

# **Measuring the Effects of Event Sponsorship: Theoretical Frameworks and Image Transfer Models**

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## **Keywords**

Event Sponsorship; Brand image transfer

## **Abstract**

The use of event sponsorship or other types of sponsorship as a means to establish, enhance or change brand image is a fairly common practice for a variety of organizations. This objective has been identified as one of the two most common goals for organisations to engage in sponsorship programs. The rationale behind the popularity of sponsorship as a marketing tool to achieve image goals is the general assumption that, by linking a brand to an event, the image of the event can be transferred to the image of the sponsor.

Despite the increasing sophistication of event sponsorship and rising academic interest in understanding sponsorship practice, there is still a lack of in-depth understanding of how sponsorship processes really work. In addition, brand image outcomes of this marketing tool have received scant attention from the research community. As a result, little is known about how and when sponsorship enables sponsors to achieve image goals. The paper addresses this issue by documenting, examining and critically assessing the literature which specifically explores the theoretical frameworks and models of brand image transfer.

The paper demonstrates that while different approaches have been used to explain image transfer, the models presented are, in general, too similar. As a consequence there is still lack of full comprehension on how sponsorship affects sponsor image. Since the emergence of brand image transfer as a major topic in the literature, most of the researchers have argued that there is still little understanding on the topic. The fact that this viewpoint has not changed in almost twenty years may be due to the absence of innovative and significant contributions from researchers. From this analysis, research gaps are identified to guide future research.

## Introduction

The power of branding as a marketing tool has been generally acknowledged in the literature (Park, Jaworski & MacInnis 1986, Keller 1993; 2008). Attitudinal benefits, such as brand image, are increasingly desirable outcomes for organizations as they allow companies to differentiate their products and consequently affect consumers' choice. Such constructs are also considered useful predictors of consumer behavior (Weihe, Mau & Silberer 2006). For these reasons, branding assumes a fundamental role in the long-term efficiency and success of a company (Parker, 1991).

Over the past two decades, practitioners and researchers have turned to sponsorship as a tool to build and enhance corporate image. World wide spending in on sponsorship is high when one considers the costs that sponsors undertake in marketing and communication to leverage their investment (Lee, Sandler & Shani 1997; Meenaghan & Shipley 1999; Quester & Thompson 2001). The exponential growth of sponsorship has been driven by several factors including the increasing regulations on advertising of alcohol and tobacco brands, which needed to find an alternative to reach their target markets (Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 2001; Jalleh et al. 2002); the increasing costs of advertising (Meehaghan & Shipley 1999; Jagre, Watson & Watson 2001; Jalleh et al. 2002); the reduction of the effectiveness of traditional marketing tools as a result of the advertising clutter (Sneath, Finney & Close 2005; Weihe, Mau & Silberer 2006; Chedi 2008; Kuster et al. 2009); the changes in communication technologies and the increasing competitiveness in mature markets (Meehaghan & Shipley 1999; Meenaghan & O'Sullivan, 2001). To these reasons, Verity (2002) adds the greater interest in leisure activities and sporting events and the increased media coverage in events.

The combination of all these elements has led to the emergence of sponsorship as one of the most prominent forms of marketing (Dolphin 2003). Sponsorship emerged as a cost-effective and flexible means of communication, useful to achieve a wide range of objectives (Lee, Sandler & Shani 1997; Meehaghan & Shipley 1999). From this variety of goals, increasing brand awareness (marketing objective) and enhancing brand image (corporate objective) have been identified as the most important for organizations (Gwinner, 1997; Cornwell, Roy & Steinard 2001; Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka 2004).

The value of branding and the importance given to brand image related goals by organizations demonstrate the need for understanding consumers' reactions to sponsors as well as that of

investigating how sponsorship can influence such reactions (Lee, Sandler & Shani 1997). Organizations engaging in sponsorship programs, expect the link with an event or other activity to evoke positive feelings and attitudes towards them (Grhos, Wagner and Vsetecka 2004; Henseler, Wilson & Vreede 2009). In other words sponsors expect the image of the sponsored activity or event to be transferred to the sponsoring brand (Gwinner, 1997). In spite of the general belief that brand image transfer can occur through sponsorship, empirical research is sometimes conflicting and inconclusive. In addition, there is no consensus on how and why this process occurs.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of the topic by providing a review of the existing literature and identifying areas that need to be further explored. Even though the aim of this paper is to understand brand image transfer in the specific context of event sponsorship, the lack of specific studies in this area requires the analysis of brand image transfer to be conducted within the broader context of sponsorship. The paper is divided into five parts. The first one consists of a general outline of both sponsorship and brand literatures, in order to set the context of the review and provide the relevant definitions. The following sections focus on brand image transfer literature in the context of sponsorship. First, the main explanations of brand image transfer, including theoretical frameworks and models, are presented in chronological order. Second, the paper focuses on the literature investigating whether sponsorship activity produces image transfer. In this section empirical studies on the effectiveness of brand image transfer are analyzed by the metrics utilized and conclusions reached. Third, the paper examines the large number of factors affecting the strength of brand image transfer, which has been the most common topic to date in the literature. Finally, three additional issues found in the more recent articles - direction of brand image transfer, multiple sponsorships and concomitant sponsorships - are discussed. The paper finalizes with an analytical summary of the current state of the literature as well as the identification of existing gaps.

### **Brand Literature**

The analysis of a process is generally possible only after understanding the constructs behind it. Brand image transfer through sponsorship has its roots in the brand literature. For this reason, it is essential to refer to this literature in the defining of some key concepts, namely 'brand', 'brand image' and 'brand image transfer'.

The power of brand as a means of product differentiation has been recognised for a long time, however it was in the last decades that it has become a significant topic of discussion (Keller 2008). In the numerous definitions proposed, the concept of brand emerges as the set of elements, which can include name, term, logo, values and other organisational attributes, that intend to identify and differentiate the products of one seller from its competitors (Becker-Olsen & Hill 2006; Keller 2008). These elements are extremely valuable as they help consumers in the decision-making process, provide credibility, reduce risk and set expectations (Aaker 2004; Keller 2008).

A deriving concept from brand, brand image, has been defined as the “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory (Keller 1993; 2008). This definition is more relevant to the literature since it acknowledges the multidimensionality of the construct and the plurality of possible associations (Smith 2004). According to Keller (1993) brand image in conjunction with brand awareness, form brand knowledge, which refers to the information consumers have in their minds about a brand.

The brand associations referred in the brand image definition include the “informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller 1993). Such associations assume different forms and types. In terms of level of abstraction, they can be categorised into three types: attributes - the characteristics of the product; benefits - the personal value of the product; and attitudes - the global evaluation of the brand by the consumer (Keller 1993; 2008). In any of those categories, brand associations can be related to tangible attributes, such as price, packaging, and design, or to intangible attributes, such as fun, energy or classiness (Biel 1992). This last distinction is particularly important in the context of sponsorship since it is the emotional nature of associations that organisations try to create in consumers’ minds through sponsorship.

Brand associations can be influenced in a variety of ways such as direct experience with the product or service, word of mouth, information provided by the organization, and links with other entities (Keller 1993; 2008). It is in the last category that event sponsorship emerges. When the brand becomes linked with an external entity, some of the attribute and attitude associations the consumer has towards the external entity may be transferred to the associations the consumer has towards the brand (Keller 1997). This explanation leads to the definition of brand image transfer. In the context of sponsorship, this concept has been

described as “the transfer of associations attributed to the sponsored activity to the sponsoring brand” (Grhos, Wagner and Vsetecka 2004). This process has also been observed in brand-to-brand situations through brand extensions, whereby the core brand transfers the image to a new brand, and co-branding, whereby two organizations advertise their brands together (Smith 2004).

Brand image can therefore be created, enhanced or changed by the establishment of strong and unique brand associations with events or other activities and the subsequent brand image transfer. The ultimate aim of this process is the creation of biases in consumer behaviour. This brief section on brand demonstrates how theoretical foundations for sponsorship brand image transfer are present in the brand literature. Specifically, Aaker (1996; 2004) and Keller’s (1993; 2008) work are cited in the majority of discussions on brand image transfer, evidencing the significant contribution of these two authors to the understanding of the topic.

### **Explanations - Theoretical Frameworks of Brand Image Transfer**

Having defined the main concepts involved in brand image transfer, this report will proceed with a description of the theoretical explanations and models that different authors have presented for this process. Researchers’ contributions to the understanding of brand image transfer emerge from different theoretical frameworks, namely meaning transfer, classical conditioning, mere exposure, attribution theory, congruence theory, identification and balance theory. This section describes the context where the frameworks emerged.

Hoek et al. (1997) suggested that, due to the similarity of advertising and sponsorship, the models to explain the advertising effects could be used to understand and explain how sponsorship works. Based on two models of advertising, the authors suggested a behaviorist context for sponsorship.

Another theoretical rationale behind the explanation of brand image transfer is the notion of schema-based information processing (McDaniel 1999). The model proposed by this author is based on the assumption that cognitive structures that guide thought and action (schemas) are based on prior knowledge of stimuli gained through past experience and information. As well as Hoek et al. (1997), McDaniel (1999) adapted this concept from the advertising literature. According to this adapted version of the framework, event schemas, the constructs that individuals have in relation to the event as a result from previous information or attendance,

create different expectations for different individuals. Furthermore, they influence in different ways the processing and response to sponsorship (McDaniel 1999). The result of this is that an event, and consequently, its sponsoring organization, can have different meanings and different images form different people. Acknowledging that different people have different images is very important for both practitioners and academics.

Balance theory has been another framework used to explain image transfer (Dean 1999). The theory suggests the existence of a triangular relationship between the sponsor, the event and the consumer. As the name suggests, this theory argues that people look for balance in their attitudes and that they can change their attitudes in order to achieve harmony (Dean 1999).

A different but related conceptual framework is classical conditioning. According to this framework, it is possible to use an established relationship between a stimulus and response to develop a similar response to a different stimulus. This happens because an individual exposed to two stimuli, uses the relationship between them to understand the unknown stimulus (Speed & Thompson 2000). In the sponsorship context, the sponsorship acts as the relationship between the two stimuli (event and brand) to catalyze the same response to the brand as to the event. Applying the principles of classical conditioning in advertising, Speed & Thompson (2000) suggested that consumer's reaction to sponsorship depends on three factors: attitudes toward the event (the unconditioned stimulus), previous attitudes towards the sponsor (the conditioned stimulus) and perception of congruence between sponsor and event.

The idea of congruence (or congruity) has been extensively present in the sponsorship literature (D'Austous & Bitz 1995; Ferrand & Pages 1996; Gwinner 1997; Quester & Farrelly 1999; Speed & Thompson 2000; Jagre, Watson & Watson 2001; Beck-Olsen & Simmons 2002; Roy & Cornwell 2003; Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka 2004; Rifon et al. 2004; Koo, Quarterman & Flynn 2006; Simmons & Becker-Olsen 2006). The capacity of event sponsorship to change the consumer's image of the sponsor has been frequently attributed to the congruence theory. The original model offered an explanation for the change of attitude occurring when an individual is connected to a particular attitude object. The statements that individuals make about objects are associative when the statement implies a positive connection and dissociative when the statement implies the absence of a connection (Jagre, Watson & Watson 2001). This model has roots on McDaniel's (1999) schema-based information processing framework. Like McDaniel (1999), Jagre, Watson & Watson (2001)

assume that the statements issued by individuals are influenced by prior experiences and information.

In the context of brand image transfer the term congruence has been used to describe fit or similarity between the sponsored activity and the sponsoring organization based on consumers' perceptions (Jagre, Watson & Watson 2001). This fit can be functional-based, when the sponsor products are used in the sponsored event or image-based, when event and sponsor share the same values (Rifon et al. 2004). Jagre, Watson & Watson (2001) suggest that the findings of this theory applied to advertising research are applicable to sponsorship effects on attitudes, even though they had acknowledge the dissonance of those findings with the congruity research applied to celebrity endorsement. This way, the authors suggest that "companies that sponsor events which are moderately inconsistent with viewer expectations (moderate fit) will produce significantly higher attitude ratings from consumers and lead to more favorable sponsor evaluations than companies that sponsor events that are either completely consistent (high fit) or extremely inconsistent (low fit)" (Jagre, Watson & Watson 2001). This suggestion is quite noticeable as it is contested in both previous and posterior literature (Gwinner & Eaton 1999; McDaniel 1999; Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka; Rifon et al. 2004; Smith 2004; Cornwell, Weeks & Roy 2005; Pope, Voges & Brown 2009). All mentioned studies have demonstrated that event-sponsor fit has a positive influence in the attitude towards the sponsor and that organizations trying to enhance brand image should search for congruent sponsorship opportunities.

Mere exposure (Olsen & Thjomoe 2003) & attribution theory (Rifon et al. 2004) are two different frameworks used to explain the change of brand image in consumers' minds as a result of brand image transfer. The rationale behind the first framework is that the simple exposure to a stimulus can lead to the preference of it. This explanation arises in a literature that started to recognize that affective preferences do not always need the process of information (Olsen & Thjomoe 2003). Attribution theory suggests that individuals make casual inferences about occurrences they observe and experience. In this context, consumers infer a motive for the sponsorship agreement, motive that could lead to a positive attitude towards the sponsor (Rifon et al. 2004).

Due to the recent history of sponsorship, authors aiming to explain how brand image transfer, or other sponsorship outcomes, occurs, turn into other literatures in search for foundations.

Psychology and Advertising are the most two common subjects used with this purpose. Some of the most recent models are based on more than one theory (Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka 2004; Smith 2004).

### **Explanations - Models of Brand Image Transfer**

The second part of the explanations for brand image transfer will describe the main models of this process. The description of such models is done chronologically in order to show the evolution of the theoretical explanations for brand image transfer. Some of the models are specific to the brand image effects of sponsorship while others are more generic approach to the impacts of sponsorship on consumers.

From the literature reviewed, several models of brand image transfer are based in the celebrity endorsement, more specifically in McCracken's model of celebrity endorsement (Gwinner, 1997). According to McCracken's (1989) approach, there is a process of meaning transfer occurring in this type of advertising. Consumers associate celebrities with certain meanings as a result of the different roles they assume in their careers. When celebrities become involved in a product advertisement, those meanings are transferred to the product, and finally to the consumer (McCracken, 1989).

Gwinner's (1997) model of image transfer in event sponsorship is an extension of this meaning transfer perspective. According to the author, events act in a similar way to celebrities in the transfer of image (Gwinner, 1997). The model proposed describes the creation of event image as a function of different external and internal factors, and the subsequent transfer of that image to the sponsoring organization's brand. The image of the event is determined by three factors: event type, event characteristics and individual factors. This way, "Image transfer occurs in a sponsorship context when the meanings consumers associate with an event become associated with the sponsoring brand" (Gwinner, 2008). Gwinner's model of image transfer has been widely cited in posterior studies on the topic (Quester & Farrelly 1998; Speed & Thompson 2000). Being one of the first attempts to describe the mechanisms that explain the impact of sponsorship in brand image of the sponsoring organization, it has remained as one of the most important contributions to the study of image transfer.

Grhos, Wagner and Vsetecka (2004) contributed to understanding of brand image transfer with a model where post-event sponsor image appears as a function of pre-event sponsor image, sponsor awareness and event image, as showed in the diagram bellow. This model has been innovative because it uses two different methodologies to assess the post-event image of the sponsor: the difference between post and pre-event image of the sponsor and the incremental effect the event image has on sponsor image after the event (Grohs, Wagner & Vsetecka). A second strength of this model is that it was tested and its accuracy was demonstrated.

In the same year, Smith (2004) proposed a different model of brand image transfer from a consumer learning perspective. In a similar way to Gwinner (1997), the model describes both internal and external antecedents of brand image transfer. In relation to the context of the sponsorship, the model identifies four different factors: domain of sponsorship, composition of sponsorship arrangement, event status and event duration. The first factor corresponds to the 'type of event' factor in Gwinner's (1997) model and the argument is that different types of events have different images. The composition of the sponsorship arrangement relates to the number of sponsors involved in the sponsorship. The event can be simple (a single sponsor), composite (a limited number of sponsors) or complex (a large number of sponsors). The more sponsors an event has, the more confused consumers get. Finally, image transfer is directly proportional to the last two external factors, event status and duration (Smith 2004). In addition to these external factors, the brand image transfer is affected by internal factors. Brand knowledge and brand image are the two internal factors described as influencing how consumers evaluate the external factors previously mentioned. Besides the antecedent factors, quality and fit are also identified as positively influencing image transfer. When the sponsor and the sponsored activity are associated, consumers evaluate the sponsorship. This model appears to be more complete than the models presented in the past. It utilize concepts previously mentioned in the literature, such as the external and internal factors (Gwinner 1997) or the idea that the post event image of the sponsor depends on the pre-event image of the sponsor but it explores those ideas, resulting in a more extensive model. The multifaceted nature of the model has the disadvantage of being very difficult to test, as a result of its complexity.

Weihe, Mau & Silberer (2006) developed a model for one of the dimensions of brand image, attitude towards the brand. In their model, the authors suggest that post-event attitude towards

the sponsoring brand is a function of three factors: the prior attitude towards the brand, the attitude towards the event and the attitude towards the communication activities at the event. This model is relatively simple and does not add much information to the understanding of the process. The majority of the constructs have been mentioned and tested by other authors, namely Gwinner (1997) (event image) and Grhos, Wagner & Vsetecka (2004) (pre-event sponsor image). Furthermore, the empirical study did not support the model in its totality, as the pre-event attitude towards the brand did not show to influence the post-event brand attitude (Weihe, Mau & Silberer 2006). The authors justified these results the unawareness of the brand before the event.

Chedi (2008) presented a slightly different model where brand image is explained by depending of congruity between event and sponsor, brand preference and mediated by processing fluency (how easy/difficult the process of information is to consumers) and consumer product schema (expectations of attributes based on memory). The results of the experiment however, suggested that the model is not adequate since processing fluency and consumer product schema did not have a relevant influence on the process.

There seems to be some evolution along the years in the models explaining image transfer. Even though there is a slight increase of sophistication, as they include more concepts, and they have arisen from different conceptual frameworks, there is a certain similarity between all models. The influence of Gwinner's model in the posterior models is quite evident and it demonstrates a minimal acceptance of this framework. Also, in one way or another, the congruence perceived match or fit is a concept present in all models of brand image transfer proposed.

### **Conclusion**

The literature on brand image transfer recognises the importance to sponsors of creating positive brand images. Different authors (Pope & Voges 2000; Close et al. 2006; Koo, Quarterman & Flynn 2006; Tsiotsou & Alexandris 2009) have showed the positive effects that brand image has on purchase intentions. Ultimately, sponsorship can be used as a central driver of brand strategy (Cliff & Motion 2005).

A study of the literature demonstrates that even though different approaches have tried to explain image transfer, the models presented are, in general, too similar. As a consequence

there is still lack of full comprehension on how sponsorship affects sponsor's image. Since the emergence of brand image transfer as a major topic in the literature, most of the researchers have argued that there is still little understanding on the topic (Javalgi et al. 1994; Gwinner 1997; Cornwell & Maignan 1998; Pope & Voges 1999; Smith 2004; Alexandris, Tsaousi & James 2007). The fact that this idea has not changed in almost twenty years may be due to the absence of innovative and significant contributions from researchers.

Even though there is an overall agreement that sponsorship can allow a brand image transfer from the sponsored activity to the sponsoring organization, there are still inconsistencies in the empirical findings. This is partially attributed to the lack of understanding of the mechanisms that explain the consumers' response to sponsorship stimuli (Christensen 2006). In addition, most of the studies reviewed are reasonably narrow experiments, which can lead to misinterpretation of the reality.

From the analysis of the literature, a number of gaps have been identified. Firstly, there is an unbalanced research in terms of the type of sponsorship researched. From the different areas where sponsorship became involved with, sport has been the one attracting the biggest share of investment. This reality is attributed to the importance of sport in the global culture as well as to the globalization of sporting events, teams and personalities (Verity, 2002). Research in this area has followed the same trend. The majority of studies in the literature referred to sponsorship in sporting events (Stip & Schiavone 1996; Quester & Farrelly 1998; Roy & Cornwell 2003; Alexandris, Tsaousi & James 2007) or sponsorship in the broader context of sport (Gwinner & Swanson 2003; Kim & Kim 2009; Tsiotsou & Alexandris 2009). Furthermore, the events studied are usually large, multi-facet events that attract a lot of media attention rather than small events. The further study of brand image transfer in other types of events as well as in smaller events is essential to better understand the process and to assess if it occurs in the same way as it does in sporting events.

Secondly, it is required to focus on the supporting promotional tools that accompany sponsorship. As suggested by the literature, the sponsorship fee consists only of the first step and a fraction of the total sponsorship expenses. The real effect emerges from the visibility that sponsors achieve through their marketing efforts in the sponsorship. Consequently, it is essential to develop further research on how such supporting promotional tools impact the brand image transfer.

Thirdly, in context where sponsorships are very popular marketing tools used by different companies even in same events, it is essential to explore the knowledge on concomitant sponsorships. The vast majority of the literature focuses on single sponsorships as opposed to concomitant sponsorships. The reality is that most events are sponsored by more than one organization. The literature has not yet assessed the implications of the presence of other sponsors in a sponsorship agreement and in the brand image transfer. It is important to understand if other sponsors can affect the intensity of brand image transfer and if they can affect the sponsor final brand image.

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