

DOCTORAL THESIS

Extending associative network theory: the role of affect in the bi-directional image transfer process

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ABSTRACT

Marketers make extensive use of sponsorship as an instrument to build and enhance corporate image, with global sponsorship spending exceeding USD50 billion in 2012 (IEG, 2013). This growth in sponsorship spending has been paralleled by growth in sponsorship research. The various definitions of sponsorship are centred on the concept that the sponsor pays in return for the opportunity to be associated with the given event. The transfer of image from the event to the brand is therefore central to the productivity of any sponsorship arrangement. Hence, it is unsurprising that image transfer models in which the transfer takes place from the event to the sponsor's brand are prevalent in the literature.

Whilst providing a good foundation, the extant sponsorship research has several shortcomings. For example, it is generally based on a unidirectional image transfer process, and the underlying mechanism of image transfer is attributed primarily to associative network theories (which, on their own, do not answer the why and how of the image transfer process). Further, most discussions in this arena use attitudinal change and the ability to recall as proxies for the existence of image transfer rather than measuring it directly. We know that events are largely thematic and engage the audience at an emotive level, but the sponsorship literature contains no studies on the role of affect in image transfer. Associative theories, whose roots lie in cognitive psychology, concern propositions, cues and outcomes, and yet they remain peripheral and largely ignored in the sponsorship literature. Observation also suggests that event-brand sponsorship arrangements are highly complex and susceptible to reciprocal image transfer.

This research addresses these shortcomings by using prior affect as the central mechanism to extend associative network theories to the sponsorship context. The central argument of this thesis is that a necessary condition for any image transfer to occur (event to brand or brand to event) is the absence of directly formed prior affect for the brand (in the case of conventional image transfer)/event (in the case of reverse image transfer). In the presence of directly formed prior affect, the association between event image and brand image is blocked, and no image transfer occurs.

A series of pretests and experiments provide empirical evidence to show that image transfer is a bi-directional phenomenon, cue directionality strengthens image transfer, the presence or absence of directly formed prior affect for the brand (event) determines whether image transfer occurs, the method of affect formation (neutral affect or indirect affect) moderates transfer strength, and image transfer from event to brand and from brand to event is asymmetrical. The limitations and theoretical implications of the research are discussed, and future research directions proposed.

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