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Jerred Jungi Wang  
*University of West Georgia*

James J. Zhang  
*University of Georgia*

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Role of Sponsor-Selection in Marketing Communications of New Local Hallmark Events: A Perspective of Image Transfer

Jerred Junqi Wang, University of West Georgia
James J. Zhang, University of Georgia

With the rapid growth of sport popularity throughout the world, developing local hallmark events have become an emerging trend in many urban and suburban communities. Yet, the underdeveloped brand equity of new events makes marketing communications challenging. Built upon the balance theory, the schema theory, and the elaboration likelihood model, this study was designed to examine the image transfer from the sponsor-end to the event-end in the context of new local hallmark events while considering potential moderating effects of image fit (IF) and sport identification (SID) in this process.

The balance theory suggests that to achieve the cognitive consistency, people tend to harmonize the outside stimuli and seek the balance among related units (Heider, 1958). In the event sponsorship, the event, sponsor(s), and consumers together constitute a triad-relationship in which the positive attributes at the high-end (e.g., sponsors with high brand equity) would transfer to the low-end (e.g., new events) to realize the cognitive consistency in people’s mind. Meanwhile, the schema theory suggests that high IF between the event and a sponsor helps facilitate the process of image transfer; conversely, low IF hinders the image transfer (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Sujan & Bettman, 1989). That is, IF would moderate the image transfer. The elaboration likelihood model indicates that people would process an outside stimulus based on its essential attributes/peripheral cues if they have sufficient/insufficient interests or cognitive resources (Petty & Cacioppo, 1980). Compared with individuals with high SID, individuals with low SID would likely to assess the event based on its sponsors’ attributes (i.e., peripheral cues). Thus, SID would also moderate the process of image transfer. Additionally, SID would directly impact one’s assessment toward event and therefore should be controlled when assessing the effect of image transfer (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008).

The flyer of a fictional local hallmark event (a road-race event) with event description and sponsor information was designed and distributed to local residents. The data from 233 survey respondents were confirmed valid. The sponsor’s brand equity (SBE), SID, IF, perceived event value (PEV), and participation intention (PI) were all derived from previous studies. Structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis revealed the significant impact of SBE on PEV ($\beta = .408, p < .01$) and PI ($\beta = .134, p < .05$). The moderating effects of IF and SID in the image transfer were partially confirmed: SBE*IF impacted PEV ($\beta = .284, p < .01$) and PI ($\beta = .035, p > .05$); and SBE*SID impacted PEV ($\beta = .063, p > .05$) and PI ($\beta = .200, p < .01$). As a control factor, SID impacted PEV ($\beta = .063, p > .05$) and PI ($\beta = .341, p < .01$). Discussions are centered on utilizing the research findings in sponsorship selections, facilitations, and communications when promoting new local hallmark events.