

# Sponsorship and Advertising: A Comparison of Consumer Perceptions

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## ABSTRACT

**Unlike advertising, little is currently known about how consumers regard commercial sponsorship. This paper outlines the results of focus group research which examined how consumers perceive sponsorship and how they view it in comparison with advertising.**  
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Commercial sponsorship, also known as “lifestyle, event, and sports marketing,” is an increasingly important aspect of marketing communications activity. Growth in this area of communications has been substantial, increasing from some \$2 billion in 1984 to \$23.16 billion in 1999 (Sponsorship Research International [SRI], 2000). Increased investment in sponsorship can largely be attributed to corporate disillusion with media advertising and by extension the perceived relative effectiveness of sponsorship as a method of marketing communications. Although advertising continues to be the focus of considerable research attention and ongoing improvement in understanding, the phenomenon of sponsorship is by contrast poorly understood. A central issue in understanding sponsorship is that of image effects, and although the process of meaning transfer and the image benefits of particular sponsor/event associations have generated some degree of understanding, consumer perception of sponsorship as a generic form of marketing communications has not been explored. The purpose of this article is to seek to

understand consumer perceptions of sponsorship and to compare consumer perceptions of both advertising and sponsorship.

## **BACKGROUND**

Commercial sponsorship is a relatively recent development with corporate expenditures in this medium having exploded over the last three decades. In 1970, some £4 million was invested in sponsorship in the U.K. market (Buckley, 1980); however, by 1999, some \$1.075 billion was spent by sponsors in that marketplace (SRi, 2000). Corporate investment in the U.S. market has grown from \$850 million in 1985 to a projected year 2000 value of \$8.76 billion (International Event Group [IEG], 2000). On a worldwide basis there has been in excess of an 11-fold increase in corporate sponsorship between 1984 and 1999, and today sponsorship spending worldwide stands at 7.0% of worldwide advertising expenditure (SRi, 2000). These spending estimates refer only to the cost of purchasing the "property rights" to sponsor events. It is generally accepted that a sum at least equal to the property rights costs should be used to leverage the initial investment.

## **CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF ADVERTISING**

Public attitudes to advertising have been the subject of considerable research and commentary (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992; Bauer & Greyser, 1968; Crane, 1991; Mittal, 1994; Muehling, 1987; O'Donoghue, 1995; Pollay & co-workers, 1986, 1993; Shavitt, Lowrey, & Haefner, 1998; Zanot, 1984). An analysis of the available literature suggests that attitudes are ambivalent, vary by country and within countries by demographic variables, and center on major attitudinal themes (e.g., attitudes toward the instrument and attitudes toward the institution that is advertising [O'Donoghue, 1995]).

Consumer ambivalence towards advertising is reflected in the public's "love-hate" relationship with advertising (Tylee, 1989) and with consumers favorably disposed toward certain aspects while negative about others. Recognizing this ambivalence, researchers have tended to distinguish between different aspects of attitude to advertising. Bauer and Greyser (1968) distinguished between advertising as an institution and advertisements as everyday phenomena, whereas Sandage and Leckeny (1980) adopted a similar framework distinguishing between attitudes toward the "institution" and attitudes toward the "instrument" that is advertising. Similarly, Reid and Soley (1982) suggested that consumers may hold beliefs about advertising at both personalized and generalized levels whereas Pollay and Mittal (1993) propose a model of

consumer attitudes to advertising based on "personal uses" and "societal effects" of advertising.

O'Donoghue (1995), in an extensive analysis of the literature, chose to examine consumer attitudes based on a two-dimensional framework—personal experiences of advertising and beliefs about the institution of advertising. The personal experiences category, covers among other aspects, the public's views regarding the entertainment and informational value of advertising and the ability of advertising to persuade, manipulate, and even distort consumer perceptions of products. On this latter issue, consumers are highly critical of advertising, with large numbers believing it to be dishonest, deceptive, and manipulative.

On the second dimension (beliefs about the institution of advertising), research studies have largely centered on the social and economic effects of advertising with consumer ambivalence again evident. Many consumers believe that advertising fuels the economy in terms of raising the standard of living, but they are unsure as to whether it increases or reduces prices. On the social effects dimension, attitudes regarding advertising's ability to stereotype, reflect reality, and manipulate vulnerable groups such as children, impact negatively on consumer attitudes.

As indicated above, overall attitudes are ambivalent, with considerable variation in consumer perceptions by nationality (Beatson, 1984; Bonnal, 1990), by social and demographic variables (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992; Bauer & Greyser, 1968; Zanot, 1984), and by advertising media type (e.g., television versus press) (Heyder et al., 1992; Mittal, 1994; Tyler, 1989).

## **CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF SPONSORSHIP**

By comparison with advertising, little is known about sponsorship as a method of marketing communications (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). To date, research in sponsorship has largely focused on certain issues (e.g., profiling sponsorship management practices and evaluating consumer effects by way of recall and recognition studies [Meenaghan, 1999]). Some particular insights into the phenomenon of image in sponsorship can be determined from the limited body of research into the effects of sponsorship on consumers. Consumer perceptions of image in sponsorship are now briefly examined at different levels of aggregation.

Figure 1 essentially outlines three levels of aggregation in sponsorship, namely, generic, category, and individual activity levels, which are broadly similar to the phenomenon of advertising, as well as media and media vehicle levels in advertising theory, respectively. Although this article is concerned with the image of sponsorship as a generic phenomenon, in order to provide some necessary context and to illustrate comparable levels of understanding, this section of the article provides a

Sponsorship	Advertising
Generic (i.e., sponsorship as a phenomenon)	Generic (i.e., advertising as a phenomenon)
Category (e.g., sports sponsorship)	Medium (e.g., television advertising)
Individual activity (e.g., soccer/individual team)	Media vehicle (e.g., channel or individual program)

**Figure 1.** Levels of sponsorship aggregation.

brief synopsis of image effects in both sponsorship and advertising. Each level of aggregation is now examined in turn.

### **Generic Level**

As indicated earlier, consumer perceptions of advertising have received considerable research attention; however, consumer perceptions of sponsorship have to date been the subject of only limited research, with some commentators suggesting that the consumer-effects process in sponsorship is different from that experienced in advertising (Bloxham, 1998; Hastings, 1984; Hoek, Gendall, Jeffcoat, & Orsman, 1997; McDonald, 1991; Meenaghan, 1991, 1998; Stipp, 1998). Both McDonald (1991) and Meenaghan (1991, 1998) suggest that goodwill generation is the key factor distinguishing sponsorship from advertising, with the former describing sponsorship as "advertising plus" and the latter suggesting that goodwill is related to the sponsor's investment in an activity with which the consumer has an emotional involvement.

### **Category Level**

The phenomenon of media effect in advertising suggests that different media (e.g., television, press, etc.) possess particular qualities such as mood, involvement, etc., that affect consumer reaction to messages placed therein (Crane, 1972; Dommermuth, 1974; Grass & Wallace, 1974; Joyce, 1981; McConnell, 1970; Stewart & Ward, 1994). The equivalent level of aggregation (sponsorship category effect) has only recently been the subject of initial research inquiry (Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999), and overall understanding of consumer image of sponsorship at this level is grossly inadequate.

### **Individual Activity Level**

The phenomenon of media vehicle effect in advertising suggests that different media vehicles (i.e., television programs, particular magazines, etc.) have particular image values that affect consumer receptivity of advertising (Aaker & Brown, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Hafstrand,

1988; Joyce, 1981; Laurent, 1990; Mathur & Chattopadhyay, 1991; Pav-elchak, Antil, & Munch, 1985; Smith, 1972; Tavassoli, Schultz, & Fitzimons, 1995; Woodside & Soni, 1990). In the case of sponsorship, the parallel phenomenon suggests that particular events and activities possess individual personalities that are then transferred by association to the sponsor in a sponsorship relationship. By comparison with both generic and category effects, this aspect of sponsorship image has been the focus of considerable research attention (Ferrand & Pages, 1998; Grimes & Meenaghan, 1998; Gwinner, 1997; Hansen & Scotwin, 1995; Javelgi et al., 1994; Rajshekhar, Traylor, Gross, and Lampman, 1994; Rajaretnam, 1994; Stipp, 1998).

## THE RESEARCH STUDY

In order to facilitate understanding of the image phenomenon in sponsorship, a major research study was undertaken (Meenaghan, 1994). This study comprised three related research interventions, using two rounds of in-depth interviews with world experts in the sponsorship field, followed by focus-group research with consumers as recipients of sponsorship imagery. Both in-depth interviews and focus-group research discussions concentrated on a range of issues based on the researcher's preunderstanding derived from ethnographic experience, desk research, and previous field research.

Although the overall objective of the research project was to seek to understand the phenomenon of sponsorship image, an examination of sponsorship image at the generic level was an essential component of the research, and it is this aspect of the research findings that forms the basis of this article.

Essentially the research objectives at the generic sponsorship level were

- To examine consumer perceptions of commercial sponsorship as a method of marketing communications
- To compare commercial sponsorship and advertising in terms of consumer perceptions
- To examine the image which sponsorship involvement *per se* confers on the sponsor, and whether this image differs from that achieved through advertising.

Multiple research approaches were employed in pursuit of the project's overall objective, to seek to understand the phenomenon of sponsorship image; the particular research results presented in this article are based on a series of focus-group interviews. The focus-group membership comprised respondents who were involved to varying degrees with different

activities such as sports, arts, and causes. Essentially the concept of fan involvement, whereby consumers/fans are involved or committed to different sports teams, arts activities, and social causes was the construct underlying the selection of focus-group respondents. Fan involvement as a concept is most widely discussed in terms of sports (Cialdini & deNicholas, 1989; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Sloan, 1989; Spinrad, 1981; Wann & Brancombe, 1993; Zillman & Paulus, 1993); and popular music (Arnett, 1995; Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992; Frith, 1978; Grossberg, 1992a, 1992b; Longhurst, 1995; Lull, 1987). This construct was employed as it was felt that varying degrees of involvement with an activity/event/team etc. would provide an important variable against which consumer perceptions of aspects of sponsorship image could be explored.

The focus-group members were Irish nationals, and their frame of reference of sponsorship experience was multilayered reflecting their Irish, European, and global market experiences. The researcher's preunderstanding, derived from previous stages of the research, enabled the development of an outline discussion guide that was used carefully to prompt group discussion and probe selected issues. Issues identified for discussion in connection with perceptions of sponsorship and comparisons of sponsorship and advertising included

- Perception of sponsorship
- Perception of sponsorship vis a vis advertising
- Perception of sponsor's objectives
- Commercialism
- Perceived Intent to persuade
- Intrusion/interference
- Image associated with sponsorship/advertising involvement

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

The results arising from the focus-group research are presented in three major sections based on the major research objectives. The format for presentation of results is that of summary interpretation and a number of actual quotes from respondents on each issue. Where appropriate, the background of the respondent is indicated (e.g., sports fan, arts fan, etc.).

### **Section A: Perception of Commercial Sponsorship as a Method of Marketing Communications**

Consumer attitudes toward sponsorship generically were highly favorable, with this method of marketing communications being variously seen as "good," "necessary," and "essential." Although favorable attitudes

existed, these were occasionally tempered by the attitudes of a well-informed public to certain negative issues surrounding sponsorship generally and sponsors' relationships with sponsored activities. Consumer perceptions of commercial sponsorship are now examined in more detail under a series of headings indicated by the research results, namely, Goodwill, Negative Aspects of Sponsorship, and "Rite of Passage."

**Goodwill.** As stated, respondents were favorably disposed toward sponsorship, exhibiting a certain goodwill factor toward those engaged in sponsorship activities generally. This goodwill factor was driven by the belief that commercial sponsorship directly benefits sports, the arts, and many other activities.

It's a good idea . . . because it puts money into areas that might not otherwise receive it

I don't think it takes away from sport. It helps certain sports definitely. Some athletes would be completely lost without sponsorship and they wouldn't be able to partake in the Olympics and things like that

Although respondents were favorable in their attitudes toward sponsorship as a method of marketing communication, favorable attitudes were more pronounced when respondents discussed activities with which they themselves were emotionally involved. In effect, respondents' predisposition/involvement with particular activities, teams, etc. led to a more specific goodwill factor that appeared to be more emotionally driven than the goodwill that was evident in more abstract discussions surrounding sponsorship as a generic phenomenon. Respondent predispositions and their effects on goodwill are evident in the accompanying responses.

I think also that it (Texaco Children's Art Competition) is genuinely doing good as a result of its "advertising" (*sic*). It is putting it in something that wouldn't be done otherwise and it is promoting and it has been promoting children's art around the country and it gets a lot of entries and all that. (arts fan)

It can be very favourable for some companies. Like I know at home, McMahan and Philips sponsor the Kilkenny Hurling team and everybody thinks they're great, keeping up the local cause. It gives them a great local image. I don't know about outside Kilkenny now. Probably nobody would know that, but locally it's definitely favourable. (Kilkenny hurling fan)<sup>1</sup>

Although the focus of this article is on sponsorship as a generic phenomenon, it was clear from the research that the intensity of goodwill

<sup>1</sup> Kilkenny is a county in Ireland and Hurling is a major Irish national sport.

is moderated by fan involvement and that goodwill at the generic level is more abstract and less intense than that displayed where a favored team or event is sponsored. This aspect of the research has been discussed elsewhere (Meenaghan, 1998).

***Goodwill Varies by Category.*** Although sponsorship at a generic level was viewed as involving benefit to an individual recipient or activity other than the sponsor, it was also evident that not all categories of sponsorship engendered similar levels of goodwill. Categories such as social causes, environmental programs, and high-brow arts/cultural activities encouraged greater degrees of goodwill than the sponsorship of sports and the popular arts. Respondents seemed to distinguish between what they saw as a form of sponsorship broadly similar to advertising and sponsorship that was regarded as being similar to philanthropy with greater levels of goodwill directed toward the latter. This attitude is summed up in the following quotation.

If it's a charity or something they're sponsoring, you just have such a positive attitude towards it, but when it's some event or games or whatever, you just say they're just there for what they can get out of it.

Although all respondents, irrespective of their preferences (arts, sports, etc.) distinguished between a "philanthropic form of sponsorship" and an "advertising form of sponsorship," "arts" respondents were particularly emphatic about this distinction, with their perceptions being driven by their emotional involvement with arts activities. On the one hand, there was arts sponsorship, which they regarded as being philanthropic, not overly intrusive on the sponsored activity, and generally carried out in a subtle, low-profile manner. On the other hand, there was sports sponsorship, which they saw as brash, blatant, loud, and obtrusive. This form of sponsorship represented for this group advertising by another name, whereas the low-profile activity associated with arts sponsorship was for them "real" sponsorship. The attitudes of respondents on this issue are evident in the following responses.

There's the type (of sponsorship) that's involved to make money out of it, but then you have it at the lower level. People will put their name to sponsor things and they know that they are not going to get anything out of it. (soccer fan)

I would see it in two different ways. For instance sometimes you have a company and they are doing something related to the arts and it's almost as if they are giving a helping hand. It comes across like that and you almost admire them. For instance, one thing that comes across to me is the Texaco Arts competition, that comes across to me as something quite positive and worthwhile, whereas the fellows running around with the names of companies emblazoned across their chests which has nothing to do with the sport that they are playing; I don't

like that. I find that off-putting, it doesn't appeal to me. I kind of feel that human beings shouldn't be used as hoarding boards to run around. There's something demeaning in that whereas I think the Texaco children's art is something very worthwhile. If it is getting advertising (*sic*) as well, so what — that's fine. (arts fan)

Among group respondents, it was believed that those categories of sponsorship that were most exploited (i.e., sports and the mass arts) involved the greatest level of benefit to the sponsor. It appeared that the sponsorship of such activities resulted in lower levels of "clean" benefit to the sponsored activity, leading to lower levels of goodwill being manifested for the sponsor. Conversely, those categories facilitating least exploitation and consequent greater levels of "clean" benefit to the activity merited the greatest goodwill.

I also think that just taking the Texaco example I think it is not attempting to model those children so that they will always buy Texaco goods or petrol. The other (sports) is so obvious, its almost as if that is advertising and the other is sponsorship in that respect. (arts fan)

I would disagree with the idea of people having negative attitudes towards the sponsorship of soccer teams. I think something like where Thorn (*sic*) are sponsoring Liverpool, the money that Liverpool gets may go into serving the customer better. On these grounds it is pumping a lot of money into games. A lot of them are minority sports that are never going to get funding. They wouldn't have anything to gain out of that as sponsors. (arts/sports fan)

***Negative Aspects of Sponsorship.*** Although there was a highly favorable attitude towards sponsorship at a generic level, there were also aspects of sponsorship that caused concern for respondents. These aspects are now discussed in turn.

1. *Sponsor Interference.* Given the degree of emotional attachment fans have to their favorite activities, it was evident that they resented any unwarranted interference with the activity itself.

But on the negative side you find that . . . as soon as sponsorship becomes involved in a sport that certain things get manipulated in a certain way that the organisers suit the sponsors rather than necessarily suit the sports fans or the people involved. I mean you do see classic examples of that happening in something like the Olympics when certain events are timed to coincide with mass TV audiences rather than what is necessarily best from an athletics point of view or sporting point of view. (sports fan)

2. *High-Profile / Grassroots Activity.* Another item of concern was the belief that sponsors are only interested in high-profile activities and have little or no interest in lesser known activities.

There are no curbs on it, there are no parameters set or any rules laid down as to what you can sponsor. I think the companies go for the glamorous and sexier side of sponsorship rather than for the other people that really need it.

Against the backdrop of this criticism, there was a recognition that sponsorship is a business decision, and that although it is regretted that more money is not invested in grassroots activity, there was a clear understanding of why companies choose high-profile activities.

3. *Ticket Allocation.* A further negative aspect of sponsorship for many respondents was the suggestion that sponsors receive prime ticket allocations, thereby precluding "real fans" from attending important games, and furthermore that these tickets are used to invite guests who have no real interest in the activity other than to be seen in high-profile social settings. This criticism came from fans of all activities, including sports and the arts.

I think there is a lot of resentment to sponsorship where you put up a whole marquee and it could be something that is quite difficult to get in to, like opera singers or the Bolshoi Ballet. You have people who never would go to ballet normally, but because they have been invited in this way, they go. I think people who are aficionados resent this and I think justifiably so. I think that gets negative vibes across. I certainly feel sorry for people who can't get a place at a particular match because so many seats have been taken up by those other people. (arts fan)

4. *Degree of Exploitation.* A further concern for respondents was the degree of exploitation that surrounded sponsorship both generally and at the individual campaign level. Although this factor has been mentioned earlier, it was obvious that negative perceptions of high levels of exploitation of sponsorship affected somewhat the positive perception of sponsorship generally held by respondents.

I mean it is alright to sponsor something as long as you don't go over the top about it, you don't get crude, with the name plastered all over the place. Because I'd say you would lose the effect of having sponsored that event or whatever it is. People get fed up with Coke or Guinness or whatever it is. Okay, fine, we know you sponsor it, but get out of the way and let me enjoy the event.

***Sponsorship as a "Rite of Passage."*** One of the interesting findings to arise from the study was the interpretation some respondents placed upon the very fact that a company was engaged in sponsorship activity. Essentially, for these respondents, sponsorship was seen as a "rite of passage," something only undertaken by "big companies" who are large

enough and therefore have adequate funding to undertake such activity. This interpretation is interesting in that the very fact of undertaking sponsorship is itself likely to transfer values such as size, status, and security. This situation is somewhat similar to the benefits delivered by mass media presence in advertising.

I think sponsors are trying to say, "we're successful now, we're a big company. We can afford to take people under our wing, so we'll sponsor this team, we're successful."

Well, I think it's trying to let people know. If you're a sponsor, people think, "Oh they must be doing well."

That it is a sort of rite of passage as a big corporation. That if you are sponsoring you are in the big league like Guinness or Kerry Co-op or something.

1. *Moderating Effect of Sponsorship Activity.* The second objective of this research was to explore in a comparative framework consumer perceptions of both sponsorship and advertising, and the results are now presented under several headings, though many of the issues overlap and are interconnected.

**Advertising as Selfish.** At the generic level attitudes to commercial sponsorship were highly favorable when compared to advertising. Sponsorship was seen as being of benefit to some activity or organization other than the sponsoring company.

Well, I'd be much more tolerant of sponsorship than I would be of advertising. Advertising would leave me cold. It's so blatant and I don't see it as benefiting anybody only the company whereas if it's something that is heavily sponsored, without thinking about it I am aware that some money or funds are going to staging this thing or helping it in some way, I'd be more tolerant.

In terms of comparisons to advertising, I think the idea of sponsoring is good whereas with advertising it's just the company aiming its product at whoever, but not actually helping anyone.

By comparison, attitudes towards advertising could be described as more negative. It was felt that in the case of advertising the company was seen as being selfish, in that advertising served no interests other than that of the advertiser. There was a general feeling that advertising was an omnipresent force from which escape was difficult. Respondents seemed to find this pervasive nature of advertising to be overwhelming and they often escaped from its perceived power by evasive action such as zapping television advertising, leaving the room, or otherwise avoiding its threat.

But you can't get away from advertising unless you go around with your eyes and your ears closed because it just assaults you, if not on the TV, the media, the buses, the sides of the street, the shops, you just can't get away from it. That's the reason I say it is more coercive than sponsorship.

I see advertising (as the most obviously commercial). You see billboards all over the place. They are trying to get money out of us.

***Indirect/Subtle.*** Sponsorship was seen as a less direct, more subtle form of marketing communications than advertising. This perception was driven by a variety of linked factors such as the moderating effects of the sponsored activity and the background nature of sponsorship compared to advertising.

1. *Moderating Effects.* A critical factor in the perception of sponsorship as less direct than advertising was that in the case of sponsorship the intended effects appeared to be moderated by the involvement of sports, arts, and other activities in the communication.

Advertising to me is the ultimate way to promote something or to try and sell something. That's my own personal feelings on it, whereas sponsorship is about that, but it is not as direct in its approach because there is something else there, a sport or an event or something else and you don't get totally focused in on the fact that this company is trying to get you to look at their products or what they are doing or what they are about. There are kind of two elements in it. I don't feel as kind of exposed to sponsorship as I would to direct advertising . . . open to being asked to do something or buy something.

They are also entertaining you which is crucial in the sponsorship. There is some form of entertainment, they are attempting to enhance something, to highlight something as opposed to the advertising when they are trying to sell their product. You know that it is very blatant.

2. *Background Role.* The moderating effects of the sponsored event caused sponsorship messages to be seen as being in the background of the overall communication. Perceptions of sponsorship as a more subtle form of marketing communications seem to stem partly from the fact that sponsorship, particularly when compared to advertising, was seen as being less obtrusive and occurs more in the background of the activity within which the communication takes place. In effect they perceived advertising to be "foreground activity" and sponsorship to be "background activity."

It's just at the level where your attention will actually catch it, but you don't feel that it's actually telling you anything in particular. It's just

in the background. You notice it, but it doesn't mean anything and you'll still follow the game or sport or whatever.

But sponsorship, say you go and watch the football, say Kerry, you're into the game and every player you see has the Kerry Group's logo. You see it, but you don't have the same negative attitude as you would with an ad.

***Perceived Intent to Persuade.*** One of the most important distinguishing factors between sponsorship and advertising centered on perceived commercial intent. Essentially, advertising was seen as being much more overt in terms of greater intent to persuade than sponsorship. This perception was driven by several factors.

1. *Advertising as Coercive.* A common theme in the discussions was that advertising was seen as "blatant," "coercive," and "forceful." This perception seemed to have the effect of engendering negative reactions in respondents and encouraging an acute sense of wariness in their relationships with advertising as a form of communication.

I would definitely have a worse reaction to somebody trying to push something at me directly through advertising. I would draw away from it, so I would. Sponsorship in the long run would probably have more effect on me personally.

I definitely see advertising as being more coercive in terms of trying to persuade.

Sponsorship, by contrast, was seen as less forceful and seemed to arouse less anxiety among respondents. This perception seemed to be driven by its more subtle, indirect nature and also by the fact that its commercial intent seemed diluted by the moderating effects of being primarily involved with valued activities such as sports, arts, etc., which also had the effect of surrounding the relationship in a aura of goodwill.

Sponsorship is probably a less forceful way of getting the message across.

It's (sponsorship) not as abrupt as advertising . . . they don't shove it down your throat.

2. *Advertising as Obtrusive.* The contrasting nature of how the communications message is delivered seemed to be a central factor in underlining the relative perceptions of sponsorship and advertising. Essentially advertising was perceived as "noisy," involving an assault on all the senses, while sponsorship is seen as quieter in nature, being concerned with names on shirts and other "silent" signage.

At least with sponsorship, it's either a big placard (*sic*) or it's clothes . . . they are not talking. It is not talking and it's not loud and bold, but if you've got a product on the TV, they are talking about and it's loud and it's bold. You are left to draw your own conclusions with sponsorship.

The thing about sponsorship, it's generally just the word . . . the name of the brand or the name of the company.

3. *Corporate vs. Product.* Many respondents appeared to believe that sponsorship was utilized as a way of promoting the corporate brand rather than a product *per se*. This fact appears to be linked to the perceived commercial intent of both methods of communication. Some selected responses follow.

Advertising is selling products whereas sponsorship happens in companies, so you don't get a total relationship with all the products.

It's a lot more to do with the image of the company I think than a particular product. It's Digital sponsored, not a Digital computer. Carroll's aren't pushing Carroll's No. 10 at you, it's Carroll's at the Open. Irish Permanent are there as an organisation. Bank of Ireland are there as an organisation and it's what it says about the organisation as well as a total rather than particular products. So I agree with John, it is that bit more subtle than pushing a particular type of bank account at you.

4. *Perception of Objectives.* Respondents saw a clear distinction between sponsorship and advertising in terms of what they believed each method of communication was attempting to achieve. Sponsorship was seen as more concerned with long-term benefits related to publicity. Where communications objectives were suggested, sponsorship was believed to be concerned with "awareness" and "image," particularly in relation to company brand names. Advertising was seen as more short-term in terms of focus, having primarily a selling objective, and was more concerned with product- and sales-related information.

If you see an ad, you are directly being asked to buy this product . . . whereas if you just see the name of a company . . . okay indirectly you are being asked to support them in some way in the long term, but you don't have to.

I think advertising . . . is aimed specifically at promoting a particular product or something like that. I mean sponsorship is a bit more diffused, it's less focused.

I think it's not as direct. You look at advertising, you can see what they're saying, but sponsorship is more of a long-term thing. It's not as clear-cut.

I would see advertising as trying to tell you something whereas sponsorship, I don't know what it's trying to say and what it's not trying to say. It's like they're saying don't forget us.

***Defense Mechanisms.*** Given the perceptions of both sponsorship and advertising as already described, it would appear that respondents adopt differentially alerted defense mechanisms when confronted with each method of marketing communications. In effect, respondents claimed to be on a higher state of alert when confronted by advertising than when confronted by sponsorship. Although this attitude was driven by the factors such as goodwill, subtlety, and commercial intent, it also seemed to be due to other factors now discussed.

1. *Moderating Effect of Sponsorship Activity.* The fact that sponsorship and therefore sponsor messages occur within contexts involving primarily human pursuits/leisure activities leads to the perception of sponsor intentions being moderated. In effect, audience attention is deflected somewhat away from the sponsorship message.

Like with sponsorship you have the sport plus the advertising, but with advertising, you just have the ad. Plus when you watch a sports match or a football match, you're watching the match, but with advertising . . .

I see a difference too in that advertising is about objects, things, whereas I see sponsorship as involved in activities. It is singing, it is dancing or some form. It may not be sport. There is some form of activity.

2. *Subtlety of the Medium.* The indirect and subtle nature of sponsorship appeared to encourage a lowered state of mental alertness than that generated by advertising.

I think sponsorship is more subtle than advertising because you are not really aware that it is a kind of an advertising or promotional ploy. It is seen as a good thing. . . . It doesn't get directly at your senses as much as an advert that is pushing something at you.

I would say advertising, (causes me to be more alert) . . . They attempt to bamboozle you with some new type of vitamin or some new ingredient that has some new glossy name. I think you are much more alert to something like that, because you know that underneath it, it's not going to make you look younger, it's not going to get rid of the years. Yes, I think your defences are very much up to something that is so transparent.

3. *Varying Delivery Contexts.* The sponsor's message delivered in the

context of a sports/arts activity is quite different from the selling context in which many advertising messages are delivered. This fact appeared to influence the level of consumer defense mechanisms.

You're sitting in front of the television watching your favourite sports programme and you're very involved watching the programme. Really I think the messages (sponsorship) probably sink in, only you're not aware of them, and you're more willing to let them in.

But the way in which we see advertising and the way in which we see sponsorship, to me there is a big difference because you don't see sponsorship during the ads, between the programmes, that's pure advertising, so television in a big way doesn't cover sponsorship, you don't see it. You don't really see it in any of the national newspapers whereas you do see advertising. You may see it in magazines where people are specifically sponsoring an event and therefore have a profile because of sponsoring it, but its profile itself is a lot lower than advertising. So its nearly hard to make a judgement because you are flooded with advertising and yet you don't really see sponsoring, it's a very low profile.

4. *Lower Level of Conscious Registration.* Some respondents claimed to have low levels of conscious registration of sponsor messages. What was not clear from the respondents' comments was whether sponsor messages meet less audience resistance and seep through with greater ease or whether there is less conscious registration of sponsor messages compared to advertising messages.

It's not as forceful, at least I don't perceive it to be as forceful. It could be just sinking in without actually realising that it's actually happening.

I don't think people think about sponsorship maybe as much as they do about advertising.

5. *Varying Receptivity to Sponsorship/Advertising Messages.* The very fact that the sponsor/audience interaction occurs in a halo of goodwill appears to cause the audience to adopt a more receptive attitude generally to sponsorship than to advertising.

You kind of take a different attitude to it, oh aren't they great rather than oh God, here we go again another Guinness ad or whatever.

I think we're more conscious of the fact that advertising is having an effect on us, but we wouldn't view sponsorship in the same way.

Although this article is concerned with sponsorship at the generic level, it should be noted that at the level of the individual sponsored

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"It says that they want to be liked, to be part of your lives"  
"It says that they want to increase their image with the public in a beneficial way"  
"They are trying to get at people through leisure or sport"  
"I think they are showing their human face"  
"Long-term rather than short-term advertising"  
"We want to help somebody or something"  
"It shows them making a commitment to the country they are in"  
"They are probably integrating themselves into the local community"

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**Figure 2.** What involvement in sponsorship says about the company.

activity/team, there was considerable evidence that audience receptivity to sponsor messages is closely related to the degree of fan involvement with the sponsored activity/team. This receptivity manifested itself in higher levels of sponsor registration and favorable disposition to the sponsor. (See Meenaghan, this issue, for a fuller discussion on this subject.)

### **Section B: Image Effects of Sponsorship Involvement**

The third objective of the research described in this article was to examine the imagery transferred by the very fact of engaging in advertising communications compared to sponsorship involvement. In this section respondents were asked what image they had of a company that was involved in (a) sponsorship and (b) advertising. The purpose of this section was to determine whether the use of sponsorship as the chosen method of marketing communication caused a company to be seen in a more beneficial light than its portrayal as a result of using advertising.

Figure 2 contains actual comments made by respondents in response to the query "What does involvement in sponsorship say about the company?" As can be seen from the remarks of respondents it is quite clear that the very fact of sponsorship usage causes the sponsoring company to be seen in a somewhat humane and caring light.

Figure 3 shows the results of a sentence completion test with respondents. The image transferred by sponsorship involvement is in contrast to that conferred by advertising, which causes the advertising company to be seen as selfish, commercially motivated, and less concerned with the society within which it operates. These perceptions are in line with the results on goodwill, perceptions of objectives, and other issues discussed earlier.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The research objectives were (a) to examine consumer perceptions of sponsorship as a generic phenomenon, (b) to compare perceptions held

"A Company Who Sponsors Is"	"A Company Who Advertises Is"
"Is a good company"	"Selling"
"Showing a human face"	"Selfish, in it for the money, its sole purpose of existence"
"Is good and is helping people"	"Trying to increase its profit share"
"Funding amateur sports"	"Trying to make me buy something that I might not necessarily want"
"Increasing sales as well as helping sports personalities"	"Trying to increase sales"
"Trying to be trendy"	"I don't think that they really care about people"
"Rich"	"Just trying to sell their product"
"Concerned"	
"Is aware of image"	
"Interested in public opinion"	

**Figure 3.** Sentence completion.

regarding sponsorship and advertising, and finally (c) to examine the images transferred from involvement with each method of marketing communications.

Essentially commercial sponsorship as a generic form of marketing communications is seen as being capable of delivering a measure of benefit to society. Although consumers undoubtedly see benefit to society as a key distinguishing factor between sponsorship and advertising, levels of benefit and returned goodwill are not distributed across all categories of sponsorship equally. Social causes and environmental programs imply the greatest benefit and returned goodwill, whereas sponsorship categories such as sports and popular mass arts activities generate lower levels of goodwill. In the case of the latter categories, consumers believe these activities to be themselves highly commercialized, with sponsors deriving considerable commercial benefits from their investment/funding. In effect, goodwill varied by sponsorship category based on the degree of perceived commercial exploitation involved, with lower levels of goodwill being directed toward those categories of sponsorship that are most overtly exploited (i.e., sports, popular music, etc.). Consistent with these beliefs consumers will accord lower levels of goodwill to obviously commercialized categories of sponsorship, as these are seen as broadly similar to, but clearly not identical to, advertising. (See Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999, for a fuller discussion on this issue.) It was also evident that goodwill varied by consumer predisposition toward the event in terms of fan involvement (e.g., arts fans exhibited more goodwill toward arts sponsors, etc.).

Consumer's attitudes to advertising have been shown to be somewhat ambivalent, and this is a consistent and central theme in the literature reviewed earlier. Consumer ambivalence can also be present in the case of sponsorship, as is evidenced by the fact that there are negative aspects of the medium that cause consumer anxiety even in a context where the overall perception of sponsorship is highly positive. These

potential negatives include issues such as sponsor interference, the propensity to focus exclusively on high-profile events, problems related to ticket allocations, and a tendency toward excessive exploitation.

Involvement in sponsorship suggests that a sponsoring company has "come of age," and such involvement represents a "rite of passage" to corporate maturity, with the attendant benefit of transferring to the sponsor the image values of scale and security. This broadly corresponds to the benefits major brand advertisers derive through accessing the values of pervasive presence and consequent status. A corollary is the further perception that only those companies who can afford to sponsor actually do sponsor and such companies acquire the image dimensions of substance and philanthropy through this activity. This specific perception of sponsorship distinguishes it from advertising in that it differentiates the medium very strongly from other more overtly commercial methods of communication. The findings of the research study regarding consumer perceptions of sponsorship clearly support McDonald's (1991) view of sponsorship as "advertising plus" while further emphasizing the goodwill factor indicated by Meenaghan (1991).

The second objective of the research was to compare consumer perceptions of sponsorship and advertising. Respondents quite clearly saw sponsorship and advertising in quite different lights. Their attitudes to advertising confirmed the salience of the wariness and manipulation issues identified in the literature review on attitudes to advertising. Advertising was regarded as being selfish, involving no benefit to society. It was seen as forceful and coercive, leading to an alerted stage of consumer defense mechanisms. By contrast, respondents regarded sponsorship as indirect, subtle, less coercive, having a more background role, involving a disguised or less commercially obvious intent to persuade, with a corresponding perception of sponsor intentions being positively mediated by the sponsor's involvement with pursuits such as sports and the arts. They regarded sponsorship as involving a lower level of conscious registration and a message-delivery context that was different from advertising, resulting in a lowering of consumer defense mechanisms.

These distinctions between these two methods of marketing communications are indicated in Figure 4. Given that consumers perceive sponsorship and advertising differently, it follows that consumer receptivity to these two alternative methods of marketing communications may well be different. In effect consumers appear to receive sponsorship communications in a "halo of goodwill," which is driven by factors such as the perception of benefit, the subtlety of the message, and the disguised commercial intent of the communication. The effect of this "halo of goodwill" is that the communication encounters lowered consumer defense mechanisms.

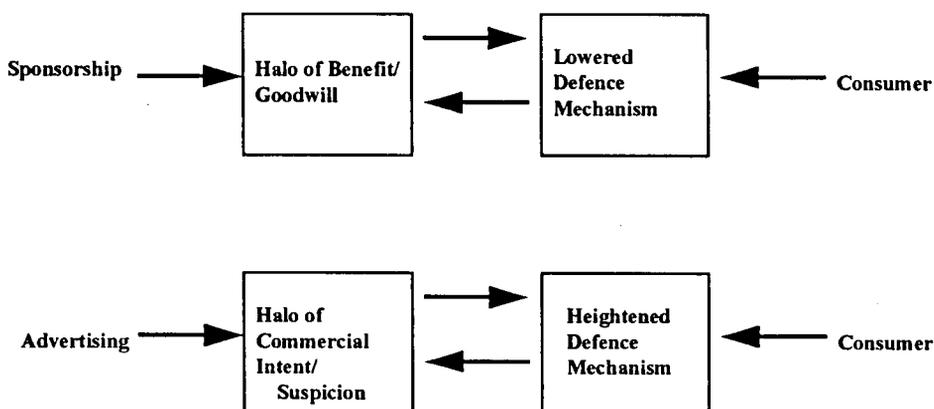
By way of contrast, advertising was seen as more short-term and sales-oriented with the reception of such communications being shad-

<i>Comparative Factors</i>	<i>Sponsorship</i>	<i>Advertising</i>
<i>Goodwill</i>	<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Selfish</b>
<i>Focus</i>	<b>Indirect/Subtle</b>	<b>Direct/Forceful</b>
<i>Intent to Persuade</i>	<b>Disguised</b>	<b>Overt</b>
<i>Defence Mechanisms</i>	<b>Low State of Alertness</b>	<b>High State of Alertness</b>

**Figure 4.** Sponsorship/advertising—alternative communications compared.

owed by a skepticism that is in turn driven by factors related to the forceful nature of the communication, its obvious commercial intent, and consumer beliefs about advertiser's motivations. The effect is that advertising communications encounter consumer defense mechanisms on a heightened state of alert. The variation in receptivity to these alternative modes of marketing communications is indicated in Figure 5.

The third objective of the research was to examine the consumer perceptions arising from the corporate employment of sponsorship and to compare these perceptions with those created by the corporate employment of advertising. The results suggest that there is an aura or halo effect arising from the use of each respective method of communication. A company engaged in sponsorship is seen as concerned with society, and through sponsorship it shows its "human face." A company that advertises is seen as more concerned with itself, rather than the world in which it operates. A company engaged in advertising is regarded as pursuing solely selfish ends and being exclusively concerned with selling its output.



**Figure 5.** Consumer receptivity to sponsorship/advertising.

The traditions and heritage of sponsorship are still strongly suggestive, in the consumer's and enthusiast's perception, of a more generous world of patronage and disinterested philanthropy.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

The research study described in this article focused on consumer perceptions of sponsorship and advertising as generic forms of marketing communications. Although the research results provide an important building block in enhancing overall understanding of the interaction between the consumer and a given sponsorship, there are certain problems identified by the research that may provide a guide to future research investigations in this area.

### **Perceptions, Not Efficiency**

This research study focused on the varying consumer perceptions of advertising and sponsorship and did *not* seek to measure the relative effectiveness of either method of communications. Although the results clearly indicate that consumers are more favorably disposed to sponsorship compared to advertising, it should *not* be assumed that sponsorship as a consequence is more effective than advertising in terms of generating specific desired consumer responses. The fallacy of assuming an inevitable and direct link between "favorability/liking" and "effectiveness" is clearly illustrated by the history of detergent advertising. It is thus evident that the issue of the comparative effectiveness of advertising and sponsorship represents a further area of urgent research endeavor.

### **Consumer Claims and Effects**

The research results are grounded on consumers self-reported perceptions and claims in relation to specific issues (e.g., that consumer defense systems are more alert in the case of advertising, that consumers are more likely to be influenced by sponsorships, etc.). In such instances, it is always useful to provide supporting evidence of such claims through alternative empirical research methodologies. This will in turn provide further opportunities for research in this field.

### **Discrete/Comparative Studies**

Studies on attitudes to advertising have traditionally focused solely on the phenomenon of advertising, whereas the research reported in this article compared both advertising and sponsorship in the framework of a single overall research approach. Studies focusing on consumer perceptions of sponsorship in a discrete/"stand alone" capacity represents a further opportunity for research. Indeed, the examination of sponsor-

ship phenomena from such a standpoint may provide different (and perhaps less favorable) perceptions of sponsorship than when they are examined in a comparative framework alongside advertising.

Further possibilities for research relate to variations in comparative perception by country (either of sponsorship alone or in comparison to advertising), and the changing nature of consumer perceptions of sponsorship over time (as this method of communication becomes increasingly cluttered and commercialized).

## **SUMMARY**

The research study described in this article sought to highlight consumer perceptions of commercial sponsorship as a generic form of marketing communications. The results clearly show high levels of consumer favorability toward sponsorship as an activity, though positive attitudes may be tempered by certain negative factors associated with sponsorship. By contrast with advertising, sponsorship is well received by consumers, and consumer perceptions of sponsorship vis a vis advertising result in sponsorship messages being received in a halo of relative goodwill against a background of lower defense mechanisms as compared to advertising communications. The very fact of undertaking sponsorship activity in itself bestows a more societally conscious profile on the sponsor.

The findings discussed in the article have important implications for both practitioners and academics alike. Commercial sponsorship is generally used by sponsors to achieve communications objectives, largely in the area of image. Therefore, research findings that promote an understanding of how consumers perceive sponsorship are an important contribution to decision making in areas such as sponsorship selection and sponsorship management. For the academic community this article seeks to provide fresh insights into consumer's interaction with and response to an increasingly important aspect of marketing communications. For both practitioners and academics, this article represents an important foundation in pursuit of the overall objective of understanding of "how sponsorship works."

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