Leveraging sponsorship with corporate social responsibility

Sebastian Uhrich a, Joerg Koenigstorfer b,*, Andrea Groeppel-Klein c

a German Sport University Cologne, Department of Sport Economics and Sport Management, Am Sportpark Mängersdorf 6, 50933 Cologne, Germany
b Technische Universität München, Department of Sport & Health Management, Uptown Munich Campus D. Georg-Brauchle-Ring 60/62, 80992 Munich, Germany
c Saarland University, Campus A5.4, Institute for Consumer & Behavioral Research, 66123 Saarbruecken, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 15 October 2013
Available online 30 October 2013

Keywords:
Sponsorship
CSR
Event
Sport
Sponsor–event congruity

ABSTRACT

Sponsors increasingly engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities surrounding sponsored events (e.g., the soccer World Cup and Olympic Games). This study examines how linking CSR to sponsorship affects consumer attitudes towards sponsoring brands. Schema theory suggests that consumer CSR perception and brand credibility act as serial mediators. They transfer the positive effects of a CSR-linked sponsorship strategy. These effects only occur for brands with a moderately low congruity to the sponsored event (but not for brands with a moderately high congruity to the sponsored event). Two experiments measuring (Study 1) and manipulating (Study 2) sponsor–event congruity confirm the proposed mediation mechanism for brands with a moderately low sponsor–event congruity. CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. sponsorship without CSR linkage) does not influence attitudes towards brands with a moderately high congruity to the sponsored event. The study develops theoretical and practical implications for sponsorship and CSR strategies.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Event sponsorship is a common marketing tool today. Event sponsorship may increase brand awareness and positive associations with the event; however, the act may not signal good corporate citizenship, an increasingly important communication objective (IEG, 2012). Some brands try to leverage sponsorship activities by linking CSR (corporate social responsibility) initiatives to sponsorship. For example, FIFA’s (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) official partners Adidas and Coca-Cola both supported the South African Department of Education during the World Cup in South Africa (FIFA, 2010). In South Africa, as for future events that are hosted by developing countries with socioeconomic disparities, consumers may—now more than ever—expect companies to behave in a socially responsible and ethical manner (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007).

Sponsors unlikely profit equally from a CSR-linked sponsorship strategy. Drawing on schema theory, this study examines differences in effects of linking CSR to sponsorship versus standard sponsorship (i.e., no CSR link) between moderately high and moderately low congruity brands to sponsored events. Results should show moderately low sponsor–event congruity to be beneficial in the context of CSR-linked sponsorship. The study extends previous research in two ways. First, this research examines the effects of linking CSR to event sponsorship on sponsorship outcomes. Although this communication strategy is common practice among event sponsors today, no previous research investigates whether the strategy improves sponsor evaluations.

Second, the study identifies the mechanism through which CSR-linked sponsorship affects brand attitudes and examines moderate sponsor–event (in-) congruity as a boundary condition of the effects of CSR-linked sponsorship. In contrast to previous claims, the study shows that sponsor evaluations are not always more positive as sponsor–event congruity increases.

2. Leveraging effects of linking sponsorship with CSR

2.1. Sponsorship leveraging

Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan (2008, p. 639) define sponsorship leveraging as “the act of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsor and sponsor.” In practice, sponsors invest up to $2 per $1 spent on fees for sponsorship rights in leveraging such as advertising or package signage (IEG, 2012; Quester & Thompson, 2001). Sponsors with a low congruity to the sponsored event use sponsorship leveraging to facilitate consumer brand–event associations (Fleck & Quester, 2007). They articulate the relatedness between a sponsor and the event in the media (Cornwell, Humphreys, Maguire, Weeks, & Tellegen, 2006). For example, Unilever articulates that Wish-Bone salad dressing belongs to the fan gear kit of groceries to consume during NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) events. Most sponsors adopt a similar strategy (e.g., official NASCAR office supplies or shaving products).

Articulating the relatedness between the brand and sponsored events is not the only leveraging strategy. Another strategy links event sponsorship to CSR activities. This linkage activates a triangle of associations between the brand, the sponsored event, and CSR (Lacey,
Close, & Finney, 2010). To date, the outcome of how CSR-linked sponsorship affects brand evaluations remains unclear. This study postulates that CSR-linked sponsorship positively and indirectly affects brand attitudes through two serial mediators—consumer CSR brand perception and brand credibility. These indirect effects are conditional on the sponsor–event congruity.

2.2. Mediating role of consumer CSR perception and brand credibility

Sponsors make a two-level decision (d’Astous & Bitz, 1995; Weeks et al., 2008). First, they decide whether or not to link CSR to sponsorship. Second, sponsors implementing CSR-linked sponsorship need to select the CSR-linked sponsorship communication’s focus. Sponsors focus either on CSR information (i.e., CSR focus) or sponsorship information (i.e., event focus) within the linked strategy. This decision refers to communication focus.

Communicating CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship) and focusing on CSR (vs. focusing on the event) within the CSR-linked sponsorship strategy should signal that a brand is “doing good” regarding serving society’s needs (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). Consumers viewing a brand’s sponsorship message that links to CSR learn about the brand’s ambition to serve society and the brand’s event sponsorship. Two schemas—structured memory traces concerning the activities of brands based on personal experiences (Fiske, 1982; Mandler, 1984; McDaniel, 1999)—activate social giving (CSR) schema and event schema. Schemas help explain stimulus evaluation associates with another stimulus (McDaniel & Heald, 2000). Affect-laden schemas trigger affective reactions and this schema-level affect can be transferred to another schema (Fiske, 1982).

Exposure to a CSR-linked sponsorship message triggers a positive effect transferring the event to consumers’ CSR schema, producing higher CSR perceptions of the sponsoring brand. CSR perception captures consumer beliefs about a brand’s activities when they are positioned around social causes. This perception refers to consumers’ opinion about a brand’s general character “with respect to its perceived societal obligations” (Brown & Dacin, 1997, p. 68). CSR perception of a brand should increase when the brand employs CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship) or when the brand focuses on CSR in CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. event focus). In the latter case, focusing on CSR will increase CSR perception because the sponsorship emphasizes the social character of the brand’s activities (Ellen et al., 2006).

This study posits that CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship) and CSR focus (vs. event focus) increase CSR perceptions. This direct increase in CSR perception should positively associate with brand credibility (Aaker, 1996; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Brown & Dacin, 1997). Brand credibility describes consumers’ tendency to perceive a brand as trustworthy, reliable, and high in expertise (Keller & Aaker, 1992). Prior studies suggest that the construct is a relevant response variable in sponsorship research (see Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006). Since CSR-linked sponsorship (CSR focus respectively) increases CSR perception and CSR perception likely increases brand credibility, CSR perception appears to function as a mediator in the processing of CSR-linked sponsorship (CSR focus respectively).

Furthermore, brand credibility likely influences brand attitudes positively because consumers believe a brand is trustworthy and reliable, increasing their predisposition to respond favorably to the brand (Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999; Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). Based on these arguments, the present study hypothesizes a mediation chain. CSR-linked sponsorship (CSR focus respectively) directly increases CSR perception, CSR perception then positively influences brand credibility and brand credibility in turn positively influences brand attitudes. H1a (the first-level decision to employ CSR-linked sponsorship or standard sponsorship) and H1b (the second-level decision to focus the CSR-linked sponsorship communication) are therefore stated as follows.

H1a. CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship) communication positively affects brand attitude via consumer CSR perception and brand credibility.

H1b. Focusing on CSR in CSR-linked sponsorship communication (vs. focusing on the event in CSR-linked sponsorship) positively affects brand attitude via consumer CSR perception and brand credibility.

2.3. Moderating role of sponsor–event congruity

The previous arguments suggest that CSR content (CSR focus respectively) in sponsorship communication indirectly increases brand attitude through CSR perception and brand credibility. The indirect effects proposed in H1a and H1b likely are conditional on sponsor–event congruity (Chien, Cornwell, & Pappu, 2011; d’Astous & Bitz, 1995; Menon & Kahn, 2003).

While previous research assesses differences in the processing of low (vs. high) sponsor–event congruity sponsorship, this study considers moderate sponsor–event (in) congruity. The rationale for examining moderate sponsor–event (in) congruity is that consumers’ learned schemas unlikely represent truly low or high sponsor–event congruity perceptions (Lafferty, 2007). Leveraging strategies articulating sponsor–event congruity are common practice among low-congruity sponsors. In addition, today’s long-term sponsorship contracts should create some sponsor–event congruity over time.

Sponsor incongruity theory postulates that moderately incongruent information leads to more favorable outcomes (vs. moderately congruent information). Moderate incongruity increases consumers’ arousal and cognitive evaluations (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy, Louie, & Curren, 1994). Moderately incongruent messages increase consumers’ processing motivation and help to resolve discrepancies and produce meaning by assimilating new information. If the resolving process is successful, consumers evaluate objects (i.e., brands) more positively (Meyers-Levy et al., 1994; Stayman, Alden, & Smith, 1992).

Applying schema incongruity theory, adding CSR to sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship) or focusing on CSR (vs. focusing on the event) should increase consumer CSR perceptions for moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored event (vs. moderately high congruity brands). For moderately low sponsor–event congruities, a higher processing motivation activates more memory centers associated with the importance of social giving. Thus the schema-level affect transfer likely is more pronounced for moderately low sponsor–event congruity brands. In addition, the more elaborate processing of the message’s social content may help consumers resolve and make sense of moderately low sponsor–event congruities (d’Astous & Bitz, 1995; Ellen et al., 2006; Menon & Kahn, 2003).

When brands have moderately high congruity to the sponsored event, additional information about CSR (or focusing on CSR within the linked strategy) likely has no effect on brand evaluations. Since the motivation to process information about pairings with moderately high congruity is low, schema activation (both event and CSR) should be less pronounced and thus decreasing schema-level transfer likelihood. Consumers expect moderately high congruity brands to be involved with the sponsored event. For such brands, a standard sponsorship signals that they are concentrating on their strengths, that is brand–event associations. In this scenario social content may be perceived as illogical due to inconsistencies with the brand’s positioning (Du et al., 2007). For moderately high sponsor–event congruities, linking CSR to sponsorship should not affect CSR perceptions of the sponsor, brand credibility, and company attitude.

These arguments suggest moderately low (vs. moderately high) sponsor–event congruity alters the relationship between CSR-linked sponsorship and consumer CSR perception and influences the indirect effects on brand credibility and attitude. H2 is stated as follows (see Fig. 1).
H2. The leveraging effects of (a) CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship), and (b) CSR focus (vs. event focus) respectively on consumer CSR perception, and hence brand credibility and attitude, are present for moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored event. The leveraging effects are not present for moderately high sponsor–event congruity brands.

3. Study 1

3.1. Participants and design

Study 1 tests H1a and H2a. In total, 101 students (mean age: 22.6 (± 2.4) years, 51 males) from a German university completed the study for course credit. They were assigned randomly to a one-factor between-participant design (communication content: CSR-linked sponsorship vs. standard sponsorship). The moderator sponsor–event congruity is a continuous variable.

Two different versions of a pre-tested press release about a brand were taken as the experimental stimulus. The study also includes a group of participants who were given a third version of the press release communicating a CSR initiative without linkage (n = 49, mean age: 22.4 (± 2.2) years, 23 males). This group creates a base measure of the brand's CSR perception after participants had gone through an identical procedure. This group allows testing whether or not CSR-linked sponsorship increases CSR perception compared to the standard sponsorship condition and outperforms a standard CSR initiative. CSR-linked sponsorship may increase CSR perception over and above the level of a CSR initiative without linkage to sponsorship. This effect is due to the schema-level affect transfer between the event schema and the social giving schema. The study uses the Sony brand because pretest results show some variance with respect to perceptions of the congruity between Sony and the event under consideration—the soccer World Cup (see Appendix A).

3.2. Procedure

First, participants drew lots labeled A, B or C and received the corresponding questionnaire. The questionnaire contains measures to assess familiarity and attitudes towards five brands, including Sony. Next, the interviewer told the participants that the study examines how consumers evaluate press releases announcing recent product launches by Procter & Gamble, Siemens, and Sony. All three Sony press release versions contain information about a product launch and information about a CSR-linked sponsorship, a standard sponsorship, or a standard CSR initiative. To maintain the cover story’s credibility, the questionnaire’s next part contains filler questions about the press releases. Subsequently, the interviewer informed the participants that they had been assigned to one specific brand based on the lot that they had drawn previously, and that all further questions referred to that specific brand. In reality, all remaining questions referred to Sony. Participants then rated CSR perception, brand credibility, and brand attitude. The questionnaire also assesses sponsor–event congruity. After the study, participants stated their opinion of the study goals and they were debriefed. Three respondents guessed the research hypothesis and they were excluded from the analyses.

3.3. Measures

Menon and Kahn’s (2003) five-item scale measured CSR perception (e.g., “... believes in philanthropy and giving generously to worthy causes,” Cronbach’s α = .80). Brand credibility was measured through four items (e.g., “… is a firm I believe in,” Cronbach’s α = .85; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Attitude towards Sony was measured using three seven-point semantic differential items (e.g., “unfavorable/favorable,” Cronbach’s α = .95; Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). An exploratory factor analysis with maximum likelihood extraction and promax rotation confirms that the dependent variable and the mediators are separate constructs. All items load above .60. The average variance extracted for the variables is larger than their squared correlations, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Sponsor–event congruity was measured through three items (e.g., “The ideas I have with ... are related to the ideas I have with ...”). Cronbach’s α = .86; Gwinn & Eaton, 1999). All measures use seven-point rating scales (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree).

3.4. Results and discussion

H1a and H2a suggest testing a moderated mediation model. This model examines the indirect effect of communication content (CSR-linked sponsorship vs. standard sponsorship) on brand attitude through the two serial mediators CSR perception and brand credibility at different values of sponsor–event congruity. Gender does not correlate or moderate the relationships between any variables, except females
scored significantly higher on CSR perception than males. Because this effect does not alter any hypothesized relationships, the following analyses were performed without gender.

Following Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) guidelines, an Mplus path model tested the moderated mediation. The model includes communication content (standard sponsorship = 0, CSR-linked sponsorship = 1), mean-centered sponsor–event congruity, and the interaction between sponsor–event congruity and communication content as the exogenous variables. Consumer CSR perception and brand credibility are modeled as serial mediators and brand attitude as the dependent variable (see Fig. 1).

Linking sponsorship with CSR (vs. standard sponsorship) positively affects consumer CSR perception ($\beta = .47, p < .01$; $M_{\text{CSR-linked sponsorship}} = 4.2 (\pm 0.9)$ vs. $M_{\text{standard sponsorship}} = 3.7 (\pm 0.9)$). The path model further shows that consumer CSR perception positively associates with brand credibility ($\beta = .72, p < .001$), which in turn increases brand attitude ($\beta = .73, p < .001$). In support of H1a, communication content’s indirect effect on brand attitude is positive ($\beta = .24, p < .01$; see Table 1).

The analysis also reveals a negative interaction effect of communication content and sponsor–event congruity on consumer CSR perception ($\beta = -.45, p < .05$). The interaction’s indirect effect on brand attitude through the serial mediators CSR perception and brand credibility is also negative ($\beta = -.23, p < .01$). A spotlight analysis tested communication content’s indirect effect on brand attitude at moderately low and moderately high levels of sponsor–event congruity (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The results provide support for H2a. Communication content’s indirect effect is positive and significant at moderately low sponsor–event congruity ($-1 SD, \beta = .48, p < .001$), whereas findings show no such effect at moderately high sponsor–event congruity ($+1 SD, \beta = .01, p > .05$; see Table 1). A two-group Mplus analysis comparing participants who perceived moderately low brand–event congruity with participants who perceived moderately high brand–event congruity by using a median split comes to the same conclusion: The indirect effect of CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. sponsorship) on brand attitude is positive for the first group of participants ($\beta = .41, SE = .17, p < .05$), while no significant effect is found for the latter group ($\beta = .08, SE = .10, p > .05$); see Study 2 for model specifications.

Study 1 extends previous sponsorship research. Results show that moderately low congruity brands to sponsored events profit from CSR-linked sponsorship (vs. standard sponsorship). Brand attitudes increase via higher CSR perception and brand credibility. The results confirm predictions informed by schema incongruity theory (Fiske, 1982) and counter previous claims that sponsorship success increases as brand–event congruity increases (Speed & Thompson, 2000).

A separate ANOVA reveals that CSR-linked sponsorship results are at the same CSR perception level as in the base level condition, where the press release only communicates CSR ($M_{\text{CSR only}} = 4.3 (\pm 0.9), p > .05$). This finding indicates that CSR-linked sponsorship can increase consumer CSR perception to an identical level compared with a CSR strategy without linkage. No additive effect on consumer CSR perception comes from the activation of the event schema in addition to social giving schema. Brands with a moderately low congruity to the sponsored event benefit from communicating both sponsorship and CSR activities and at the same time increase CSR perception. This effect does not hold true for moderately high congruity brands. CSR-linked sponsorship neither increases nor decreases brand attitudes through the serial mediators for these brands.

Study 1 examines the effects of messages that differ regarding communication content—whether or not a CSR initiative is mentioned in the sponsorship message. However, many sponsors link CSR initiatives to their sponsorships and real-world communication strategies vary with respect to communication focus (emphasizing either the CSR initiative or the event). For example, all FIFA World Cup sponsors communicate CSR in at least one of their sponsorship (e.g., promoting free sporting event tickets for poor South Africans and highlighting either the sporting event or the donation). Study 2 addresses this issue and manipulates sponsor–event congruity by using different brands. This study helps generalize the findings to various brands with varying degrees of sponsor–event congruity.

### 4. Study 2

#### 4.1. Participants and design

Study 2 tests H1b and H2b. A total of 336 German students (mean age: 25.3 (±5.8) years, 48.5% males) were assigned randomly to four experimental conditions: (1) standard sponsorship (vs. CSR-linked sponsorship) × 2 (communication focus: CSR vs. event) between-participant design. Sponsor–event congruity was manipulated using two different brands. The study uses different versions of a press release concerning CSR-linked sponsorship to manipulate communication focus. In the CSR (event) focus condition, the press releases emphasize the sponsor’s CSR (event sponsorship) activities. The soccer World Cup in South Africa provides the context for the study (see Appendix B).

#### 4.2. Pretests on sponsor–event congruity and communication focus manipulations

A first pretest selected two equally prominent and attractive soccer World Cup sponsors that differ in their event congruity. Based on the results of in-depth interviews with sponsorship experts, a sorting task of pictures and brand logos, and a survey using a standardized scale ($n = 39$; see Study 1 scales; sponsor–event congruity: $M_{\text{Adidas}} = 4.0 (\pm 1.4), M_{\text{Coca-Cola}} = 3.4 (\pm 1.4); t(38) = 3.8, p < .001$) Adidas was chosen as the moderately congruent brand and Coca-Cola as the moderately

### Table 1

Results of the moderated mediation analyses for Study 1 (H1a and H2a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR-linked sponsorship $^1$ → CSR perception</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor–event congruity → CSR perception</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR-linked sponsorship $^1$ → Sponsor–event congruity → CSR perception</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>&lt;.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR perception → brand credibility</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand credibility → brand attitude</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Indirect effects of CSR-linked sponsorship on brand attitude (via serial mediators)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CSR-linked sponsorship $^1$ → brand attitude at different values of sponsor–event congruity:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– 1 SD (moderately low sponsor–event congruity)</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 1 SD (moderately high sponsor–event congruity)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^1$ vs. standard sponsorship (two experimental conditions); $B =$ unstandardized path coefficient; $SE =$ Bootstrap standard error; $SD =$ standard deviation.
incongruent brand. The survey results find no significant difference in brand familiarity and liking between the brands.

A second pretest assesses the focus of communication manipulations. Participants (n = 112) were assigned randomly to four groups and asked to read one press release. They rated the press release’s emphasis for the respective brand (Adidas or Coca-Cola) on two seven-point items (anchored by 1 = heavy focus on the event sponsorship and 7 = heavy focus on corporate social responsibility). ANOVA results show a significant main effect of communication focus in the expected direction (M_CSR = 5.3 (±1.0), M_event = 3.6 (±1.2); F(1, 108) = 63.26, p < .001, η² = .37), with no significant interaction and brand effects (F < 1).

4.3. Procedure

Participants were told that the study’s purpose is to examine how they evaluate press releases. The procedure for the study’s first part that was applied before and after participants read the scenarios follows Study 1.

4.4. Measures

Study 2 uses the same scales as in Study 1 to assess CSR perception (Cronbach’s α = .91), brand credibility (Cronbach’s α = .92), brand attitude (Cronbach’s α = .92), and sponsor–event congruity (Cronbach’s α = .80). A factor analysis with maximum likelihood extraction and promax rotation confirms that the outcome variable and the mediators are separate constructs. All item loadings are above .60.

4.5. Results and discussion

An Mplus two-group moderated mediation path model analyzed the data. The model includes communication focus (event focus = 0, CSR focus = 1) as the exogenous variable. Consumer CSR perception and brand credibility are serial mediators in the model and brand attitude is the dependent variable (see Fig. 1, bottom). Gender does not correlate with any variables or affect any relationships and was therefore excluded. Sponsor–event congruity (Adidas = moderately congruent brand, Coca-Cola = moderately incongruent brand) represents the grouping variable. The model tests for invariances between the paths from the exogenous variable to the first mediator (i.e., CSR perception, a path), from CSR perception to the second mediator (i.e., brand credibility, b path), and from brand credibility to the dependent variable (i.e., brand attitude, c path). The study hypothesizes differences in path a (translating to brand attitude differences), but not in paths b or c.

Results confirm that communication focus’s effect on consumer CSR perception (a path) differs between the moderately low congruity brand to the sponsored event (Coca-Cola) and the moderately high congruity brand (Adidas) (Δβ = .52, SE = .27, p < .05). Consistent with the study’s theorizing, CSR focus’s positive effect on consumer CSR perception is significant only for Coca-Cola (β = .50, p < .01), whereas no such effect exists for Adidas (β = −.03, p > .05; see Table 2). Supporting H2b, a positive indirect effect on brand attitude exists for the moderately low congruity brand to the sponsored event (β = .13, p < .05) and a non-significant indirect effect for the moderately high congruity brand (β = −.01, p > .05). As expected, the paths between CSR perception and brand credibility (Ab path; β = −.02, SE = .07, p > .05), and between brand credibility and brand attitude (Ac path; β = −.14, SE = .14, p > .05) do not differ between Coca-Cola and Adidas.

Testing the overall model (i.e., across brands; H1b) reveals that, focusing on CSR in a CSR-linked sponsorship message increases consumer CSR perception of the sponsor (β = .50, SE = .17, p < .01). CSR perception positively associates with brand credibility (β = .81, SE = .04, p < .001) and that, in turn, positively influences brand attitude (β = .40, SE = .07, p < .001). The indirect effect of communication focus on brand attitude via CSR perception and brand credibility is positive (β = .16, SE = .06, p < .01), providing support for H1b.

Study 2’s finding are consistent with Study 1 and support the theoretical framework. Emphasizing the social activities within a CSR-linked sponsorship message (vs. focusing on the event within a CSR-linked sponsorship message) increases consumer CSR perception. These perceptions help moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored event increase brand attitude via brand credibility. The findings confirm theory, suggesting advantages for moderately low congruity brands in the context of CSR-linked sponsorship hold true for communication content and communication focus. Again, CSR-linked sponsorship produces null effects for brands with a moderately high congruity to the sponsored event.

6. General discussion

6.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

This study is the first piece of theory-building research to investigate the effectiveness of linking CSR initiatives to sponsorship. Results identify the theoretical mechanism to explain the effects of CSR-linked sponsorship on brand attitude taking into account sponsor–event congruity. This research responds to calls in the literature to investigate creative communication strategies as a means of sponsoring leveraging (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). Empirical evidence from two studies suggests that adding CSR to sponsorship or focusing on CSR within the sponsorship message leverages sponsorship for moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored events; however, no effect exists for CSR-linkage of moderately high congruity brands.

The findings show that moderately low congruity brands linking sponsorship and focusing on a CSR message increases consumer CSR perception. This result is important because previous findings demonstrating the advantages of high-congruity sponsorship seem to hold true only for standard sponsorship and high sponsor–event congruity (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009; Johar & Pham, 1999; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

This research’s most general managerial implication is that managers should consider the sponsor–event congruity when designing a communication strategy linking CSR and sponsorship. This strategy benefits moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored events. For these sponsors, CSR activities help consumers to resolve inconsistencies due to the moderately low event congruity. The linkage appeals when means of increasing sponsor–event congruity (e.g., articulation) fail or competitor imitation occurs (Cornwell et al., 2006). For example, NASCAR sponsor Unilever can support social causes to promote their products (e.g., health campaigns for school children from poor families.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Results of the two-group moderated mediation analysis for Study 2 (H1b and H2b).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coca-Cola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR focus¹ → CSR perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR perception → brand credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand credibility → brand attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR focus¹ → brand attitude (via serial mediators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adidas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR focus¹ → CSR perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR perception → brand credibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand credibility → brand attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSR focus¹ → brand attitude (via serial mediators)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ vs. event focus (two experimental conditions); see Table 1 notes for explanations of the abbreviations.
at the race venues) and link these activities to their sponsorship (e.g., invite the children for a healthy breakfast with racers).

Increasing consumer CSR perception and perceived brand credibility via CSR-linked sponsorship is important for at least two reasons. First, threshold countries with intense economic disparities host an increasing number of mega-events (e.g., the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). CSR has become an important goal for sponsors because they signal a desire to reduce economic disparities in these countries. Second, spectator concerns about over-commercialization of sport events suggest companies need to be careful not to alienate them (Lee, Sandler, & Shani, 1997). This research shows that CSR-linked sponsorship adds social meaning to the sponsorship and improves a brand's evaluation (i.e., credibility and attitudes) in the context of commercialized sports events. Acting as a sponsor of commercialized events and doing good do not contradict each other. Instead, this combination produces more favorable effects for moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored event. While these effects do not occur for moderately high congruity brands, CSR-linked sponsorship may still be an attractive strategy. The strategy has no negative effects on brand attitudes and may complement the marketing communication portfolio of these brands.

6.2. Limitations and future research directions

The research limitations offer fertile ground for a number of future research studies. This research highlights the importance of sponsor–event congruity in determining the success of CSR-linked sponsorship. However, besides the sponsor–event pairing, linking sponsorship with CSR creates two more relationships where congruity is potentially relevant: the sponsor–CSR pairing and the CSR–event pairing (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Is CSR-linked sponsorship still only beneficial for moderately low congruity brands to the event when the social initiative fits well with both the sponsor and the event?

Other valuable research contributions could result from examining how different ways of communicating CSR-linked sponsorship influence communication effectiveness. This study uses press releases that are perceived as relatively neutral sources of information. Would other forms of corporate communication, such as print, internet, or television advertisements offer the same results? As consumers could regard these channels as more commercial and marketing oriented, the positive effect of CSR-linked sponsorship on CSR perception may be affected.

Future research needs to examine the process that makes consumers react more positively to CSR-linked sponsorship from moderately low congruity brands to the sponsored events. Two pathways seem plausible. First, consumer attention to both CSR and sponsorship information may increase consumers’ motivation to process and make sense of messages that are provided by moderately low congruent (vs. moderately high congruent) brands. Higher attention may cause greater depth of processing (Sujan, 1985). Second, consumer involvement with social causes may increase due to the positive connotations of CSR information and the importance of social giving (McDaniel & Heald, 2000).

To conclude, the study shows that moderately low congruity brands to sponsored events do not necessarily have an inherent disadvantage regarding their effect on consumers. These brands can employ CSR-linked sponsorship to influence brand attitude positively via CSR perception and brand credibility.

Acknowledgment

The authors thank Hans Baumgartner, C.B. Bhattacharya, and Ashley Stadler Bank for their valuable feedback on the manuscript. They also thank Anastasia Blocha, Jennifer Meyer, and Linda Zehren for their help with the data collection.

Appendix A. Press releases used to manipulate communication content (Study 1)

Standard sponsorship condition

Sony—innovative products and sponsorship

News from the entertainment brand Sony is usually about its innovative and multifunctional technologies like the Sony 3D technology and the Sony Cybershot camera. Recently though, Sony hits the headlines with different activities: the commitment to the sponsorship of the FIFA World Cup. The sponsorship of the soccer World Cup in South Africa is very important for Sony. For example, Sony presents its new products during the greatest sports event of the year in several sponsorship campaigns. Sony employees support the event on the site. Sony’s chief executive is pleased about this engagement: “As a global company, Sony aims to energize the sponsorship of the World Cup. This begins with every single employee who commits to the sponsorship, helps on site, lends a hand and acts things. I am proud of the sponsorship, it is a great platform for our innovative products—with this we can make a difference.”

CSR-linked sponsorship condition

Sony—innovative products and corporate social responsibility–linked sponsorship

News from the entertainment brand Sony is usually about its innovative and multifunctional technologies like the Sony 3D technology and the Sony Cybershot camera. Recently though, Sony hits the headlines with different activities: the commitment to corporate social responsibility linked to its FIFA World Cup sponsorship. The sponsorship of the soccer World Cup in South Africa and corporate social responsibility for people in need and disadvantaged people are very important for Sony. For example, Sony links several sponsorship campaigns with the support of institutions that take care of South African children in need. Sony’s chief executive is pleased about this engagement: “As a global company, Sony aims to combine sponsorship with corporate social responsibility. This begins with every single employee who commits to these activities, helps on site, lends a hand and acts things. I am proud of Sony’s engagement—with this we can make a difference.”

Standard CSR condition (control)

Sony—innovative products and corporate social responsibility

News from the entertainment brand Sony is usually about its innovative and multifunctional technologies like the Sony 3D technology and the Sony Cybershot camera. Recently though, Sony hits the headlines with different activities: the commitment to social responsibility. Corporate social responsibility for people in need and disadvantaged people is very important for Sony. For example, Sony donates money and products to institutions that take care of South African children in need. Sony employees support the facilities on the site. Sony’s chief executive is pleased about this engagement: “As a global company, Sony aims to act responsibly towards the society as a whole. This begins with every single employee who comes through for others, helps on site, lends a hand and acts things. I am proud of the great number of volunteers who show their personal commitment—with this we can make a difference.”
Appendix B: Press releases used to manipulate communication focus (Study 2; here: Coca-Cola)

Event focus condition
Coca-Cola focuses on sponsorship activities during the soccer World Cup

The sponsorship of the soccer World Cup is very important for Coca-Cola during the course of this event. Coca-Cola’s engagement as official sponsor includes numerous actions that aim to present the brand in the context of the World Cup. For example, Coca-Cola provides products at each game’s venue and offers a variety of licensed products. Further Coca-Cola links the sponsorship with corporate social responsibility activities in order to improve life circumstances of people in need and disadvantaged people (e.g., poor children).

“The sponsorship helps Coca-Cola become a brand that is valued by people,” says a spokesman of the Coca-Cola management. Coca-Cola is visible for people during all games, be they group games or the World Cup final. The sponsorship activities thus make people worldwide aware of the brand.

CSR focus condition
Coca-Cola focuses on corporate social responsibility during the soccer World Cup

Corporate social responsibility is very important for Coca-Cola during the course of the soccer World Cup. Coca-Cola’s engagement as a responsible brand includes numerous actions that aim to present the brand in the context of acting responsibly towards people in need and disadvantaged people. One example includes the “scout cup” initiative. This initiative aims to improve life circumstances of poor children and teenagers. Further Coca-Cola links corporate social responsibility activities with the World Cup sponsorship in order to increase the brand’s visibility and make people worldwide aware of the brand.

“Corporate social responsibility helps Coca-Cola become a brand that is valued by people,” says a spokesman of the Coca-Cola management. For example, Coca-Cola is engaged in poor communities, where children receive only little attention. These activities improve their life circumstances.

References

Quester, P. G., & Thompson, B. (2001). Advertising and promotion leverage in a cause-brand alliance when