The notion of branding in sports is one that has only recently emerged, but which has now become a focus for sports marketing practitioners and academic researchers. In some quarters, there is still a marked reluctance to conceive of teams, clubs, events and other sporting entities as brands. Critics see branding as the unnecessary commodification of sports, rendering social institutions simply as commercial properties. However, there is no doubt that many of these sporting institutions have a clear history, identity and position, which can be utilised as the basis for fan engagement, product positioning and revenue generation. As such, sports organisations have variously sought either to create clear brand identities or to release the latent equity that many of the organisations possess. Branding is thus a relatively immature activity but is nevertheless rapidly rising to prominence. This part sets out to examine some of the currently most salient issues in the field. Chapters examine how sports brands are built, how such brands can be activated in sports, and the role brands play in promoting sports properties.
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2
CONGRUENCE EFFECTS IN SPORTS MARKETING

Determinants, measures, and outcomes of fit or misfit

Björn Walliser

Introduction

In sports marketing, congruence often arises as a magical concept, able to induce stronger and more positive impacts on consumer reactions than incongruent pairings. For example, an athlete endorser should have a stronger influence than an actor on the evaluation of an energy bar but not on the evaluation of a candy bar (Till and Busler, 2000). Even athletes such as Tiger Woods or Michael Phelps, who transgress social norms, might enjoy commercial success if they endorse “rebellious” products (Pokrywczynski and Brinker, 2012). Similarly, a sports team brand should anticipate greater success by leveraging its brand equity in a sports clothing line rather than a cosmetics line (Papadimitriou et al., 2004). In contrast, misfits—brands and sports entities not going well together—might damage brand equity by prompting negative reactions among consumers. It is questionable whether the sponsorship of the soccer team, Atlético Madrid, by the country of Azerbaijan is well understood by sports spectators, albeit some recent studies propose that a well-chosen misfit could benefit sponsors and sports marketing brands (for example, Trendel and Warlop, 2013).

For decades, sponsorship practitioners and scholars have suspected that congruence drives sponsorship and endorsement success. Congruence effects are arguably the most widely-used theoretical concept for explaining sponsorship effectiveness, often in interaction with other variables. Sponsorship literature thus follows research in other marketing areas, such as celebrity endorsements and brand extensions, where the role of fit had received earlier attention. Several theories provide explanations for congruence effects, though they do not all offer the same conclusions. Congruity theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955) and balance theory (Heider, 1958) both stress the importance of cognitive consistency, which motivates people to maintain uniformity in their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. According to general schema theory, information that is consistent with existing schemas tends to be better remembered and evaluated more positively (Fiske, 1982). In contrast, the encoding flexibility model (Sherman et al., 1998) posits that information consistent with prior expectations receives little attention and is poorly encoded, such that people instead turn their attention to inconsistent information that is harder to comprehend, such as incongruent pairings.
This chapter details the impact of congruence on three key areas of sports marketing: sports sponsorship, sports advertising based on endorsements, and sports brand extensions. All three areas combine two or more brands or entities in a quest for commercial success, such that congruence should be important for all of them, though the focal associations differ. For example, a sponsorship entails a match between a brand and a sports property, often an event, but sometimes a person or team (for example, Shell and the Ferrari Formula 1 team); for some, sports naming rights are also a specific form of (venue) sponsorship. When it comes to endorsements, congruence between the athlete and the brand or product is of primary concern (for example, Jordan Spieth and Under Armour sports apparel). For brand extensions, the congruence between two brands or products is most important (for example, Liverpool F.C. and LFCTV, the club’s television channel).

Negotiating a sponsorship or endorser agreement demands substantial time and resources. More than one in four endorsers featured in U.S. magazine advertising represents the world of sport (Belch and Belch, 2013). If a perfect match was not necessarily required, this would alleviate much stress from sports marketing managers. If congruence had a consistent influence, it would be reassuring to take advantage of positive effects and avoid negative ones.

The following sections describe the nature, relevance, and existing measures of congruence, before documenting the outcome of congruence effects and suggesting several variables that likely mediate or moderate their impact.

**Determinants of congruence in different sports marketing contexts**

Many terms describe congruence, and many grounds provide theoretical bases for predicted congruence effects. That is, congruence also appears as “relevance” (Johar and Pham, 1999), “fit” (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004), “similarity” (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999), “match” (McDaniel, 1999), “compatibility” (Ruth and Simonin, 2003), and many other terms. In sports marketing, congruence refers to how well a brand goes with another entity, such as an event, athlete, or another brand. Furthermore, the basic determinants of congruence—image and product features—are common across different areas of sports marketing, but its precise conceptualization differs (see Table 2.1).

As early as the 1970s, Kanungo and Pang (1973: p. 172) suggested the need for “fittingness” between a model and a product, though they did not specifically address the sports context. Misra and Beatty (1990: p. 161) led the groundwork to understanding endorsement-related fit—the so-called matchup hypothesis—by asserting: “the highly relevant characteristics of the spokesperson are consistent with the highly relevant attributes of the brand.” Endorsement research (for example, Erfgen, 2011) frequently distinguishes three congruence categories: attractiveness-based (relevance of the physical attractiveness of the endorser), expertise-based (perceived expertise of the endorser for a product category, brand, or issue), and image-based (match of the endorser’s image with the image of the brand). In addition, Fleck et al. (2012) observe that the perceived congruence of a (celebrity) endorser depends on the consumer’s
attitude toward that endorser. People who like a celebrity are more likely to find them congruent, regardless of the brand being promoted.

The congruence between a parent brand and its extension has been conceptualized in various ways (for example, Apostolopoulou, 2002). Early studies (Chadwick and Clowes, 1998) define extension congruence primarily in terms of product category fit and feature similarity, that is, whether the product category of the parent brand and the extension brand are similar, and whether both brands are used in similar settings or are manufactured at the same facility. Aaker and Keller (1990) define brand extension fit as the established expertise of the parent brand in the extension’s product category. Image and quality are other key dimensions of extension congruence. The team brand association scale (Ross et al., 2006) establishes several factors that might determine extension congruence in a sports context, such as the non-player personnel associated with a particular team, team performance, team history, team play characteristics, identifying marks associated with the team, organizational attributes, and even liking or disliking competitor teams. Marketing research has shown that perceived fit is mediated by the perceived credibility of the parent brand and its potential ability to launch new products (Smith and Andrews, 1995). Apostolopoulou (2002) suggests that sports fans with stronger team identification are more likely to react positively to brand extensions, regardless of perceived fit. In most cases, brand extension literature (Broniarczyk and Alba, 1994) simply defines “fit” as the extent to which consumers perceive congruence, notwithstanding the specific reasons that lead to it.

The extent to which a sponsor and sponsee are perceived as similar by sponsorship targets depends on their functionality, image, or other attributes, associations, or strategies. Fleck and Quester (2007: p. 981) tabulate definitions of congruence in sponsorship literature. For example, functional or logical fit arises from sponsor products that are used during the sponsored event. Image fit reflects a link between the image of the sponsor and the sponsee, such as Rolex supporting a prestigious golf tournament. A strategic fit might be exemplified by a beer brand sponsoring football, for the simple reason that football fans tend to consume above-average amounts of beer. A qualitative, empirical, cognitive mapping sponsorship study (Olson and Thjømøe, 2011) confirms some of these dimensions and adds new ones, identifying seven total explanations of fit: (1) using a brand’s products during an event, either directly, for example, athletes’ shoes, or indirectly, for example, spectators drink beer while watching a game; (2) size similarity, for example, the object and brand are both prominent or not prominent; (3) audience similarity, for example, the object’s audience is also the brand’s target segment; (4) geographic similarity, for example, national brand and national team; (5) attitude similarity, for example, equal liking of the brand and the object; (6) image similarity, for example, similar meaning or image of both entities; and (7) time duration of the sponsorship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1 Determinants of congruence in sports marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sport celebrity endorsement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of the endorser (including endorser ubiquity).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise of the endorser.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness of the endorser.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking of the endorser.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brands

relation, for example, “unhealthy” beer brands still fit well with “healthy” sports, because of their longstanding sponsorship link.

Use by the participants and audience similarity turns out to be the most important predictors of fit in the context of the study done by Olson and Thjømøe (2011). Work by Woisetschläger et al. (2010) reveals that the perceived benefits of the sponsor for the sponsored entity and regional identification with the sponsor company have the strongest influence on sponsorship fit, according to fans of a soccer club. The same variables influence perceived fit in a stadium-naming context (Woisetschläger and Haselhoff, 2009). Sponsor sincerity and ubiquity contribute only modestly to perceived fit (Speed and Thompson, 2000; Woisetschläger et al., 2010).

Across various sports contexts, the different determinants of congruence appear independent. For example, if an endorser does not fit a brand in terms of image, they could still be perceived as congruent, because of their expertise or attractiveness. In the absence of a functional sponsorship fit, a sponsor and sponsee could be perceived as similar because of their image, national origin, or another dimension of fit. Therefore, brands should always be able to find some grounds on which to establish fit with a sports entity.

Measures of congruence

Congruence can be measured indirectly or directly. Indirect methods determine the overlap among associations evoked independently by each of a pair of entities. Indirect methods thus would first evaluate the associations evoked by a brand, then test the associations evoked by a celebrity or event, and finally compare the two set of associations. Direct methods instead evaluate congruence as on overall construct, using “fit” and its synonyms such as “similar,” “well matched,” or “congruent” as prompts. The scales in Table 2.2 reflect direct measures, which tend to be more commonly adopted by sports marketing studies.

Some direct measures are also more elaborate. Speed and Thompson (2000: p. 231) include a specific fit dimension in their five-item sponsorship scale: “The image of the event and the image of the sponsor are similar.” Olson and Thjømøe (2011) propose 17 items to measure six of the seven dimensions of sponsorship fit they identified. For the “product use” dimension, they ask: “(1) How likely is it that the products from [sponsor] are used by the participants in [object]? and (2) When watching [object] on television, how likely are audience members to be using [sponsor] products?”

Table 2.2 Direct measures of overall congruence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sponsorship literature</th>
<th>Endorsement literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. dissimilar ↔ similar</td>
<td>1. not compatible ↔ compatible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. inconsistent ↔ consistent</td>
<td>2. not a good fit ↔ good fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. atypical ↔ typical</td>
<td>3. not congruent ↔ congruent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. low fit ↔ high fit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. does not make sense ↔ makes sense</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleck et al. (2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[Brand X] and [celebrity Y] go well together.”</td>
<td>“[Brand X] is well matched with [celebrity Y].”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In my opinion, [celebrity Y] is very appropriate as a celebrity endorser for [brand X].”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Congruence effects in sports marketing

Inspired by advertising research (Heckler and Childers, 1992), Fleck and Quester (2007) validate a two-dimensional congruence scale (see Table 2.3 for the measures) based on expectancy and relevancy. Consumers clearly understand congruence more in terms of expectancy (noticing a sponsor at an event where it was expected) than relevancy (learning something about the sponsor through the event or the sport). To illustrate, Messi and Adidas would be an expected and relevant pairing, as would be Phil Mickelson and Callaway golf balls. However, KPMG would not necessarily be expected as a sponsor of golfers, but could still be considered relevant based on the strategic capacities needed by golf professionals playing a course as well as by management consultants. Expectancy explains three times more variance in the congruence construct than relevancy. An adapted version of this scale successfully measured endorsement congruence as well (Fleck et al., 2012).

### Conceptual background of congruence effects

On a general level, congruence effects in sports marketing can be explained by balance theory (Heider, 1958). Consumers strive to establish harmony in their thoughts about elements they perceive as belonging together. Confronted with an entity they like, such as an athlete or sports event, together with a less-valued entity, such as a brand, consumers may form more positive attitudes toward the brand, or else a less positive attitude toward the celebrity or event. Congruity theory (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955) refines this approach by identifying degrees of positive and negative evaluations and anticipating that evaluations of both entities could change. Thus, consumers might form more neutral attitudes toward the liked celebrity or event and the less-liked brand.

Schema theory offers another means to explain congruence effects. Schemas are cognitive structures that represent information about objects, their attributes, and the interrelations among attributes. In a general case, information congruent with existing schemas is easier to memorize (Alba and Hasher, 1983); items consistent with existing schemas also receive affect from that schema (Fiske, 1982). In a sponsorship setting, general schema theory posits that when spectators perceive that a sponsor brand fits with an existing schema (for example, a brand that fits with an event), they better remember the brand, and the affect from the event schema transfers to the brand schema (or vice versa). Predictions about schema processing outcomes are not uniform. According to one model of schema theory, expectancy-incongruent information enjoys better encoding. This “schema-pointer plus tag” model posits that incongruent information gets encoded in a specific memory location and is therefore better recognized in subsequent encounters.

The associative network (AN) approach further posits that memory consists of individual pieces of information, called nodes, that are connected. Thinking about one node (for

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### Table 2.3 Two-dimensional congruence scale (Fleck and Quester, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectancy</th>
<th>Relevancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am not surprised that this company sponsors this event.</td>
<td>1. That this company sponsors this event tells me something about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I would expect this company to sponsor this event.</td>
<td>2. With this sponsorship, I discover a new aspect of this company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It was predictable that this company would sponsor this event.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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19
example, event, athlete) may activate thinking about another node (for example, brand). Repeated exposures to typical sports marketing pairings strengthen the associative link of the two entities, which might also modify the evaluation of our attitude toward these objects, because attitude reflects the association between an object and its evaluation (Fazio et al., 1989). Whether expectancy-congruent information is better remembered than expectancy-incongruent information depends on the level of elaboration. In a sponsorship context, Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) describe interpretations of marketing stimuli as a two-stage process. First, consumers make relatively effortless inferences about sponsor stimuli on the basis of their event schemas (or inversely, make inferences about the event on the basis of their sponsor schemas), such as “This brand fits well with the event” or “Supporting this event or cause is a good thing.” Second, congruent relationships do not trigger very elaborative processes, so they lead to milder, albeit positively valued thoughts. Incongruent pairings instead advance the processing to a level at which consumers assess all available inputs and potentially correct inferences they drew during the more superficial first processing stage. This more effortful processing leads to positive valuations if people can resolve the incongruity (Jagre et al., 2001). The resolution of slightly incongruent messages leads to similar (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006) or possibly stronger affect; an inability to cope with strong incongruence may lead to frustration and negative thoughts (Mandler, 1982).

The encoding flexibility model (Sherman et al., 1998) confirms these processes. It posits that information consistent with prior expectations receives little attention and is not well encoded. Instead, consumers turn their attention to inconsistent information, which is harder to comprehend, such as incongruent pairings. This model also differentiates between perceptual and conceptual encoding of information. Perceptual encoding implies processing of the physical qualities of the stimulus (for example, recognizing the logo of a sports brand). Conceptual encoding relates to the attribution of meaning to a stimulus (for example, perceiving a brand as luxurious). According to the encoding flexibility model, under low elaboration, perceptual encoding is superior for incongruent information, but conceptual encoding is better for congruent information (Trendel and Warlop, 2013).

Samu et al. (1999) combine schema and AN theories to explain co-branding and advertising alliances. Whereas AN theory explains how memory of partner brands gets activated, schema theory explains the transfer of affect across activated schemas and explains how the perception of congruence changes over time.

**Effects of congruence on sports marketing variables**

Congruence affects sports celebrity advertising, sports brand extensions, and sports sponsorship in many ways. Table 2.4 offers an overview of studies that measure and test the influence of congruence on key marketing variables, such as memorization, attitude, and purchase intentions.

**Overall effect of congruence**

Sponsorship literature, that has provided the vast majority of the studies presented in Table 2.4, regularly documents positive outcomes of congruence. In most cases, congruence seems to increase rather than decrease attention to sponsors (for example, Deitz et al. 2009), sponsor memorization (for example, Rodgers, 2004), sponsor brand attitude (for example, McDaniel, 1999), purchase intentions (for example, Rodgers, 2004), and the market value of brands or companies (for example, Clark et al., 2009). Congruence benefits not only the sponsor...
Congruence effects in sports marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable investigated</th>
<th>Positive effects</th>
<th>Negative or neutral effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cornwell et al. (2006), Grohs et al. (2004), Trendel and Warlop (2013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial (stock) value of brands.</td>
<td>Cornwell et al. (2005), Clark et al. (2009), Cornwell et al. (2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sponsorship study, EEndorsement study, BEBrand extension study

company or its shareholders but in certain conditions, it also strengthens the brand’s identity, brand relationships (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006), and the image of sponsees (Ruth and Simonin, 2003).

There is some doubt whether the influence of fit on memorization is always positive. Some studies (Olson and Thjømøe, 2009; Trendel and Warlop, 2013) reveal that non-congruent sponsors are easier to recognize than congruent sponsors, in line with Stangor and McMillan’s (1992) meta-analysis, in which recall of expectancy-incongruent information is higher overall than that for expectancy-congruent information. Some prior studies may have overestimated the positive role of congruence on memorization because they ignored spectators’ tendency to infer sponsor names using congruence heuristics (Johar and Pham, 1999): if they are not sure about a sponsor of an event, spectators tend to cite brands they think would fit with the event.

A series of empirical results confirm the tenets of the match-up hypothesis for sports endorsements. Till and Busler (2000) show that respondents offer more positive evaluations of an energy bar when it is promoted by an athlete, that is, someone who should have expertise about energy products, rather than by an actor. Athlete characteristics, such as perceived attractiveness and expertise, positively influence perceived fit, which in turn influences attitudes toward the endorsed brand (Fink et al., 2004). Even unknown athletes in advertisements for sports products elicit more favorable responses, in terms of perceived expertise and purchase intent, than do non-athlete endorsers (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). But not all dimensions of fit are equally salient in all situations. The endorser characteristic most directly linked to the promoted product exerts the strongest impact. For example, the expertise of a softball player has a stronger influence on attitudes toward a softball game and ultimately intentions to buy...
tickets for that game than player attractiveness (Fink et al., 2004). Congruence has a positive general influence on endorsement processes, regardless of whether the endorsers are sports celebrities or unknown athletes. A single, salient (sports-related) characteristic, such as musculature for exercise equipment, may even be enough to evoke congruence among consumers.

Congruence also is influential for the extension of existing sports brands into new product categories, though empirical evidence addressing this point is sparse. Sports managers believe fit is a key success factor for extensions (Apostolopoulou, 2002), and fans are capable of assessing the fit of extensions (Walsh et al., 2012). Sports clothing and sports camps thus produce significantly higher fit perceptions than cosmetics or banking services. Furthermore, product categories with greater fit are evaluated more positively by fans and invoke higher purchase intentions (Papadimitriou et al., 2004). Similar to endorsement and sponsorship literature, the dimensions of congruence vary by the product category of the extensions, hinting at effects of perceived typicality for sports brand extensions that are similar to those uncovered in brand extension literature in general (for example, Loken and Ward, 1990).

**Mediating and moderating variables of congruence for sports marketing outcomes**

The influence of congruence on memorization, brand attitudes, and other marketing outcomes is moderated and mediated by several other variables, including message elaboration, perceived brand motives, and brand prominence. It is also subject to situational traits and the personal characteristics of the consumers.

Consumers generate more thoughts if they perceive a misfit rather than fit, in a brand extension (Koernig and Boyd, 2009) or sponsorship (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006) context. If fit is high, perceived cognitive consistency leads to positive thoughts (Speed and Thompson, 2000). Without such cognitive consistency, consumers develop more thoughts about the misfit, including more negative thoughts toward both partners (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Similarly, if an endorser does not fit, consumers have more negative, more neutral, and fewer positive ad-related thoughts than if the endorser fits with the product advertised (Koernig and Boyd, 2009). The negative thoughts due to the lack of relation in the pairing lead to feelings of frustration (D’Astous and Bitz, 1995) and negative attitudes toward both partners. Between the extremes of fit and misfit, a moderate level of fit may lead to better brand memorization and more positive attitudes than perfect fit (Jagre et al., 2001). That is, a small misfit between two entities may be beneficial, so long as it is perceived as interesting and mostly positive. For example, unexpected information leads to greater advertising message involvement and more favorable evaluations (Lee, 2000).

Increased elaboration generates thoughts not only about the misfit itself but also the context of the pairing in general (Koernig and Boyd, 2009; Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006). According to attribution theory, consumers try to understand why sponsors support an event or cause. Spectators who believe that sponsors have altruistic motives, perceive them as more credible and develop more positive attitudes toward them (Rifon et al. 2004; Speed and Thomson, 2000). Sponsors perceived as too aggressive or commercial instead are perceived less favorably. Colbert et al. (2005) show that congruence interacts with the type of sponsor, perceived sponsor objectives, and the type of event. For example, some large public companies in Canada do not need functional matches to be perceived favorably as sponsors, because their longstanding history of sponsorships makes them seem like “natural” sponsors to many Canadians.
Analogous to literature on “brandfests”, participation in sponsorship experiences offers another way to increase congruence and brand attitudes for non-congruent sponsors (Coppetti et al., 2009; Weeks et al., 2008). Furthermore, sponsors that articulate their good intentions (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006) can accommodate pairings that initially were perceived as non-congruent. Articulation and spectator experience both facilitate image transfers (Coppetti et al., 2009) and memory (Cornwell et al., 2006) for non-congruent sponsors, though not for already congruent brands. In addition to the positive main effects of congruency, activation, and altruistic articulation on brand attitudes, Weeks et al. (2008) observe a three-way interaction among these variables. For less congruent sponsorships, the positive effects of activation leverage get offset by commercially oriented articulations. For congruent sponsors using activation, perceptions of a commercial rationale do not negatively alter brand perceptions.

The more expertise a person has with a stimulus category, the more likely they are to apply schema-based processing. Experts have more compact and readily accessible schemas and use schema-inconsistent information more than novices do. In a sports context, experts are equivalent to fans; brand experience is largely influenced by brand prominence. Compared with less knowledgeable persons, event experts generate more thoughts about the event, as well as more negative thoughts about sponsor–event combinations (Roy and Cornwell, 2004). Thus, experts should be more critical of sponsor–event pairings, especially when sponsor equity is low, because experts also generate more negative thoughts for such low equity sponsors than do novices (Roy and Cornwell, 2004). Sponsors with high brand equity instead appear more congruent with the event (Roy and Cornwell, 2003) and invoke more positive brand attitudes (Rifon et al., 2004). Deitz et al. (2009) highlight how social identification with a team (i.e., fans) and need for cognition can enhance perceived fit and sponsorship responses. Identification with a team, being a fan, directly and indirectly, through perceived team–sponsor congruence, leads to more positive responses to a sponsorship.

Congruence typically appears as a static property, such that the relationship between the two entities is perceived as congruent or not. However, perceptions of congruence can change over time. Sponsors or endorsers that do not appear congruent when a deal is first announced might achieve increased matching over additional encounters. Exposure leads to habituation, if not liking, and may help people forget about mismatches. According to Dardis (2009), congruence thus mediates between exposure and brand attitude. Brand extension research also affirms that congruence is “elastic” (Dardis, 2009: p. 39), in the sense that promoting an extension is a key success factor. Consumers’ perceptions of congruence thus appear to evolve over time, depending on communication efforts by the brand and learning by spectators (Cornwell et al., 2006). The Amstel Gold Race—a popular cycling event in Europe sponsored by the beer brand, Amstel—offers an extreme example. If asked explicitly, many cycling fans likely consider an alcoholic beverage and a cycling race a misfit. But over time, this longstanding sponsor has literally become part of the event (i.e., its name) and is barely perceived as a sponsor, much less an intruder or misfit. When sponsors have been with an event long enough, people tend to question the link much less.

**Conclusion**

Prior literature demonstrates that congruence has a positive effect on brands across three areas of sports marketing: sports sponsorship, sports celebrity endorsements, and sports brand extensions.

Considering the many determinants of congruence, brands should always be able to find some grounds on which to create fit with a sports entity. But because congruence is
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context-dependent, dynamic, and subjective, it remains a constant managerial challenge to determine the most convincing basis of fit. Consumers have different reasons to believe that two entities fit (or misfit), but some of these reasons are more convincing, or have better predictive power, than others.

Sports marketing managers seem to believe that congruence has a positive effect for brands with little prior exposure but a negative one for brands with a strong sponsorship presence (Henseler et al., 2007). The reality is more complicated. Evaluations of fit and positive sports marketing partnerships depend on brand-related factors, including brand prominence, brand equity, sponsorship articulation, and brand history, as well as consumer-related factors, such as brand experience, brand knowledge, and brand motive attributions.

Notes

1. This chapter does not elaborate on self-congruity or self-image congruity, which is not to be confused with the aforementioned conceptualizations of congruence. Self-congruity refers to the match between a person’s self-concept and the image of a product or service. In a sport context, self-congruity is the degree to which spectators think that an event they attend or a product they buy is congruent with their self-image (for example, Close et al., 2009).

2. Most examples in the following paragraphs refer to sponsorships, yet the conceptual framework applies equally to endorsements, brand alliances, and brand extensions.

3. Memorization measured in terms of conceptual implicit memory.

4. Memorization measured in terms of perceptual implicit memory.

5. The impact was positive when this study used an unknown athlete.

6. This study found no significant impact when a famous athlete was used.

References

Congruence effects in sports marketing


Brands


