on the image transfer process. We also propose relationships between image transfer and consumers' sponsorship-related behavioral intentions. Third, the methodology and analytical procedures are presented. Following a presentation of the results, strategic managerial implications, suggestions for future research and study limitations are offered.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Image Transfer

A brand's image is defined as the collection of "associations" one holds in memory regarding a brand. These brand associations can take the form of attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller 1993). In his early work on brand equity, Keller (1993) suggested that these "associations" are developed from a variety of sources including brand and product category experiences, product attributes, price information, positioning in promotional communications, packaging, user imagery (e.g., typical brand users), and usage occasion. In addition, brand associations can be influenced through celebrity endorsement and sponsorship activities (Keller, 1993). In the case of event sponsorship, "when the brand becomes linked with the event, some of the associations with the event may become indirectly associated with the brand" (Keller, 1993, p.11). This linking of event "associations" to the brand is what is meant by the term "image transfer." That is, the image of the event is being transferred to the image of the sponsoring brand when an individual connects the event's attributes, event's benefits, or attitudes about the event with the brand in his/her memory.

Keller's views are consistent with the theory of meaning transfer that McCracken (1989) uses to explain the celebrity endorsement process. This theory suggests that consumers assign "meaning" to celebrities based upon an individual's interpretation of the celebrity's public image as demonstrated in "television, movies, military, athletics, and other careers" (McCracken, 1989, p. 315). Meaning moves ***from*** the celebrity endorser ***to*** the product when the two are paired in an endorsement capacity (McCracken, 1989). Consumption of the endorsed product then transfers this meaning to the consumer, which, presumably, is a motivating force in the individual's decision to select and purchase the endorsed product.

One can logically extend this concept to a sponsorship context where the meanings (or associations in Keller's terminology) held with respect to an event are transferred to a sponsoring brand, thus providing those consumers who are favorably disposed toward those meanings a reason to purchase the sponsoring brand. Sporting events can develop meaning or associations from the type of sporting event (e.g., football versus ice-skating), the event's characteristics (e.g., professional status, venue, size, etc.), and individual consumer factors such as one's past experiences with the event (Gwinner, 1997).

While some sponsorship research has explored changes in attitudes toward the company or changes in corporate image perceptions (Javalgi et al., 1994, Stipp and Schiavone, 1996), supporting evidence for an event to brand *image transfer process* is very limited. Gwinner and Eaton (1999) who proposed and

found support for an event's image being transferred to a sponsoring brand because of their pairing in a sponsorship arrangement provide the only empirical support for this transfer process to date. While their study provides some guidance to brand managers for brand positioning decisions, three limitations of that research restrict its applicability. Specifically, (1) because their research uses an experimental lab setting the external validity of the findings are unknown, (2) they do not attempt to explore how the image transfer process may change for different "types" of respondents or different types of sponsors, and (3) their research did not assess the impact of image transfer on outcomes important to brand managers, such as purchase intentions. Our study seeks to overcome these three limitations by examining the impact of the image transfer process on consumer purchase intentions in a variety of real sporting event contexts using actual spectators. Further, we examine the influence that a consumer's level of team identification and the event-brand fit may have on the image transfer process.

Team Identification

Until recently, the study of identification has primarily focused on interpersonal cohesion (interdependence or similarity). In general, theories of how individuals relate to groups were believed to fall into two camps (Turner, 1987). The first camp argues that group cohesion is dependent upon intra-group interdependence. That is, group members need one another. The second argument contends that groups are a collection of individuals who are interpersonally attracted to each other. Recently, researchers have argued that group evaluation is a distinct process from that of interpersonal interdependence or attraction (Hogg and Turner, 1985).

Sociologically, sport teams are groups to which individuals relate. Turner (1987, p. 2) describes a group as "one that is psychologically significant for the members to which they relate themselves subjectively for social comparison and the acquisition of norms and values...which influences their attitudes and behaviors." A spectator is said to be highly identified with a team when they perceive a "connectedness" to the team and feel that the team's successes and failures are also his or her successes and failures (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hirt et al., 1992; Wann and Branscombe, 1992; Wann et al., 1994). As such, team identification is a more specific instance of organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Naturally, there are large variations in the extent to which individuals identify with teams ranging from low identified fans to fans that identify highly with the team. Spectators falling on different points of the identification spectrum also act differently toward the team. Low identified fans are likely attracted to the team for the entertainment value and opportunity for social interaction. These fans have little emotional or financial commitment to the team (Sutton et al., 1997). In contrast, highly identified fans display long-term loyalty to the team and support the team through both their time and financial commitments (Sutton et al., 1997).

Identification with a particular group can serve to increase one's self-esteem (Hogg and Turner, 1985; Tajfel, 1978). In order to accomplish this self-esteem enhancement, the individual must be able to identify group members (in-group) from non-group members (out-group). "To the extent that the in-group is perceived as both different and better than the out-group, thereby achieving positive distinctiveness, one's social identity is enhanced" (Abrams and Hogg, 1990, p.3). Indeed, the distinctiveness of an organization, how clearly one group is distinguished from other groups, has been shown to be a significant predictor of organizational identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Self-esteem is enhanced by individuals associating themselves with groups they perceive in a favorable way (Cialdini et al., 1976). More specifically, self-esteem enhancement is accomplished by focusing on the positive elements of the in-group and downplaying their negative aspects (Wann and Branscombe, 1995a, 1995b). Further, emphasizing negative information, and downplaying the positive, among out-groups can similarly contribute to one's self-esteem by elevating the status of the in-group relative to the out-group (Branscombe and Wann, 1994). Thus, one's sense of self is enhanced by membership in the group with positive elements and by not having membership in the group with negatively perceived elements (Wann

and Branscombe, 1990). As such, self-esteem maintenance serves as a motivation for highly identified individuals to discriminate between in- and out-group members.

In a sporting context, in-group membership can extend beyond the actual athletes on a team to include a team's coaches, administrators, and even fans; whereas out-group membership may be assigned to fans and employees (players, coaches, etc) of rival teams. It is logical to conclude that in a sport sponsorship context, highly identified fans will extend in-group membership status to brands that sponsor an event or team, because the sponsor is perceived as aiding the team / event in accomplishing its goals (Madrigal, 2000; 2001). Individuals in a sporting context are likely to be especially aware of in-group and out-group membership because inter-group competition (as in sports) has been shown to heighten sensitivity to identifying group membership (Brown and Ross, 1982). Highly identified individuals are more concerned and active (than low identification individuals) in differentiating between in-group and out-group members (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Wann and Branscombe, 1995a).

We propose that the heightened sensitivity exhibited by highly identified fans to in-group and out-group membership will make them more likely to (1) hold a strong image of the event in their mind, and (2) recognize sponsors of the event. This should aid in the image transfer process in two ways. First, a stronger image of the event will better enable it to be transferred than a weaker image (Keller, 1993). That is, there must *be* an image of the event in the consumer's mind before it can be associated with a sponsor. Highly identified fans have been shown to possess greater objective knowledge about sports and particular teams (Wann and Branscombe, 1995b) and thus are likely to have made stronger connections regarding the event's image in their memory. Second, image transfer requires not only an image of the source of the transfer (event), but also a target (sponsoring brand) to which it can be transferred. As such, an accurate recall of whom the sponsors are (and are not) will increase the success of the image transfer process. On this second point, sponsor recognition has been shown to be higher among highly identified fans (Lascu et al., 1995) and Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggest that "awareness of out-groups reinforces awareness of one's in-group" (p. 25). As such, sponsors in-group status should also aid highly identified fans in correctly recognizing event sponsors, which will have a positive influence on the image transfer process.

> H1: Image transfer in sponsorship will be significantly higher for high-identified fans compared to low identified fans.

Fit Between Event and Sponsoring Brand

Fit, or congruence between objects, is an often-studied phenomenon in the marketing literature. Past research has examined fit in such contexts as a brand and a proposed brand extension, celebrity endorsers and the endorsed goods, and even a brand's name and its country of production (e.g., Häubl and Elrod, 1999; Kahle and Homer, 1985; Kamins, 1990; Lynch and Schuler, 1994; Mirsa and Beatty, 1990; Park, Milberg, and Lawson, 1991; Till and Busler, 2000). The interest in this topic is justifiable because the similarity between two stimuli influences the degree to which knowledge and affect are transferred between the objects (Martin and Stewart, 2001). Given that image transfer is often a goal in sponsorship decisions, a more complete understanding of how event – sponsoring brand fit may influence the image transfer process is needed.

There has been much speculation and empirical assessment in examining brand-event fit in sporting contexts. Meenaghan (2001) reports that focus group participants were able to discern congruence between some event – sponsor parings, this assessment is based on there being a "logical connection between both parties to the relationship (i.e., sponsor and sponsored activity)" (p. 105). In a recent study examining fit in a sponsorship context it was found that image transfer between event and sponsoring brand was enhanced when respondents perceived either a functional (brand is used in the event) or image

based (abstract perceptions) similarity to exist between the event and brand (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). Using a more generalized measure of event-sponsor fit and a student sample, Speed and Thompson (2000) found a positive relationship between degree of fit and respondent interest in the sponsor, attitude toward the sponsor, and intention to use the sponsored product. Other research has found fit between brand and sport to be positively associated with the perceived personality match between the two (Musante, Milne and McDonald, 1999).

The rationale for Hypothesis 2 is based on the theory of associative memory. Under this framework, one's memory is represented as a series of concepts or nodes that are linked together with ties of varying strength (Anderson, 1983). As discussed earlier, Keller (1993) uses this framework to suggest that the concepts associated with an event can become linked in memory with a brand through sponsorship activities. However, the ease to which an individual processes, encodes and links these concepts is higher when there is a perceived similarity between the concepts (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). This perspective is consistent with the schema theory based argument for endorser – brand fit advanced by Misra and Beatty (1990). To explain the better recall of respondents in their "congruent" condition, they propose that inconsistent information is filtered out and not brought into memory as well as consistent information (Misra and Beatty, 1990). If the same process holds true for image transfer, then we would expect that when the event and sponsoring brand are more congruent, the task of encoding and linking their respective meanings would be easier for the individual to accomplish. The result is an increasing level of image transfer between the event and sponsoring brand.

> H2: Image transfer in sponsorship will be significantly higher among those individuals who perceive a good fit between the event and the sponsoring brand compared to those who perceive a poor fit.

Sponsorship Outcomes

Madrigal (2000) examined fans' purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands in relation to perceptions of group norms and team identification. His results indicate that favorable purchase intentions are associated with higher levels of team identification, and when such activity is perceived as important to others group members (norms). Our study also investigates purchase intentions, but we are interested in the impact of image transfer. As mentioned earlier, one drawback of earlier research on image transfer is that it has not examined the important linkage between a brand acquiring image components of the event and the impact on sales. We propose that when sport spectators' favorable associations of the event are transferred to the brand, it will increase the intention to purchase goods from the sponsoring firms.

> H3: Greater levels of image transfer between event and brand will be associated with greater intentions to purchase sponsored products.

METHODOLOGY

Walliser (2003) recently lamented the limitation of the large number of studies using student samples in sports marketing research. Indeed, this has been a limitation of studies found in leading marketing journals and in the more specific area of image transfer as well. As Winer (1999) notes, "Rarely does an author of an experimental study either worry about how to establish external validity for the results or actually perform additional studies that go a long way toward establishing some degree of external validity" (p. 349). As a result, this paper strives to use actual attendees at actual sporting events to add a degree of external validity that has been lacking in other studies.

More specifically, our sample consisted of ticket holders for three football games (2 NFL games and 1 NCAA division 1 school). Participants completed our battery of survey items as they tailgated before the

game (college sample) or as they attended a team sponsored fan event just outside the stadium (NFL samples) in the hours before the start of the contest. The collegiate research sample was collected in 1995 from a Conference USA member university, while the NFL samples were drawn from the Eastern National Football Conference in 1996. The research samples were collected at the start of the season for each of the three teams. Additionally, as suggested by Madrigal (2001), our study used actual sponsoring brands rather than fictional ones. Three sponsoring brands in each context were assessed in terms of the degree to which the event's image had transferred to the brand.

Data Collection Methods

Adult spectators at an afternoon university football game of a major NCAA Division I conference served as the sampling frame for the college sample. Information provided by the university athletic department and verified by field observation suggested that different areas around the football stadium were likely to contain certain homogeneous groups. Surveys were distributed prior to the game in designated parking and tailgating areas surrounding the football stadium in order to obtain a more representative sample. The areas designated for the visiting team's fans were not surveyed. One-thousand-seventy subjects were approached, 922 of which agreed to participate in the study for a response rate of 86.2%. Forty-one of the surveys were found to be incomplete or had obvious acquiescence bias and were discarded resulting in 881 usable questionnaires. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 76 years (mean = 32.7), with males making up 59.7% of the sample (n = 526). Subjects included current university students (26.4%), alumni (42.7%), and general spectators (30.9%).

On two separate game days, adult ticket holders attending a NFL team sponsored fan appreciation event just outside of the home team's stadium (prior to the start of the game) were approached and asked to participate in the survey. Six-hundred-twelve usable questionnaires were collected (n_{NFL1} = 289; n_{NFL2} = 323). Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 72 years (mean = 32.8), with males making up 69.7% of the sample. Subjects included predominately high school graduates (44%) and those with college degrees (46%).

Measures

Rather than attempt to track the flow or process involved in the image transfer, we follow the approach used by Gwinner and Eaton (1999) which examines the congruency between the image of the event and the image of the sponsoring brand. The logic of this approach is that more congruent event-brand images are indicative of an image transfer having taken place, while less congruent images indicate a lower level of image transfer (i.e., the image of the event has not transferred to the image of the brand because the two images are dissimilar). As such, the *result* of the image transfer is assessed, rather than the *process* of it taking place. Accordingly, image transfer was assessed using a measure of image congruency from Sirgy et al. (1997) that had been successfully used in the Gwinner and Eaton (1999) study. It consists of asking respondents to imagine the experiences they will encounter at the event and then to think of adjectives that describe the image of the sporting event. Following this mental exercise, a single item congruency question is asked with respect to each sponsor (e.g., "My image of __ football   is   consistent with my image of [name of sponsor]"), measured on a seven point Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) scale. Higher values indicate greater image transfer. Following Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995), we assessed team identification by using Mael and Ashforth's (1992) 6-item identification measure.

Fit was assessed between the event and the sponsoring brand only in the two NFL samples, using a single item from Speed and Thompson (2000), "There is a logical connection between ___ football and [name of sponsor]." This question was assessed on a seven-point Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) scale, higher values indicating greater perception of fit. While some authors have discussed different

dimensions of fit between events and brands in a sporting event context (e.g., Gwinner, 1997, McDonald, 1991, Musante, Milne, and McDonald, 1999), we used this non-specific measure in order to allow the respondent to determine in his or her own mind what dimensions were relevant with respect to fit.

Purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands *in general* were assessed using two items developed for this study ("When you shop for products and services, how often do you purposely look for those sold by sponsors of ___ football?" and "In general, how much does the fact that a firm is a sponsor of ___ football enter into your buying decision when you are shopping for products?"). The first purchase intention items utilized a seven point "Never" (1) to "Often" (7) scale, while the second item was assessed using the end values "Weak influence" (1) and "Strong influence" (7). As such, higher values indicate stronger purchase intentions. In addition, in the second NFL data collection, we asked questions that measured purchase intentions directed toward *specific* sponsors (e.g., "The next time you need sporting goods, how likely are you to purchase from [name of sponsor]?"), rather than the intention to purchase from sponsors in *general* described above.

RESULTS

To test hypothesis 1, that image transfer will be significantly higher for high identified fans compared to low identified fans, we used one-way ANOVAs with a between groups design. Specifically, we trichotimized the identification variable in each context such that approximately a third of the subjects fell into each identification category: high ($n_{NCAA} = 280$; $n_{NFL\ I} = 88$; $n_{NFL\ II} = 109$), medium ($n_{NCAA} = 298$; $n_{NFL\ I} = 90$; $n_{NFL\ II} = 105$), and low ($n_{NCAA} = 303$; $n_{NFL\ I} = 96$; $n_{NFL\ II} = 109$). This category assignment was used as the between groups predictor variable. The criterion variable in each test was the image transfer score for each sponsor (three sponsors were assessed for each context, resulting in nine ANOVAs). Each of the one-way ANOVAs was significant at p < .001 and specific between group differences were then assessed using Tukey's HSD test. The Tukey HSD test indicates that across all sponsors and contexts, image transfer is significantly stronger for high-identified fans compared to low identified fans (these results are summarized in Table 1).

Table 1: Image Transfer by Level of Team Identification

	High		Medium		Low	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
NCAA Football Game						
US Cellular*	5.5	1.6	4.7	1.7	4.2	1.8
Pepsi*	5.6	1.6	4.8	1.8	4.2	1.9
WITN News*	4.6	1.7	4.1	1.7	3.4	1.7
NFL Football Game 1						
Chrysler*	5.3[a]	1.8	4.9[a]	1.5	4.2	1.9
Dunkin Donuts*	5.8	1.4	5.0	1.6	4.1	1.8
MBNA*	5.7	1.5	5.0[a]	1.7	4.4[a]	1.9
NFL Football Game II						
Chrysler*	4.2[a]	2.1	3.8[ab]	1.8	3.2[b]	1.9
Modell*	4.8[a]	1.9	4.8[a]	1.5	3.7	1.9
Penn Orthopedic*	4.6[a]	2.1	4.1[a]	1.8	3.3	2.0

*This table provides ANOVA results regarding the image transfer score for each sponsor by level of identification. For each level of identification (i.e., high, medium, low) the first figure is the mean and the second figure is the standard deviation for the specific sponsor noted in the row. Significance at the .001 level is denoted as *. Within a row, image transfer means sharing a superscript are not significantly different at the 5 percent level based on Tukey's HSD post-hoc test.*

To test hypothesis 2, that image transfer in sponsorship will be significantly higher among those individuals who perceive a good fit between the event and the sponsoring brand compared to those perceiving a poor fit, we again used one-way ANOVAs with a between groups design.
In this case, we created two groups for each sponsor based on the fit variable to be as close in size as possible (i.e., half the sample in the good fit group and half of the sample in the poor fit group). This

category assignment was used as the between group predictor variable: good fit (coded as 2) and poor fit (coded as 1). As in the test of hypothesis 1, the criterion variable in each test was the image transfer score for each sponsor (this test was only done for the two NFL samples, as the fit variable was not measured in the NCAA sample). Each of the one-way ANOVAs was significant at p < .001 and specific between group differences were then assessed using Tukey's HSD test. The Tukey HSD test indicates that across all six NFL sponsors and both contexts, image transfer is significantly stronger among those that perceive a strong fit between the sponsor and the event (these results are summarized in Table 2).

Table 2: Impact of Perception of Event-Brand Fit on Image Transfer

| | NFL Football Game I | | | | | | NFL Football Game II | | | | | |
| | Chrysler* | | Dunkin Donuts* | | MBNA* | | Chrysler* | | Modell* | | Penn Ortho.* | |
Degree of Fit	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Strong Fit	5.8	1.3	5.7	1.3	5.8	1.4	4.5	1.8	5.1	1.7	5.0	1.8
	n = 123		n = 133		n = 139		n = 159		n = 172		n = 142	
Weak Fit	4.1	1.7	4.3	1.8	4.3	1.8	3.0	1.9	3.7	1.8	3.2	1.8
	n = 166		n = 154		n = 148		n = 164		n = 151		n = 178	

This table provides ANOVA results regarding the image transfer score for each sponsor by the perceived fit between the event and each sponsoring brand. For each degree of fit (i.e., strong, weak) the first figure is the mean and the second figure is the standard deviation for the specific sponsor noted in the column. The number of respondents classified as indicating strong- or weak-fit are provided (i.e., n =). Significance at the .001 level is denoted as *. Tukey HSD post hoc tests indicated that for all six NFL sponsors the image transfer score is significantly higher (at the 5 percent level) for respondents that perceived a strong fit between the sponsor and the event.

Finally, hypothesis 3, which examines the impact of image transfer on respondents sponsorship related behavioral intentions, was examined with regression analysis. Following the wording of our sponsorship outcome measures, this hypothesis was tested using both general sponsor and specific sponsor outcome measurements.

For the *general* sponsor assessment, in each context we summed the image transfer scores of the three sponsors and then used this summed score as an independent variable in a regression equation to predict the general outcome measure. The general outcome measure was operationalized by summing the two items: "When you shop for products and services, how often do you purposely look for those sold by sponsors of ____ football?" and "In general, how much does the fact that a firm is a sponsor of ____ football enter into your buying decision when you are shopping for products?." The results indicate a significant, positive influence of general image transfer on general sponsorship outcomes for all three regressions (one for each context): NCAA context ($F_{1,857}$ = 171.8, p<.0001, standardized beta = .41, R^2 = .17); NFL 1 Context ($F_{1,285}$ = 69.5, p<.0001, standardized beta = .44, R2 = .20); NFL 2 context ($F_{1,316}$ = 71.6, p<.0001, standardized beta = .43, R^2 = .18).

For the *specific* sponsorship outcomes, we also regressed image transfer on an outcome measure, but in this case, we examined the image transfer of a specific brand relative to the purchase intentions of that same brand. This data was collected for each of the three sponsors in the NFL 2 context. Similar to the general outcome results, we find a significant, positive influence of image transfer on specific sponsorship purchase intentions for all three regressions (one for each sponsor): Chrysler ($F_{1,322}$ = 103.3, p<.0001, standardized beta = .49, R^2 = .24); Modell's ($F_{1,321}$ = 65.4, p<.0001, standardized beta = .41, R^2 = .17); Penn Orthopedics ($F_{1,320}$ = 113.1, p<.0001, standardized beta = .51, R^2 = .26).

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which team identification and degree of fit between event and brand influences the image transfer process outside an experimental setting. Our results indicate that, consistent with our hypotheses, those having a higher level of team identification and those perceiving a stronger fit between brand and event reported a higher level of image transfer between the event and the brand.

In addition, our results support the hypothesis that higher perceptions of image transfer are associated with higher levels of purchase intentions for sponsoring brands. One reason these results are important is that they extend Gwinner and Eaton's (1999) earlier experimental lab research by finding these relationships in a field setting using real sponsors, real events, and actual attendees. As Winer (1999) has previously pointed out, "it is incumbent on us to be concerned about the generalizability of research results beyond the lab into other contexts," (p. 349).

In addition to establishing robustness of the relationship, there are two primary contributions from this study. First, we have identified boundary conditions (identification and fit) where the level of image transfer is impacted. As we discuss subsequently, this has substantial consequences for both event and brand managers making sponsorship-related decisions. The second major contribution of this study is empirically linking image transfer with consumer buying intentions. Understanding the impact of sponsorship on consumer buying behavior is a long neglected area in sponsorship research.

Implications for Management

Several implications can be drawn from the results of this study that have relevance to brand managers' sponsorship decisions or to the managers of events that seek sponsorship. One of the most important implications is that *image matters*. That is, brand managers cannot be concerned only with exposure issues (i.e., number of attendees in the target market, size of the television audience, etc.); they must also be cognizant of the image that the event projects because this image will be transferred to the sponsoring brand. As such, in considering events for potential sponsorship, firms should make an effort to understand event image through the eyes of those market segments the brand is trying to reach. Indeed, it may actually be counterproductive to gain a high degree of customer exposure through event sponsorship if the event's image is inconsistent with the brand's positioning goals.

A second managerial implication from this study deals with the notion of market segmentation. Because highly identified fans were found to be more receptive to image transfer, it would be beneficial to segment the market into high and low identified fans. If this can be done (and it is likely to be more efficient to do this at an aggregate level rather than an individual level), then sponsoring brands could strategically customize the type of message aimed at each segment. For example, highly identified fans might be exposed to messages emphasizing the in-group status of the sponsor. Relatedly, from a brand's sponsorship selection standpoint, the number of highly identified fans that view or attend the event could be used as part of the selection criteria. Presumably, if a brand manager were deciding between sponsoring one of two events, all else equal, our results suggest that the event having a larger highly identified participant base would be the better choice.

If image transfer is a goal of the sponsorship, the results of our study point to the importance of there being a logical connection between the event and the sponsoring brand (in the mind of the consumer). As with identification, event-brand fit could be used as part of a brand's sponsorship selection criteria. All else equal, an event having a better fit with the brand would be considered a better choice between two competing sponsorships. The fit results also suggest that the level of image transfer can be increased if the brand takes steps to actively encourage fans to "see the fit" between the event and the sponsoring brand. Obviously, some event-brand pairings have an obvious basis for a logical connection (e.g., Valvoline sponsoring NASCAR racing or Gatorade sponsoring the Ironman Triathlon). However, for those events where the association is not as clear, the sponsoring brand may need to take steps to activate its sponsorship. One way to do this is to create promotional materials that help consumers to understand the connection. For example, Timex sponsoring the Kentucky Derby may not have a logical connection for many consumers, but a connection can be explained by promoting the watch brand as the official timer for the event.

This study also holds implications for managers of events. Event manager's seeking to retain current sponsors or acquire new ones could emphasize how the image of the event supports the current or potential sponsor. This implies that events must not only manage, but also be able to articulate the image they are capable of transferring, which would suggest an empirical study of what the event's image is among its various constituents. Additionally, the notion of a logical connection or fit can be used to develop prospect lists when an event is attempting to solicit new business. Perhaps most importantly from a sponsorship selling perspective, the current study allows an event to point to empirical evidence of how sponsorship positively shapes consumer's purchase intentions. Even more convincing would be for an event to develop this information relative to its own particular participants and then use that information when soliciting new sponsorship arrangements.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

As with all studies, there are limitations that should be considered when interpreting these results. First, this research utilized multiple sport context samples. Although sports are a natural area of sponsorship, this focus may restrict the generalizability of the findings reported. Understanding how this study translates into events outside of a sporting context should be investigated in future research. Are the same relationships present as the sponsorship moves to an arts or music event context? Another limitation is that our study does not consider longitudinal issues. As such, also of interest for future research is the extent to which the longevity of the sponsorship influences the image transfer process. While it may sound logical to assume that long term associations will increase image transfer, this should be explored. Is there a point where the transfer is complete? That is, from an image transfer perspective, is there some level of saturation where no additional image transfer will take place?

While this study addresses many questions and fills some gaps from prior studies, it also raises many questions. One question relates to event-brand fit. So far, fit has been defined in the literature as a logical connection. This definition could be made more specific. Interesting questions to consider include the following. Are there different types of fit (e.g., image based, usage based, etc.)? Do some types of fit influence image transfer more than other types of fit? Can fit be taught to consumers if the fit is not obvious? Is fit conveyed equally well by the sponsor as by the event marketer? Additionally, some recent research has explored sport identification's influence on perceptions of event-sponsor fit (Gwinner and Bennett 2008). Future studies could explore this relationship as it relates to image transfer.

Event sponsorship has moved from primarily philanthropic activities to mutually advantageous business arrangements between sponsors and the sponsored. The objectives being sought by sponsoring organizations are focusing more and more on exploitable commercial potential and bottom-line results, and less on altruism or a sense of social responsibility without expectation of return. With this recognition comes an increased importance on identifying how to use event sponsorship opportunities to aid in brand positioning and creating tangible behavioral outcomes. Additional research such as that presented here is needed to improve our understanding of the promotional effectiveness of corporate event sponsorship.

APPENDIX

Sample Questions

Image Transfer (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999)

Take a moment to think about _____ football. Think about the various images and experiences you would encounter when you attend or watch a _____ football game. Imagine this sporting event in your mind and think about words you would use to describe the event such as, exciting, tradition, young, conservative, rugged, or whatever words you think describe the image of this sporting event.

Once you have done this, indicate your agreement or disagreement with the following statements by circling the appropriate number:

My image of _____ football is consistent with my image of [insert name of sponsor here].[1]

Team Identification (Mael and Ashforth, 1992)

When someone criticizes _____ football, it feels like a personal insult[1]

I am very interested in what others think about _____ football[1]

When I talk about the _____, I usually say "we" rather than "they" [1]

The _____ successes are my successes[1]

When someone praises the _____, it feels like a personal complement[1]

If a media story criticized the _____, I would feel embarrassed [1]

Fit (Speed and Thompson, 2000)

There is a logical connection between _____ football and [insert name of sponsor here]. [1]

General Purchase Intentions

When you shop for products and services, how often do you purposely look for those sold by _____ football sponsors?[2]

In general, how much does the fact that a firm is a sponsor of _____ football enter into your buying decision when you are shopping for products?[3]

Specific Purchase Intentions

The next time you need [insert product/service associated with sponsor], how likely are you to purchase from [insert name of sponsor here].[4]

Demographics

Gender?   □ Female   □ Male

Age in Years? ____

How would you best classify yourself?   □ University Student   □ Alumni   □ General Spectator (used with NCAA questionnaire)

Highest level of education completed?   ____ (used with NFL questionnaires)

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[1]7-point Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) response scale. [2]7-point Never (1) to Often (7) response scale. [3]7-point Weak Influence (1) to Strong Influence (7) response scale. [4]7-point Very Unlikely (1) to Very Likely (7) response scale. Sponsors (NCAA = US Cellular, Pepsi, WITN News; NFL I = Chrysler, Dunkin Donuts, MBNA; NFL II = Chrysler, Modell, Penn Orthopedic) were all measured in regards to image transfer, fit was assessed between the event and the sponsoring brand for the two NFL samples, and purchase intentions directed toward specific sponsors were measured only in the second NFL questionnaire. Each sponsor name was provided for the image transfer, fit, and specific purchase intentions questions in the area noted as [insert name of sponsor here] in the above table.*

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