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Mellowing Skeptical Consumers: An Examination of Sponsorship-Linked Advertising — [Source link](#)

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Mellowing skeptical consumers: an examination of sponsorship-linked advertising

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Abstract

This research provides insight into the complex relationship between consumer response to persuasion attempts and skepticism, suggesting that erstwhile targets may be swayed by campaigns which are pitched as a form of entertainment. We examine consumer responses to an important sponsorship leveraging tool; sponsorship-linked advertising. A theoretical model of consumer response to sponsorship-linked advertising is proposed, drawing upon important resistance mechanisms to persuasion including ad skepticism, attributed advertiser motives and the nature of thoughts. Results confirm existing research on consumer skepticism suggesting its transitory nature, and hence potential for advertisers to strategically temper it through specific cues in ad execution. Differential processing between sponsorship-linked advertising and traditional advertising is supported, such that sponsorship-linked advertising elicits more favorable cognitive response.

Keywords: sponsorship, advertising, skepticism, consumer, cognition

Mellowing skeptical consumers: an examination of sponsorship-linked advertising

Consumer beliefs about advertising tactics and resistance toward persuasion attempts have been of interest for some time (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999). Research has shown that consumers automatically apply a schema based suspicion toward advertising in general and differentially toward particular advertising attempts (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005). Yet consumers value advertising and think it an important information source (Dahlen, 2005). The nature of skepticism is of interest to firms that face ad-weary targets but is also important from a public policy perspective. Societal dismay with commercial communication attempts play a role in the overall level of trust that consumers feel with the marketplace and in the extent to which they make favorable advertiser motive attributions.

The current research examines a communication form, namely sponsorship-linked advertising, which has arose since Friestad and Wright (1994) developed their persuasion knowledge framework. Sponsorship, defined as "...investing in causes and/or events to support overall corporate objectives and/or marketing objectives" (Cornwell, 1995, p. 15) has developed into a mainstream communications approach in the last two decades. Sponsorship-linked advertising has emerged as a way to leverage sponsorship relationships and to communicate creatively with consumers, and its effectiveness is influenced by a number of different factors (Kim, Lee, Magnusen, & Kim, 2015). It is also often misappropriated by event ambushers and thus has an interesting and complex relationship with potential skepticism.

The proliferation of SLA as a sponsorship leveraging strategy has grown in significance with the emergence of sport as a globalized, commoditized industry attracting extensive sponsorship investment. Understanding how sponsorship leveraging might be

processed by target consumers, and whether it is in fact a worthwhile investment to boost brand equity impacts, is important for brand owners and sports property owners to know. This research tests the impacts of Sponsorship Linked Advertising upon a variety of brand equity measures including attitudes toward the brand, purchase intent, valence of thoughts about the advertising, and degree of resistance to the advertising in terms of ad skepticism. We test a theoretical framework of advertising response premised upon the integration of persuasion and resistance reaction mechanisms drawn from cognitive psychology. Specifically, we draw upon theories of ad skepticism, cognitive priming and inference-based thought processing to test SLA response through two experiments. The structure of this paper is as follows: first, we outline an overview of sponsorship-linked advertising and models of advertising response. Next, we report the results of two experiments undertaken to test hypothesized differential cognitive and brand equity responses to SLA and Non SLA advertising types. Finally we discuss implications and future research potential. This research is concerned with the following research questions:

1. How do consumers process SLA; and does this processing differ from Non SLA?
2. Is consumer cognitive response in terms of nature of thoughts, advertiser motive attributions and ad skepticism to sponsorship-linked advertising more positive as compared to Non SLA?
3. Is brand equity in terms of purchase intent and attitudes to the brand enhanced through SLA as compared to non SLA?

Our research contribution is twofold; first, we advance marketing and communications literature by developing and testing a model of consumer response to sponsorship linked advertising which integrates persuasion knowledge and ad skepticism. Second, we empirically test this model across cognitive, affective and behavioural

dimensions of consumer response and find differential processing and effectiveness between SLA and non SLA. No prior research in the field has examined the impacts of different SLA strategies, which is surprising given the extent of investment in such strategies. Finally, we demonstrate a practical contribution for sponsor brands by identifying the best practice for sponsorship leveraging through advertising and also as a defense against the ever present risk of ambushing advertising by non-sponsors.

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine research questions 1 and 2 with a view to determining how SLA is cognitively processed by consumer targets. If SLA is processed differently to non SLA, then we might expect different brand equity impacts from the two leveraging strategies. Study 2 therefore examines the final research question of how consumers respond in brand preference and purchase likelihood to SLA and non SLA. Together, our studies advance knowledge of how and why heavily invested sponsorship activation through SLA might be an appropriate strategy for sponsoring brands and in what circumstances.

Study 1

Conceptual Development

Sponsorship-Linked Advertising

Sponsorship-linked advertising (SLA) is conceptualized to include both explicit communication of a sponsorship link (e.g., “Proud to be an official partner”) as well as implicit sponsorship connections (e.g., general event-themed imagery embedded). The sponsorship link may be explicitly conveyed by embedding a sponsorship statement and/or event logo within the ad, consistent with articulation objectives inherent in sponsorship leveraging (Cornwell & Roy, 2004; Smolianov & Shilbury, 2005). Implicit SLA however, is associated with abstract, creative or indirect execution that suggests an overall theme associated with the sponsored event or activity. It is not characterized by explicit reference to

the sponsorship affiliation with an event, but rather affiliation by inference on the part of the target. Figures 2 to 6 below summarizes the stimuli used in the studies reported, and provided examples of each SLA type. Sports, arts or causes may use communications elements independently or contemporaneously within ad execution. What distinguishes SLA from the realm of creative advertising is the advertiser's intent to tie to a sponsored event. Intent will not be fully developed here but can be assessed by an index of characteristics (Kelly, Cornwell, Coote, & McAlister, 2012). Conversely, absence of advertiser intent to link to a sponsored event would be Non Sponsorship-Linked Advertising ("Non SLA").

Hence, in examining SLA, the scope of this research does not extend to all themed ads, but only those themed ads which convey a sponsorship association (albeit implicitly) to an event. This SLA conceptualization naturally extends to ambushing, traditionally defined as an attempt by a company to associate its own brand with the sponsored activity without securing formal rights, resulting in a weakening of the impact of an official sponsor's activity (Shani & Sandler 1998). Recent content analytic results from print advertisements find extensive use of SLA strategy, in its explicit and implicit forms, by legitimate sponsors and ambushers alike (Kelly et al., 2012). Thus, examination of SLA is important in an increasingly competitive, commercialized and cluttered global sponsorship arena in which ambushing is becoming a pervasive practice.

Persuasion and resistance. Past research examining advertising processing has addressed both persuasion and resistance mechanisms (e.g., Darke & Ritchie 2007; Wei, Fischer, & Main 2008). We examine consumer response to SLA in accordance with Friestad and Wright's (1994) Persuasion Knowledge Model ("PKM") and ad skepticism as a resistance mechanism. Ad skepticism is discussed in more detail in the next section. The PKM states that response to persuasion is contingent upon three types of knowledge structures: persuasion knowledge (i.e., the target's ability to identify and interpret persuasive

attempts); agent knowledge (knowledge of the advertiser); and topic knowledge (beliefs about the content of persuasive attempts; see also Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). PKM has been applied to Cause Related Marketing (CRM), establishing that consumers' persuasion knowledge affects perceptions of underlying marketer intent and that these thoughts influence the effectiveness of CRM tactics. This includes inhibiting skepticism to enhance persuasion for corporate social advertising initiatives (Pomeroy & Johnson 2009), and how this cognitive perception attributed to corporate motive affects individual's subsequent attitudes and behavior (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Vlachos et al., 2009). Likewise, Skarmeus & Leonidou (2013) draw on attribution theory to explain how consumer skepticism toward the CSR of grocery retailers develops, and its influence on important consumer-related outcomes. The findings reveal that attributions of egoistic- and stakeholder-driven motives elicit consumer skepticism toward CSR, while values-driven attributions inhibit skepticism.

Previous research has considered the commercialization of sponsorship (e.g., Weiner, 2000), however, little work has examined how consumers perceive sponsorship-linked ads. For example, Chang (2012) found that the negative attributions and perceptions of CRM are more accessible than sponsorships. This is despite consumers attributing the motives behind both sponsorship and CRM to altruism, and both forms of marketing sharing similar positive perceptions.

Sponsor motive attributions. Previous research has examined cognitive processing mechanism underpinning sponsorship. Relying upon attribution theory, past research has suggested perceived sponsor motive is an important variable in sponsorship response (Cornwell & Roy 2004; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Ruth & Simonin, 2006). Research suggests the possibility of SLA directing consumer judgment of corporate sponsorship motivations, by strategically affecting commerciality inherent in sponsorship through ad

execution. For example, implicit communication of a sponsorship link through themed SLA may soften the inherently commercial nature of the sponsorship in consumers' minds. Conversely, more direct communication of the link through explicit SLA may attract adverse consumer judgment by highlighting the commercial intent of the sponsorship. Briefly, attribution theory is premised on the assumption that consumers act as naïve scientists by making causal inferences about events they observe and experience (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1973). According to Heider (1958), such causal inferences are contingent on salient information in the environment. Consistent with this view, SLA may induce judgment of sponsor motive, the favorability of which depends upon salience of such motives as communicated through contextual cues. These motives may range from "public serving" and relatively altruistic, to "self-serving", or purely commercial, or both (Ellen et al., 2006).

Consumer skepticism. Widespread consumer skepticism toward advertising (e.g., Calfree & Ringold, 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998) and differential responses to particular advertising appeals (Ellen et al., 2006; Obermiller et al., 2005) suggest that skepticism toward advertising may be contingent upon context and specific execution strategies. Consumer skepticism has been conceptualized in two ways. Situational skepticism is a momentary state of distrust of an actor's motivations; while dispositional skepticism is defined as an individual's ongoing tendency to be suspicious of other people's motives (Forehand & Grier, 2003). This state/trait conceptualization suggests the possibility of strategically affecting skepticism through cues embedded in ads. Ad skepticism has been found to partially explain the relationship between ad avoidance and perceived personalization, privacy concerns, and ad irritation (Baek & Morimoto, 2012).

Dependent Variables

Cognitive outcomes have largely been measured by recall and recognition, including response latency, sponsor–event matching and thought elicitation (e.g., Johar & Pham, 1999).

The advertising literature provides support for the relationship between ad evoked emotional responses and consumers' attitudes towards the ad (Batra & Ray 1986) and brand attitudes (e.g., Edell & Burke, 1987). It follows that target thoughts and valence of those thoughts following ad exposure are relevant in assessing both ad response and cognitive processing associated with such response. Although related constructs, ad skepticism and sponsor motive attributions are conceptually distinct and important defenses in persuasive communications. Hence, examination of SLA should include these interfering mechanisms.

Cognitive psychology and information processing. In investigating processing mechanisms attaching to SLA, cognitive psychology literature offers some useful conceptual guidance. Specifically, a persuasive advantage for SLA as compared to Non SLA is expected on the following grounds:

(1) Distinctiveness of sponsorship-linked advertising. An associative memory model of sponsorship implies the existence of memory associations with the brand, firm, or event. Informational nodes link to the brand or firm and contain meaning (e.g., Keller, 1993). Sponsorship Linked Ads, whether communicated through an explicit tie, or implicitly through thematic execution, or both, could forge distinctiveness of the link between event and brand in memory (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). The presence of a sponsorship link in SLA therefore increases distinctiveness of the source (as compared with Non SLA), which could enhance the transfer of associations from the event to the brand, resulting in stronger memory traces and affective response (Dahlen, 2005; Sparkman & Locander, 1980). This proposition is consistent with cognitive efficiency theories which imply that more vivid or distinctive features are likely to be activated in memory retrieval and subsequent attitude formation, with less salient features avoiding scrutiny (Anderson, 1983; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005).

(2) *Cognitive priming*. An alternative, but related research stream concerned with priming predicts a persuasive advantage for SLA. Ad execution elements depicting a theme around a sponsored event may act as cognitive primes, influencing the interpretation of the ad (Yi, 1990a, 1990b, 1993). A cognitive prime acts as a semantic network of related information that guides attention and determines the interpretation of an ad (Schmitt, 1994; Yi 1990b). The prime increases the accessibility of certain information for processing (Yi, 1990a). This tends to move evaluation of the advertised product toward the priming cue, a phenomenon called assimilation. Assimilation suggests that attitudes toward a stimulus are affected by the context within which it is evaluated, with assimilation effects potentially occurring when a perceived resemblance exists between the context and target/stimuli (Herr, 1989; Maher & Hu, 2002; Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1993).

In relation to SLA, assimilation will therefore occur when there is overlap between the brand and the contextual cue (i.e., event linkage cues). Hence the greater this overlap, the greater the assimilation effect. The presence of a sponsorship link (distinguishing SLA from Non SLA) may therefore act as a semantic network between brand and event, forming a more potent prime for specific brand associations than non SLA and resulting in stronger and more positive brand associations (Dahlen, 2005; Sparkman & Locander, 1980). An assimilation effect may also arise from external contextual primes, such as press releases announcing the sponsorship link (termed “sponsorship availability”), which may be leveraged through SLA. In these circumstances, target consumers will have actual knowledge of the sponsorship, conceivably strengthening the semantic link between brand and event through priming and assimilation.

(3) *Inference based thought generation*. Consumers must often draw inferences to find commonality between brand and event, especially in relation to implicit SLA, which often does not articulate the sponsorship link explicitly (Cornwell et al., 2006). Prior research

suggests that consumers will initially rely upon a simple inference to associate two objects and, failing this, they will generate multiple alternatives (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Sawyer & Howard, 1991). Hence, a persuasive advantage for SLA over more direct product advertising may be its multitude of interpretations. Prior literature suggests that generation of multiple inferences may result in more favorable ad response due to self-conclusions and increased elaboration (Dahlen, 2005; Hoch, 2002; Yi, 1990a). This effect has been shown to occur in low involvement situations comparable to everyday ad processing (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Sperber & Wilson, 1986). It therefore becomes evident why an advertiser might wish to make indirect ad claims including Sponsorship-Linked Advertising, rather than direct ad claims.

Hypotheses

Nature of thoughts. The sponsorship literature associates sport with the evocation of positive feelings and thoughts (e.g., Cornwell & Roy, 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000). As an ad strategy, it is logical to assume that ads containing a themed cue that encourages the retrieval of pleasant associations are more likely to generate positively valenced feelings than ads devoid of such a tied referent, (i.e., non SLA). Indeed, such an assumption has been supported in a sponsorship context (e.g., Cornwell & Roy, 2004; Rifon et al., 2004). Hence, combined effects of distinctiveness of SLA (i.e., a link to sport), priming and assimilation associated with these distinctive thematic cues and literature suggesting SLA may prompt a multitude of inferences, leads to the hypothesis that:

H1: Sponsorship-Linked Advertising (in all its forms) will elicit more positively valenced thoughts than Non Sponsorship-Linked Advertising.

It is also expected that SLA in its implicit form will elicit more positively valenced thoughts than SLA in its explicit form, on the basis of a likelihood of self generating multiple positive inferences and stronger priming cues associated with vivid thematic execution.

H2: Implicit Sponsorship-Linked Advertising will elicit more positively valenced thoughts than explicit Sponsorship-Linked Advertising.

Moreover, interactive effects among sponsorship availability (i.e., actual sponsorship knowledge) and SLA ad types are expected as a result of enhanced priming and assimilation associated with sponsorship availability. It follows that:

H3: Sponsorship-Linked Advertising will elicit more positively valenced thoughts than Non Sponsorship-Linked Advertising, and these effects will be greater for sponsorship availability than no sponsorship availability.

See Figure 1 for a conceptual model of the hypotheses.

Consumer skepticism and advertiser motive attributions. Although more positive thoughts may be evoked, there is still potential for the presence of negative attributions (e.g., Ellen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004). The commerciality of the articulatory statement relating to the sponsorship may emphasize commercial motivation of the sponsor and adversely impact consumer perceptions of the sponsor (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Cornwell et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004). Cues signaling commerciality of sponsor motive, such as the presence of sponsorship statements and event logos, or even the mere act of leveraging through any SLA, may affect the persuasive value of the ad. It is conceivable that the tied nature of the ad may be perceived as a persuasive tactic in terms of Friestad and Wright's (1994) PKM and thus trigger scrutiny of sponsor motives in accordance with attribution and associative learning theoretical predictions. This proposition is consistent with research suggesting sponsorship is likely to be perceived as a commercially motivated tactic (Cornwell & Roy, 2004; Rifon et al., 2004; Ruth & Simonin, 2006). However, the sponsor, through ad execution, wants to prompt altruistic sponsor motive inferences. If the commercial motive (i.e., sponsorship tie) is less explicit, then judgment of the ad, brand and sponsor is likely to be more positive (Ellen et al., 2006; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

Collectively, attribution, persuasion knowledge and skepticism research streams suggest that target consumers approach persuasion attempts skeptically and make attributional judgments in relation to advertising and sponsor motives. The level of resistance, in terms of attributed advertiser motives and ad skepticism, should depend upon the degree to which commerciality of sponsorship is communicated in the ad through implicit and explicit dimensions. Although all ads inherently exhibit some commerciality, in the case of SLA, counterarguing and other resistant mechanisms may be reduced, as it must now apply to multiple inferred claims, increasing the odds of at least one claim avoiding scrutiny (MacQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Rieskamp, 2006). Moreover, it is anticipated that implicit SLA will produce less resistance due to its more indirect execution and absence of a commerciality signal in the form of an explicit sponsorship tie. We therefore make the following hypotheses:

- H4: As compared to Non SLA, Sponsorship-Linked Advertising (in all its forms) is expected to elicit a) more favorable advertiser motive attributions, and b) less ad skepticism.
- H5: Implicit SLA will elicit a) more favorable advertiser motive attributions and b) less ad skepticism, than explicit SLA.

See Figure 1 for a conceptual model of the hypotheses.

[insert Figure 1 about here]

One external contextual factor that may elevate the commerciality of sponsorship in consumers' minds is a press release containing a sponsorship announcement (i.e., sponsorship availability; e.g., Cornwell et al., 2005; Johar & Pham, 1999). Exposure to such an announcement, coupled with Sponsorship-Linked Advertising aimed at leveraging the sponsorship, may highlight the inherently commercial nature of sponsorship and compound resistant reactions to SLA, now premised upon actual, rather than inferred, notions of sponsor

intent. However, opposing this proposition is the priming literature which suggests a positive effect of sponsorship availability due to assimilation effects. Hence, although a two-way interactive effect between SLA (in all forms) and sponsorship availability is predicted, its direction is unclear.

H6: An interactive effect between sponsorship availability and Sponsorship-Linked Advertising (in all forms) is expected such that sponsorship availability will moderate the effects of Sponsorship-Linked Advertising on a) favorability of advertiser motive attributions and b) ad skepticism. No a priori predictions are made regarding the direction of this relationship.

Study 1 Method

The focal research context here is sports. This context is justified due to the global significance and size of sports sponsorship and events relative to other sponsorships, and recent academic calls for investigation into SLA as a means of effectively leveraging sponsorship (Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Cornwell et al., 2005).

Design

Seventy-two undergraduate university students were recruited as volunteers. To test hypotheses 1–6, a 5 Ad type (explicit v. implicit v. combined explicit/ implicit v. Non SLA product ad v. Non SLA themed ad) x 2 sponsorship availability (present v. absent) mixed design was used, with ad type as the within subjects independent variable, and sponsorship availability as the between subjects variable. Dependent variables were verbalized thoughts, thought valences (i.e., number of positive, negative and neutral), attribution type (i.e., why company was making the offer) and ad skepticism. Covariates included familiarity with the event and ad involvement. A mixed design was used to maximize power by means of reducing between subjects error variance and to allow generalizability to real life situations where individuals get more than one treatment (Mitchell & Jolley, 2004). Furthermore, the

sponsorship availability manipulation allows the results to generalize to the real world, where people may or may not have true sponsor knowledge at the time of ad exposure. The current study is designed to extend past research efforts by using a commonly accepted method of examining an individual's thought processes: thought verbalizations at the time of ad exposure (e.g. Wright, 1980). Use of thought protocols is warranted as an effective tool in understanding complex relationships between thoughts and their link to product use (e.g. Muehling & Sprott, 2004), formation and modification of consumer brand identities (Aaker, 1999), and in understanding efficacy of sponsorship and therefore SLA leveraging (e.g., Cornwell et al., 2005). It has the added advantage of avoiding confounding by researcher prompted questions (Johar & Pham 1999).

Stimuli

Materials were two simulated press releases (see the Appendix), each containing a sponsorship announcement relating to a fictitious brand and real event, a mock magazine containing ten fictitious ads as well as filler editorial material and a questionnaire booklet. Fictitious ads and brands were used to avoid the confounding effects of participants' familiarity with the test brands (e.g., MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; McDaniel, 1999). However, to ensure experimental realism, sports themes and ties related to real globally recognized sporting events. Order effects were reduced by randomizing ad sequence in the magazines. Selection of both product categories (television and car) and brand names (Stage and Zephyr respectively) for inclusion in fictitious ads and press releases was based on equivalent likeability, familiarity and absence of association with sports/events determined from pretesting a pool of 54 brand names and 9 product categories. A total of 171 student participants completed the product category, brand and event screening tests. In the brand and product screening, 47 participants were presented with a list of six brand names relating each of nine product categories and were asked to rate likeability of each of the brands and each

product category on a three-item, 7-point scale anchored by semantic differentials i.e., 1 = “very unlikeable/very unpleasing/very disagreeable” and 7 = “very likeable/very pleasing/very agreeable”. Brands and product categories were eliminated if they significantly differed from a mean rating of 3.50. To eliminate brands and products with any preexisting brand or event associations, participants were also asked “Does this brand/product category remind you of any other brand?” and “Does this brand/product category remind you of a sporting, charitable or other sponsored event?” Two events (Wimbledon and Winter Olympics) were selected from a pool of six global sports events, on the basis of pretesting of likeability and familiarity with the event, using three item, seven point semantic differential scales adopted from previous research ($n = 48$). The scale measuring familiarity was anchored by 1 = “Unfamiliar”/“Inexperienced”/“Not knowledgeable” and 2 = “Familiar”/“Experienced”/“Knowledgeable”. A single item question, “Does this event remind you of a brand or product category?” was asked to assess associations with brands or product categories. Events were rejected if mean ratings differed significantly from the mean rating of 3.50. Following pretesting, products and events were randomly assigned to form pairings for inclusion in two different press releases containing sponsorship announcements relating to the same brand-event pairings as the Sponsorship Linked Ads. Press releases were identical except for the brand/event pairing featured. Ten different fictitious ads were also created in total, including six Sponsorship Linked Ads (implicit, explicit and implicit and explicit combined, replicated over two product categories) and four Non SLA (replicated over the same product categories, but including two product ads and two creatively themed ads; see Figures 2 to 6). Inclusion of the latter two ad types within the Non SLA condition limited ad attractiveness or likeability as a potential confound, with sports themed ads naturally holding more appeal than straight product ads which do not display an equally creative and positive theme. Use of a mix of ad styles within the Non SLA condition also reduced reactivity in the

form of hypothesis guessing by limiting participants' ability to distinguish among conditions. Final ads were pretested to ensure equivalent likeability ($n = 46$). Ad stimuli were separated by carefully selected filler editorial material unrelated to the ad content, to reduce hypothesis guessing and potential within participants' confounds relating to formation of brand networks between ad stimuli and filler editorial. The ads were comparable in visual format, creativity, color, illustration, length of ad copy, product category, description of product features and placement of brand logo. Congruence of event sponsor pairings was controlled to reflect moderate to high levels, given the significant effect it has been found to have upon memory of a sponsor (e.g., Cornwell & Roy 2004). This was assessed by adopting the six-point scale used by Cornwell and colleagues (2006), anchored at one (poorly matched) and six (well matched). Mean rating of 3.00 ($n = 30$) or above confirmed the moderate-high perceived congruence in the main study.

[insert Figures 2 to 6 about here]

Procedure

All participants were issued with a mock magazine containing the ten target ad stimuli and editorial filler. The front page of the magazine contained general instructions and a cover story, with participants being told they were being asked to respond to print ads being developed for a variety of new products. They were instructed to read each page carefully and to look at the ad as if they were seeing it in a magazine, in accordance with protocol from previous studies (e.g., Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999; Yi, 1990a). Participants were asked to respond to questions contained in a separate response booklet in relation to each ad as they read it, in the order they appeared in the magazine. Following perusal of the mock magazines, participants were asked to list all thoughts that came to mind as they viewed ads. Participants were then asked to evaluate these thoughts as either positively, neutrally or negatively valenced by placing a "+", "0" or "-" next to each listed thought. After viewing all ads,

participants responded to items measuring sponsor motive attributions and ad skepticism in that order. In addition, participants were required to rate scale items assessing familiarity and involvement covariates.

Measurement

Independent variables. Ad type was manipulated through colored full page fictitious ad stimuli. Explicit SLA featured a product visual and event logo and sponsorship statement in the bottom right hand corner. Implicit SLA featured a sports event themed visual and small product visual in bottom right but no sponsorship statements or event logos. Implicit and explicit ads contained the same sports themed visual with a sponsorship statement and event logo additionally placed in the corner of the ad. Product Non SLA featured a product visual and themed Non SLA displayed a non-sports, “slice of life” themed visual, with a small product visual in bottom right. Sponsorship availability was operationalized through simulated press releases containing a sponsorship announcement between a brand and event pairing featured in the ad stimuli. Adoption of the simulated press paradigm is useful in seeing how memory may be affected by pre-existing information in the associative memory network and by strengthening some items in that network (Cornwell et al., 2006; Johar & Pham 1999).

Dependent variables. Thought valences were measured by asking participants to indicate “+”, “-” or “0” beside each thought elicited, corresponding to positive, negative or neutral perceived valences. Overall thought valence was calculated by subtracting total negative thoughts from total positive thoughts. Thoughts were elicited by asking respondents to list all thoughts that come to mind as you view the ad. Attributional thoughts were measured by asking participants why they thought the company was making the offer. This approach was previously used by Ellen and colleagues (2006) in relation to a cause related marketing study. Ad skepticism was measured by a four item scale adapted from Obermiller

and Spangenberg's (1998) Ad Scep scale anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = Strongly agree. Items included "This advertisement provides me with essential information," "I feel I've been accurately informed after viewing this advertisement," "This Advertisement is generally truthful" and "I can depend on getting the truth from this advertisement". Scale items were randomized in the repeated measure following exposure to limit common method bias (Mitchell & Jolley, 2004). Specifically, items were presented in a different order to their presentation during the initial exposure and presentation was a randomized block design.

Covariates. Event familiarity was measured using a three item, 7-point semantic differential item "familiar/unfamiliar" to control for distortive effects of prior experience and knowledge on consumer response (Cornwell & Roy, 2004). Involvement, conceptualized as a motivational state that moderates brand processing based upon cognitive and affective dimensions, is a critical variable in modeling ad response. Hence this was included as a covariate and measured by a three-point eight-item semantic differential scale ("motivated"/"not motivated", "interested"/"uninterested", "aroused"/"not aroused") adopted from prior research (e.g. MacKenzie & Lutz 1989).

Analysis

Given the interval nature of Ad skepticism and valence of thoughts, these variables were analyzed by multiple regression analyses. Interactive effects were analyzed by hierarchical moderated multiple regression. Attributed motives, being categorical, were analyzed by binomial logistic regression. Attributions were coded by two trained independent coders in accordance with the approach adopted by Ellen and colleagues (2006), with 1 = Other centered, e.g., "support a worthwhile event" or "to support a fitness message", 2 = Product/firm centered, e.g., "profit orientated/self-centered", e.g., "the company wants us to buy the car" or "to communicate a fun image" and 3 = Mixed i.e., a combination of 1 and 2. For example, "to promote health and fitness in the community whilst simultaneously

increasing sales". Intercoder reliability of 86% was calculated on the basis of Cohen's Kappa and these are acceptable levels (Nunally, 1978).

Study 1 Results

Nature of Thoughts

A summary of the results for Study 1 can be seen in Table 1. A single thought valence variable was calculated by the difference between total positive thoughts and total negative thoughts and regressed on sponsorship availability, the five ad types (3 SLA and 2 Non SLA), event familiarity and involvement. Overall the model was significant, explaining a variance of 5.4% in total positive thoughts ($R^2 = .05$, $F(7, 646) = 5.30$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis one was supported, with SLA in its combined implicit and explicit form being the only significant positive predictor of thought valence ($B = .72$, $t = 2.52$, $p < .05$), such that exposure to SLA in its combined implicit and explicit form was associated with more positive thoughts overall than exposure to Non SLA ($B = -.02$, ns). Explicit SLA was a significant positive predictor at the 90% confidence interval, $B = .48$, $t = 1.67$, $p < .1$. Although not significant predictors, implicit SLA ($B = .34$, ns) and sponsorship availability ($B = .23$, ns) were positively related to thought valence, as expected. As expected, familiarity positively predicted thought valence ($B = .85$, $t = 3.63$, $p < .001$).

To test hypothesized interactive effects between SLA ad types and sponsorship availability, a series of hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were undertaken. In the first analysis, implicit and explicit SLA and sponsorship availability were entered in the initial step, and their interaction term, calculated by their cross product was entered in the second step. Two other similar analyses were conducted for the remaining SLA types. Contrary to expectations, no significant interactions were revealed.

Qualitatively, sports-related thoughts appeared to be positive and beneficial for the brand. For example, a frequent comment in relation to SLA was "I can trust this product

because it is sponsoring a major event” or “This company must be successful because it is a major sponsor”. Thoughts emanating from Non SLA were more product attribute than brand image focused. Common examples included “this [product] would be useful”, “this product is high quality”. Ad execution in all cases was frequently addressed. Comments in relation to both sports themed and non-sports themed visuals often highlighted a mood such as “the people look happy” or “this would be fun”. Comments in this context were also negative. For example, “I don’t understand the connection between the picture and the product/brand”. This illustrates the complexity of processing which underpins consumer response to more abstract, thematically executed ad types and indeed suggests a tendency for consumers to make inferences regarding theme-brand linkage.

[insert Table 1 about here]

Attributions

In order to test H4a and H5a, attributed advertiser motives were used in logistic regression (i.e., binomial Logit). Logistic regression simultaneously examines the effects of independent variables on a dichotomous categorical variable of interest. The first logistic regression investigated contribution of the independent variables on mixed motive attributions (i.e., a combination of commercial and altruistic motives, as compared to commercial motive attributions). Overall, the model fit was significant, χ^2 , $df = 7$, $p < .05$, explaining 4.8% and 12.4% of variance in motive attributions as indicated by Cox and Snell and Nagelkerke R Square respectively. 93.4% of the sample ($n = 654$) were classified as correct (i.e., commercial attributions). Implicit and explicit SLA was a significant predictor, $B = 2.32$, $Wald = 9.42$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$, $Exp(B) = 10.18$, indicating that the odds of mixed motive being attributed were increased approximately ten times following exposure to SLA in its combined explicit and implicit form. Explicit SLA was also a significant predictor, $B = 4.83$, $Wald = 2.75$, $df = 1$, $p = <.001$, $Exp(B) = 15.86$, indicating that the odds of explicit

SLA exposure was approximately 16 times more likely to elicit mixed motive attributions. Implicit SLA was a significant positive predictor at the 90% confidence interval, $B = 1.45$, $Wald = 3.30$, $df = 1$, $p < .1$, $Exp(B) = 4.24$. As expected, Non SLA did not predict mixed sponsor motive attributions ($B = -.92$, $Wald = 1.67$, $df = 1$, ns , $Exp(B) = 1.32$). Interestingly, while not significant, sponsorship availability was also a negative predictor, indicating that odds of attributing a mixed motive were decreased ($B = -1.24$, $Wald = .59$, $df = 1$, ns , $Exp(B) = .93$).

The second logistic regression explored the contribution of the independent variables to altruistic motive attributions as compared to commercial motive attributions revealed that the overall model was not significant, with 96% of the sample ($n = 654$) being classified as correct (i.e., commercial attributed motive). This indicated that ad types and sponsorship availability were not associated with altruistic motive attributions, suggesting less variance in attributed advertiser motives than expected. Hypothesized interactive effects between SLA and sponsorship availability were tested by a series of three stepped logistic regressions. Interaction terms were created, comprised of the product of sponsorship availability and each of the 3 SLA forms. These interaction variables were added in the second block for each of the models. Results revealed no significant interactions, contrary to predictions.

Varying attribution types were found in the study, despite the profit centric motive being clearly dominant across all ad types. For example, mixed motives commonly attributed to sponsorship-linked ad types were “supporting a worthwhile community cause while simultaneously improving image”. Further, demonstration of persuasion tactic knowledge or thought elaboration of advertiser’s intent may not have been captured in the initial thought elicitation task. For example, “The company is trying to convince people to buy this product by forming a brand alliance with the Olympics” or “They are positioning their image as classic and adventurous like Wimbledon”.

Ad Skepticism

As with nature and type of thoughts, ad skepticism was tested by a multiple regression analysis with the dummy coded five ad types, and covariates of event familiarity and involvement entered as criterions. Overall this model was significant, $F(8, 643) = 10.68, p < .05$, with the predictors together accounting for 10.4 % of total variance in ad skepticism ($R^2 = .10$). Individually, Explicit, implicit and combined explicit/ implicit SLA types were significant predictors, $B = -.7, t(646) = -5.29, p < .05$ and $B = -.68, t(646) = -5.13, p < .05$ and $B = -.66, t(646) = -5.0, p < .05$ respectively. This indicates that SLA in all its forms, is associated with less ad skepticism than Non SLA. Although not significant predictors, Non SLA types were positively related to ad skepticism, such that exposure to a Non SLA resulted in greater ad skepticism than exposure to SLA.

To test the hypothesized interaction between SLA and sponsorship availability, three hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were conducted. In the first analysis, independent variables were sponsorship availability and explicitness. To test the hypothesized interaction between the predictors, the interaction term was added next, to assess whether it accounted for additional variance over and above variance explained by the additive model. Taken together, sponsorship availability and SLA Explicitness significantly predicted ad skepticism, $F(2, 717) = 5.36, p < .05$. However, when the interaction term was added to the model, F change was non-significant. Similar analyses were undertaken to test the remaining hypothesized interactions between sponsorship availability and the two other forms of SLA, with non-significant results.

Study 2

Attitudes toward Sponsorship-Linked Advertising

Having examined consumers' cognitive processing of SLA in Study 1,

we sought to test affective and behavioral impacts of SLA upon consumers, reflecting the hierarchy of effects model of consumer response. An ancillary aim of Study 2 is to provide practical guidance of the effectiveness of SLA strategy in terms of consumer response directly linking to sales for sponsors who opt to engage in often expensive, customized SLA coinciding with the sponsored event. An investigation of ad based cognitive and affective aspects is important for designing advertising for maximum impact and reflects extensive tradition and research support for a two component construct (e.g., MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989; Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). Consistent with this approach, Cornwell and colleagues (2005) emphasise a need to examine a range of sponsorship outcomes in order to obtain an accurate evaluation of sponsorship, including cognitive, affective and behavioral consumer based dimensions.

Affective outcomes have been measured experimentally through attitude preference, liking (e.g., Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002), attitude toward the sponsor (e.g., Ruth & Simonin, 2003) and attitude change (e.g., McDaniel, 1999). Evaluation measures frequently used in advertising research include attitude toward the brand, attitude toward the ad, and purchase intentions (e.g., Keller, 1991; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Confidence in advertising related judgments has been suggested as another measure of advertising effectiveness (Berger & Mitchell, 1989; Keller, 1991). Measurement of both cognitive and affective dimensions is warranted given the potential for high recall to simultaneously exist with negative affect (Cornwell et al., 2005). Hence, a complete examination of leveraging outcomes should reflect this approach by recognising the multidimensionality of consumer response.

Consistent with affect transfer models of persuasion (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986), the affect generated at the time of ad exposure is expected to have significant impact on consumer evaluations. The advertising literature provides considerable support for the relationship between ad evoked emotional responses and consumers' attitudes towards the ad

(Aaker, Stayman, & Hagerty, 1986; Batra & Ray, 1986; Stayman & Aaker, 1988) and brand attitudes (e.g., Edell & Burke, 1987). Focus upon both attitude to the ad, attitude to the brand, and purchase intention have been established as important measures of ad and sponsorship effectiveness (e.g., Roy & Cornwell, 2004; Keller, 1991; MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989) and are therefore focal dependent variables in the present research. Study 2 therefore builds on Study 1 by testing the impact of SLA upon consumers' attitudes and purchase intention relating to sponsoring brands. The design also generalises findings to a representative consumer sample and online media, in contrast to Study 1 which sampled student participants and exposure through print media. On the basis of Study 1 results and literature supporting positive impacts of Sponsorship-linked advertising, we hypothesised a main effect of SLA and interactive effect with sponsorship availability as follows: -

- H1: That sponsorship-linked advertising would elicit a) more favorable attitudes toward the ad and b) stronger purchase intention than non SLA.
- H2: That sponsorship availability would strengthen this positive effect of sponsorship linked advertising upon attitudes to the ad and purchase intention.

Study 2 Method

Design

Three hundred representative consumers were recruited through an online panel for payment of \$8 per participant. To test the above hypotheses, an Ad type (Explicit v. Non SLA) x 2 sponsorship availability (present v. absent) mixed-design was used. Dependent variables were attitude to the sponsor ad and purchase intent (sponsor brand). Familiarity with the event was measured as a covariate, adopting the same scale used in Study 1. Two of the same sets of advertising stimuli were used again in Study 2, with ad type being restricted to explicit form of SLA, in addition to a non SLA ad type. Sponsor-event pairings used as stimuli included the Winter Olympics-Zephyr cars and Formula One Championships-Stage

television. Previous research has demonstrated that most sponsors adopt explicit forms of SLA to leverage their sponsorships, rather than implicit SLA (Kelly et al., 2012). Hence we chose to examine explicit forms of SLA on the basis that we could formulate some practical sponsorship leveraging guidance to sponsors on the basis of our results.

Procedure

Participants were advised that they were viewing and providing their opinions on advertisements for several new products. This cover story was used to limit hypothesis guessing and ensure that participants interacted with the advertisements and press releases in a similar way to regular magazine reading. Participants viewed two target press releases or two filler news releases, followed by four advertisements embedded in an online survey, including two target ads of the same type (i.e., explicit SLA and non SLA types) and two filler advertisements. As with the first study, the press releases contained the sponsorship availability manipulation. Advertisements were viewed in randomised order to control for order effects. Immediately following viewing each of the advertisements, participants completed an online survey which included three items measuring attitudes to the advertisement (e.g., “Overall what was your impression of the ad?”) and six items measuring purchase intent relating to the product featured in the advertisement (e.g., “I plan on buying this product”). Attitudes to the advertisement were measured using a seven-point semantic differential type scale (e.g., 1 = “liked it very much” and 7 = “disliked it very much”), while purchase intent was measured using seven point Likert type scales anchored by 1 = “strongly agree” and 7 = “strongly disagree”. These scales were adopted from previous advertising research (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989).

After viewing the four advertisements and the items relating to each, participants were asked to respond to items measuring familiarity with each of the events featured in the advertisements. A three-item, seven-point scale was adopted from prior research (e.g., “How

familiar are you with the Winter Olympics?” 1 = “very unfamiliar”, 7 = “very familiar”). At the conclusion of the survey, participants were thanked and provided with a link to debriefing material.

Study 2 Results

A summary of the results for Study 2 can be seen in Table 2. Data were analysed by multivariate analysis in SPSS, in which SLA and sponsorship availability were entered as predictor variables on attitude to the ad, attitude to the brand and purchase intention. Dependent variables were comprised of the composite scales across the two stimuli. As expected, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of SLA type on attitude to the ad, $F(2, 335) = 4.17, p < .05$ attitude to the brand $F(2, 335) = 4.81, p < .01$ and purchase intention, $F(2, 335) = 4.65, p < .05$. Moreover the hypothesised interaction between sponsorship availability and SLA was significant for purchase intent, $F(2, 335) = 4.33$ and brand attitude $F(2, 335) = 4.62$, such that knowledge of the sponsorship relationship strengthened subsequent sponsorship advertising response.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Discussion

The current research provides empirical evidence of a relationship between Sponsorship-Linked Advertising processing and consumer skepticism, pointing to temporal effects of such skepticism in an advertising context. Our results imply that consumers may actually enjoy viewing ads which are thematically tied to sports events, feeling less skepticism and inferring more favorable advertiser motives when viewing them as compared to traditional advertising. It provides a good starting point for additional research on how consumers might process Sponsorship-Linked Advertising in response to calls from sponsorship and advertising literature for examination of underlying processing mechanisms associated with advertising and sponsorship response. The findings suggest differential

consumer processing between SLA and Non SLA, offering confirmation for use of Sponsorship-Linked Advertising as a viable sponsorship leveraging strategy. Predictions relating to thought valence were supported, with combined (explicit/implicit) SLA types producing more positive thoughts than Non SLA. Interestingly, sponsorship availability was positively related to thought valence such that exposure to a press release sponsorship announcement resulted in more positive thoughts than non-exposure. This finding suggests that sponsorship announcements may act as a cognitive prime in consumer memory, cuing the positive associations with sport, rather than acting to highlight the commercial nature of sponsorship. When considered in light of consumers' information processing mechanisms, these findings suggest that themed cues in an ad may enhance production of themed (e.g., sports) inference based thoughts and thus may influence mental processing activity when attitudes are formed or retrieved (e.g., Greenwald, 1968). Consistent with this notion, it is expected that exposure to Sponsorship-Linked Advertising (as compared to simple product Non SLA) would yield more favorable attitudes toward the ad and advertised brand. However, this proposition remains to be empirically tested.

Moreover, results support H4, suggesting widespread consumer skepticism and propensity to make attributions about advertiser motives, and that this skepticism may be tempered by strategic ad execution. Sports SLA that was implicitly and explicitly tied demonstrated more favorable attributed advertiser motives (mixed motives) and less ad skepticism than Non SLA. However, contrary to H5, all SLA types produced similar degrees of skepticism and attributed thoughts, indicating that perhaps consumers may not attend to the detail of the stated relationship present in explicit SLA forms, but more generally to the overall theme of the ad, being associated with the event. Research supports the notion of consumers forming mixed attributions, finding that a mixture of perceived self-serving and altruistic motives has a more positive effect upon perceptions of corporate social

responsibility than either pure self-serving or altruistic motives (Ellen et al., 2006). This duality in persuasive communications is consistent with Willams and Aaker's (2002) finding that positive and negative emotional reactions co-occur when individuals are exposed to ads with mixed emotional appeals. Contrary to expectations, attributions were not as varied as those found in prior research by Ellen and colleagues (2006) on CRM, with the majority of attributions profit orientated. One explanation for this lack of variation in attributed motive may be that sponsorship of large scale sporting events is viewed as inherently more commercial than sponsorship of causes such as the arts and charities due to the significantly larger investment, promotion and media attention surrounding such events. Future research in a sports sponsorship context should therefore consider alternative and more sensitive means of eliciting attributions, including interval scale ratings.

One surprising finding was that the hypothesized interactions between SLA ad types and sponsorship availability were all unsupported. One explanation for this anomaly may be limitations of a within-participants design, namely subject fatigue and carry over effects. The influence of the sponsorship availability condition may have been diluted by the time participants responded to later ads within the magazine. Future research adopting alternative designs, aimed at testing interactive effects between SLA and exposure to actual sponsorship knowledge through a between subjects design in which participants are exposed to only a single condition of SLA stimuli is therefore warranted.

The aim of Study 2 was to evaluate the impacts of SLA upon consumers' attitudes and preferences toward the sponsored brand. Hypotheses were supported, with results revealing more positive response to SLA than non SLA and a strengthening of this response when consumers were made aware of the sponsorship relationship. This result is consistent with advertising research suggesting that repeated exposure and familiarity with messaging and brand predicts more favourable advertising response outcomes (Kent & Allen, 1994).

Prior sponsorship impact research has found positive effects upon brand equity and even stock price of sponsoring brands following a sponsorship announcement (e.g., Cornwell, Pruitt, & Clark, 2005), and the Study 2 findings reflect this halo effect of a sponsorship announcement, with the interactive effect found for sponsorship availability. Hence, explicit and repeated communication of the sponsorship relationship through the sponsorship-linked advertising and press releases is recommended as an activation strategy for sponsors. Further replication across different brands and sports SLA stimuli and media is warranted to generalise these findings, given the reality and complexity of integrated above and below the line communications now prevalent. For example, in preparation for the marketing restrictions placed on the tobacco industry in Australia, tobacco companies strengthened their existing brands through repeated exposure before the ban (above the line communication) and continued to promote their product below the line through international sponsorships in unregulated jurisdictions (Carter, 2003).

A major limitation associated with the proposed model is that several key persuasive antecedents are exogenous. Second, SLA and consumer response to it is complex, and this research is therefore limited in focusing upon a narrow selection of ad type, sponsorship type, and contextual cuing effects. The logical step for future research is to replicate and extend findings of this research, by examining real ads and brand names, and a variety of strategic cues, across several media. The cross sectional nature of the design excludes lagged effects of ad exposure on response and consequently the possible evolutionary nature and durability of thoughts and thought valences, ad skepticism and attributional thoughts. Thus, a longitudinal examination of temporal effects upon the proposed model would be a fruitful direction for future research.

This article has provided some initial evidence of how consumers might process SLA as compared to traditional advertising. Remarkably, results presented imply that consumers

may enjoy viewing Sponsorship Linked ads, prompting a multitude of generally favorable thoughts of a less skeptical nature than Non SLA. The proposed model is both realistic and novel by incorporating consumer resistance mechanisms to persuasive marketing attempts, namely skepticism and advertiser motive attributions. By identifying the dimensions of Sponsorship-Linked Advertising and examining consumer processing differences between SLA and non SLA, the findings can provide international marketers with a comparison standard that can be used to assess ad and sponsorship practice and predict response to specific strategies. Specifically, our findings suggest that in practice, sponsoring brands should ensure that sponsorship leveraging is explicit and preferably themed around the event as well to ensure most favourable response. With ambush advertising omnipresent around mega events, it is logical that ensuring leveraged advertising has an explicit execution will distinguish legitimate sponsors from ambushers. However, it should be noted that in terms of processing the advertising, consumers may not differentiate explicit from themed SLA types, with our findings pointing to little distinction among attributions and skepticism elicited by SLA forms. Moreover, our research provides insight into the complex relationship between consumer response to persuasion attempts and skepticism, suggesting that erstwhile targets may be swayed by campaigns that can be pitched as a form of entertainment. Thus, sponsors and sports property owners are wise to invest in creatively themed and explicit executions to elicit most favourable response, and ensure that the campaign is heavily leveraged. Some commentators suggest this investment ratio to sponsorship dollar should be 3:1 (Crimmins & Horn, 1996).

In conclusion, this research examine how different attempts at persuasion can reduce consumer skepticism towards sponsorship linked advertising. We found that consumers were less skeptical and more favorable towards advertisements that were thematically tied to

sporting events. Our findings have practical implications for defending against ambushing advertising by non-sponsors and developing best practice for sponsorship linked advertising.

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Appendix - Sample Press Release Comprising Sponsorship Availability Condition

Zephyr to Sponsor Winter Olympics 2010

Today Zephyr Cars announced that it will be sponsoring the Winter Olympics in 2010. The official sponsorship is expected to associate the innovative Zephyr brand with this exciting event, with the objectives of raising brand awareness and enhancing its status as a leading car manufacturer. Following the signing of the sponsorship agreement, Zephyr CEO Robert Smith commented, “We are delighted to have secured an association with the Winter Olympics and see it as an excellent platform by which to promote the Zephyr brand. The sport closely reflects our core values of speed, reliability, and cutting edge technology, hence directly supporting our brand positioning.”