EFFECTS OF SPONSORSHIP CONGRUITY ON E-SPONSORS AND E-NEWSPAPERS

By Shelly Rodgers

This study examines psychological responses to e-sponsors and e-newspapers as a function of sponsor congruity. The method is a 3 (sponsor congruity) x 2 (section) x 4 (news story) x 4 (e-newspapers) within-groups experiment. Participants were student and non-student adults. The high congruity condition yielded positive effects for the e-sponsors, whereas the moderate congruity condition yielded positive effects for the e-newspapers. Sponsor motive moderated sponsor congruity on evaluations of the e-newspapers. Results showed that high congruity sponsors benefited from the sponsorship at the expense of the e-newspaper’s credibility. Findings suggest that policies are needed to guide decisions about the use of Internet sponsorships in newspaper Web sites.

Sponsorships are one of the fastest-growing forms of Internet advertising, accounting for more than one-third (37%) of online ads and $7.2 billion in online advertising revenue. Internet sponsorships are used by a variety of Web sites including electronic newspapers (e-newspapers). With the increasing need to provide an online product and the demand to generate new sources of revenue, e-newspapers can benefit from Internet sponsorships as a viable advertising model for news sites.

Currently, there are no industry standards to guide decisions about the use of Internet sponsorships, resulting in inconsistent sponsorship use across news sites. In some cases, e-newspapers will allow a company to sponsor a news story that closely aligns with its product. For instance, a vitamin company may sponsor a news story about the health benefits of vitamins, or a luggage company may sponsor a news story about preventing luggage loss. This has prompted concern about whether readers can distinguish “objective” reporting from promotional messages and whether Internet sponsorships erode journalistic standards or decrease credibility of the e-newspaper.

Past studies on sponsorship effects typically identify benefits/risks for the sponsor with little regard for benefits/risks for the sponsored context. This is somewhat limited. Sponsors seek out credible contexts. However, advertising practices that damage those contexts may also damage the customer base that drives advertising costs and...
revenues. Online users trust e-newspapers, and more than one-third of all Internet users have visited a newspaper Web site. However, e-newspapers that allow advertising practices that hurt their product’s reputation may also jeopardize their financial viability. Hence, in examining sponsorship effectiveness, it is necessary to determine not only the effects of sponsorship congruity on e-sponsors but also sponsorship effects on e-newspapers.

The purpose of this research is to examine psychological effects of sponsor congruity on e-sponsors and e-newspapers. The influence of a moderating variable (sponsor motive) is also examined. The method was an online experiment with a group of student and non-student adults.

The Congruity Hypothesis and Sponsor Effects. Congruity is the most frequent concept used to explain sponsorship effects. Congruity broadly refers to the nature of the link between the sponsor and the context being sponsored. Sponsorships, defined as investments in causes or events to support corporate objectives, consist of an association between a product/brand and a sponsorship entity or context. The communication value of the sponsorship depends on the sponsor-context link. Sponsorship studies have demonstrated a number of positive psychological effects for congruous versus incongruous sponsorships. For instance, memory and purchase intentions are higher and attitudes are more favorable for congruous than for incongruous sponsorships.

Two competing theories are used to explain the effects. On one hand, congruent stimuli are thought to create unique memory traces making it easier to locate congruent versus incongruent stimuli in memory. Additionally, congruent stimuli are thought to conform to individuals’ expectations and attitude change occurs in the direction of increased congruity within the individual's cognitive schema, which leads to a favorable response. An alternative theory relates to meaning transfer. Under this paradigm, category schemas that match the level of congruity between a product and product category transfer schema affect, or perhaps individuals who already possess positive category schemas transfer those attitudes to a congruent object.

Congruity theory helps to explain the cognitive impact of congruent sponsorships. A congruent sponsor seeks out relevant contexts with which to associate to increase attention to its sponsorship, enhance brand image, and increase intent to purchase the sponsored product. By associating with a relevant context, a sponsor attempts to capitalize on schema congruity to share the image of the sponsored context and elicit favorable responses. Congrous sponsorships subsequently conform to an individual’s expectations and lead to a favorable response, presumably through the transfer of positive schema affect. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: Sponsor congruity will have a linear effect on responses to e-sponsors in that low congruity sponsors will yield the lowest and high congruity sponsors will yield the
highest memory, attitude, and behavioral intentions for the sponsors.

**Context Effects.** The congruity hypothesis has been successful in predicting sponsorship effects, but most sponsorship studies have examined congruity by focusing on the sponsor and not the context. Additionally, several studies have shown that incongruous sponsors are more advantageous than congruous sponsors in some circumstances. To explain this, incongruity theory suggests that objects that are seen as moderately discrepant from expectations are preferred to either extremely congruent or incongruent alternatives. For instance, consumers evaluate moderately incongruent products more positively than highly congruent products, presumably due to heightened processing resulting from novel or unexpected matching between an object and evoked schema.

Sponsorships, unlike advertisements, are small and limited to brand name identification and sometimes a brief slogan (e.g., Kraft Foods: Feeding the hungry one person at a time). In the absence of information about the sponsorship, consumers use contextual information to judge the sponsor-context alignment. News sites seek to maintain neutrality and objectivity without interference or influence by advertisers with commercial interests. This is accomplished by distinguishing ads from news content, for example, by using different fonts or labeling commercial messages as “ads.”

Currently, there are no policies in e-newspapers about the use and implementation of sponsorships. Hence, sponsors and news that are highly congruent may not be distinguishable from editorial content. In the absence of distinguishing characteristics, readers may become confused about the sponsorship and question whether a congruent sponsor paid for the creation of the story, had direct input into the story, or influenced the reporter who wrote the story, thus implying a vested interest on the part of the sponsor. Journalistic standards may be questioned and negative evaluations of the e-newspaper may result. Thus,

\[ H2: \text{ Sponsor congruity will have an inverted-U effect on responses to e-newspapers in that highly congruent sponsors will yield the lowest and moderately congruent sponsors will yield the highest memory for news content, perceived credibility, and behavioral intent for the e-newspapers.} \]

**Moderating Effect of Sponsor Motive.** Sponsor motive, defined as a cognitive response that varies as the context and content of the communication change, has been examined in a number of sponsorship studies. Research has shown that sponsorship linkages can increase skepticism toward the sponsor and thoughts about sponsor motives can increase when corporate sponsors associate with social cause messages.
This process occurs when individuals draw on their persuasion knowledge—defined broadly as what consumers know about marketers and marketers’ persuasion attempts. Consumers use their persuasion knowledge when a persuasion agent’s ulterior motive is highly accessible; when individuals infer that the actor might have an ulterior motive; or, in the case of sponsorships, when consumers infer that there are two or more incompatible motives within a sponsor-context link.

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), this process occurs through a “change-of-meaning” hypothesis. The PKM predicts that first encounters with persuasion tactics may not take on specific meaning for consumers. As exposure to the tactic increases, the persuasion tactic will take on a “change of meaning,” and agent evaluations can change as a result.

When individuals first encounter an Internet sponsorship, they may not ascribe a particular meaning to the sponsorship. Here, the editorial environment and its adherence to neutrality may not be integrated into the cognitive evaluations of and responses to the sponsorship. As more time is spent with the e-newspaper and individuals encounter sponsors that use congruity as a persuasion tactic, elaborations may increase thoughts about the nature of the sponsor link and what the link means, as well as about implied rules about news processes. Eventually, the change of meaning takes place and evaluations of the sponsor (i.e., increased skepticism) change. Whereas individuals may initially rate high congruity sponsors more positively than low or moderately congruent sponsors (H1), increased exposure to the sponsor and in combination with being asked to think about the sponsored context (H2) may prompt individuals to draw inferences about the sponsor’s motives. Thus,

H3: Sponsor motive will moderate sponsor congruity on evaluations of the e-newspapers.

Participants. There were 191 participants—110 students, recruited from a large Midwestern university, and 81 non-student adults, recruited from professional clubs and organizations of a small Midwestern city. Each student was paid $10 for his/her time and each organization/club was paid $20 for each member that participated. The treatment of participants was in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

Design. The experiment was a 3 (sponsorship congruity) x 2 (section) x 4 (news story) x 4 (e-newspapers) within-groups design. Sponsorship congruity, the independent variable, had three levels (low, medium, high) and was a within-subjects factor. Within-subjects factors help to control variability due to individual differences, making it easier to detect treatment effects when they are present.

The replication variables were newspaper section (travel and health), news story (travel to South America, preventing lost luggage, taking vitamins for good health, and drinking green tea for good health),
and names of e-newspapers (the Daily News, the Daily Star, the Daily Times, and the Daily Post). Replication variables help to enhance generalizations across contexts. Statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether the three replication variables significantly influenced the dependent variables. Results revealed no significant differences. It is therefore appropriate to average across the replication variables to increase the power of the design.

**Stimulus Materials.** One e-newspaper was designed by a professional Web designer and four versions were created to control for ordering effects. Each e-newspaper had six screens—one for the instructions, four for the news stories, and a “thank you” screen. The sponsorships appeared at the top of each news story in large bold text with the words “Today’s sponsor is [brand/product name].” The four sponsors were Birele vitamins, Situs luggage, Dree travel service, and Fanon Stationary bikes. Fictitious names for the sponsors and e-newspapers were used to control for confound effects that can occur from using known brand names, and all stories, sponsors, and names of e-newspapers were pre-tested prior to the experiment.

**Procedure.** The computer’s settings were standardized for control purposes. To rule out selection bias, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four e-newspapers. Participants were given nine minutes to read each section of the e-newspaper (an exposure period determined prior to the study by averaging the reading times of a slow and fast reader).

**Independent Variable.** The independent variable was sponsor congruity, defined as the perceived link between the sponsor’s product and the topic of the news story. Sponsor congruity had three levels—low, medium, and high. A high congruity sponsor was defined as having a relevant match between the product (e.g., herbal tea) and topic of the news story (e.g., health benefits of herbal tea). A medium/low congruity sponsor had a somewhat relevant/not relevant match between the sponsor’s product (e.g., herbal tea) and topic of the news story (e.g., taking vitamins for good health/preventing lost luggage). All story/sponsorship pairs were pre-tested to ensure that the manipulations were in the expected direction.

**Dependent Variables.** There were six dependent variables, outlined below. Items were reverse-coded where necessary so that a lower value indicates a negative cognition and a higher value indicates a positive cognition.

**Memory for Sponsors.** Memory for the sponsor was measured with four items: two free recall and two cued recall questions. Participants were asked to list, in free recall fashion, the brand and product/service for each of the four stories. Cued recall was measured by asking subjects to select the “correct” sponsor brand/name from a list of four sponsor names, one correct and three decoys, for each news story. Scores ranged from 0 to 4. The mean recall score was 1.20 (sd = 1.75).

**Attitude toward Sponsors.** Attitude toward the sponsor was measured using four, 5-point semantic differential scales. The items included: bad/good, disliked/liked, favorable/unfavorable, and high quali-
ty/low quality (α = .88). Scores ranged from 4 to 20. The mean attitude toward the sponsor score was 12.41 (sd = 2.80).

Purchase Intentions for Sponsored Brand. Purchase intent was measured using three, 5-point semantic differential scales, which included the sponsor’s name and product followed by the statements: “I’m likely to make a purchase”/“I’m unlikely to make a purchase”; “I would like to have more information”/“I would not like to have more information”; “I’m not interested in it”/“I’m interested in it” (α = .73). Scores ranged from 3 to 15 and the mean was 7.25 (sd = 3.15).

Memory for News Content. Memory for the news stories was measured with a multiple choice “quiz” consisting of eleven questions taken directly from the news stories. Scores ranged from 2 to 11, and the mean score was 6.83 (sd = 1.94).

Perceived Credibility of the E-newspaper. Perceived credibility of the e-newspaper was measured with ten, 7-point semantic differential scales: not qualified/qualified, believable/not believable, not experienced/experienced, knowledgeable/not knowledgeable, untrustworthy/trustworthy, unbiased/biased, reputable/not reputable, ethical/unethical, not objective/objective, and not credible/credible (α = .93). Scores ranged from 11 to 77 and the mean was 55.27 (sd = 11.49).

Behavioral Intent for the E-newspaper. Behavioral intent for the e-newspapers was measured using three, Likert-type scales ranging from (1) unlikely to (5) very likely (α = .84). The three statements were: “What is the likelihood that you will subscribe to the e-newspaper?”; “What is the likelihood that you will return to the e-newspaper sometime in the near future?”; and “What is the likelihood that you will return to the health/travel section of the e-newspaper?” Scores ranged from 3 to 15 and the mean was 7.03 (sd = 3.47).

Moderating Variable. Sponsor motive was measured using four, 5-point Likert scales ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Higher scores indicate lower skepticism (i.e., “good” sponsor motives). The statements were as follows: “Sponsor [name] sponsored the news primarily to sell its product”; “Sponsor [name] had mostly good intentions in sponsoring the news”; “Sponsor [name] sponsored the news primarily because it cares about the news”; and, “Sponsor [name] sponsored the news mostly to advance corporate goals” (α = .84). Scores ranged from 4 to 18 and the mean was 10.26 (sd = 2.96).

Manipulation Check. A manipulation check was conducted during the pre-test phase of the experiment and also as part of the experiment. The statement, “How well did the brand and product/service fit with the story it sponsored?” was measured on the 5-point scale: (1) not very well at all, to (5) very well.

A manipulation check was conducted using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). A significant effect was revealed for sponsor congruity (F [2, 721] = 29.97, p < .0001). High congruity sponsors (M = 3.71, sd = 1.29) were rated as having a better fit than either the medium (M = 3.03, sd = 1.31) or low (M = 2.68, sd = 1.30) congruity sponsors. Tukey’s

Results
HSD test showed significant differences among subjects in the medium-high, low-high, and medium-low conditions \((p < .01)\).

**H1** predicted a linear relationship between sponsor congruity and the three dependent variables related to the sponsors. Results were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), which analyzes multiple variables in a single relationship or set of relationships.\(^42\) This analysis revealed a significant effect for sponsor congruity (Wilks’ Lambda = .94, \(F[6, 744] = 7.26, p < .001\)).\(^43\) Univariate tests revealed significant effects of sponsor congruity on memory for the sponsor \((F[2, 746] = 14.78, p < .001)\), attitude toward the sponsor \((F[2, 746] = 6.12, p < .01)\), and purchase intent for the sponsored product \((F[2, 746] = 3.09, p < .05)\). Tukey’s HSD test showed significant differences in the low-high and medium-high conditions. No significant differences were found for the low-medium condition. Sample means are displayed in Table 1.

**H2** predicted an inverted-U relationship between sponsor congruity and the dependent variables relating to the e-newspapers. Results were analyzed with a MANOVA. Wilks’ Lambda did not detect significant differences in the overall \(F\)-statistic \((p = .19)\). Therefore, Roy’s Largest Root, which tests the null hypothesis in MANOVA, was used \((F[3, 721] = 2.85, p < .05)\).\(^44\) Univariate tests revealed significant effects of sponsor congruity on perceived credibility of the e-newspaper \((F[2, 722] = 3.10, p < .05)\). Memory for news content and behavioral intent for the e-newspaper was not significant. Tukey’s HSD test showed significant differences for the medium-high condition (see Table 2).

**H3** predicted that sponsor motive would moderate effects of sponsor congruity on cognitive responses to e-newspapers. Procedures described by Sharma, Durand, and Gur-arie\(^45\) were used to determine whether sponsor motive behaved like a moderator (versus a mediator)

### Table 1

**Means and Standards Deviations for Main Effects of Sponsor Congruity on Cognitions for the E-Sponsors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Low Congruity ((n=186))</th>
<th>Medium Congruity ((n=377))</th>
<th>High Congruity ((n=186))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory for the Sponsors</td>
<td>(M = 1.03_{abc}) (1.33)</td>
<td>(M = 1.08_{bc}) (1.23)</td>
<td>(M = 1.65_{ca,cb}) (1.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward the Sponsors</td>
<td>(M = 12.27_{abc}) (2.83)</td>
<td>(M = 12.16_{bc}) (2.70)</td>
<td>(M = 13.01_{ca,cb}) (2.88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Intent for the Sponsors</td>
<td>(M = 7.13) (3.10)</td>
<td>(M = 7.07_{bc}) (3.10)</td>
<td>(M = 7.75_{cb}) (3.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subscripts a, b, c on the horizontal axis indicate which means are significantly different from one another at the .05 probability level based on Tukey’s HSD test.
variable. Results revealed that sponsor motive was a Type 1 moderator (i.e., a suppressor variable) because: (1) it did not interact with the predictor, and (2) it was related to one or more criterion variables. Results were subsequently analyzed using a multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) where the same MANOVA used to test H2 was repeated and sponsor motive was entered as a covariate. The analysis revealed a significant effect for sponsor motive (Wilks’ Lambda = .98, $F_{[3, 712]} = 5.56, p < .01$). Univariate tests revealed significant effects of sponsor motive on memory for the content ($F_{[1, 717]} = 14.79, p < .001$) but not behavioral intent ($p < .10$) or perceived credibility of the e-newspapers ($p = .74$).

To further investigate the influence of sponsor motive on the findings, results were analyzed using a series of both bivariate correlations and linear regressions. The bivariate correlations revealed one predictor variable that was significantly related to sponsor congruity: perceived credibility of the e-newspapers ($r = .06, p < .05$). The correlation between sponsor congruity and memory for content ($r = .00$) and sponsor congruity and behavioral intent ($r = .04$) was not significant. To parcel out the effects of sponsor motive, the same bivariate correlations were repeated after entering sponsor motive as an independent variable. The same pattern of results emerged. The correlation between sponsor congruity and perceived credibility was significant ($r = .07, p < .05$), and the correlation between sponsor congruity and memory ($r = .14$) and sponsor congruity and behavioral intent ($r = .09$) was not significant.

Using linear regression, sponsor motive was then regressed on the same three dependent variables. The equations containing sponsor congruity and each dependent variable were not significant. To parcel out the effects of sponsor motive, the regressions were repeated and

### Table 2

**Means and Standards Deviations for Main Effects of Sponsor Congruity on Cognitions for the E-newspapers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Low Congruity (n=183)</th>
<th>Medium Congruity (n=362)</th>
<th>High Congruity (n=180)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory for the News Content</td>
<td>$M = 6.89$ (1.93)</td>
<td>$M = 6.91$ (1.94)</td>
<td>$M = 6.88$ (1.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Credibility of the E-news</td>
<td>$M = 55.54$ (11.33)</td>
<td>$M = 56.07_{bc}$ (11.66)</td>
<td>$M = 53.49_{cb}$ (11.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Intent for the E-news</td>
<td>$M = 7.04$ (3.50)</td>
<td>$M = 7.30$ (3.46)</td>
<td>$M = 6.65$ (3.28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The subscripts a, b, c on the horizontal axis indicate which means are significantly different from one another at the .05 probability level based on Tukey’s HSD test.
sponsor motive was entered into the equations. The equations containing sponsor congruity, sponsor motive, and memory for content ($F[2, 753] = 8.03, p < .0001$, adjusted $R^2 = .02$) and sponsor congruity, sponsor motive, and behavioral intent ($F[2, 749] = 2.97, p = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .01$) were significant. The linear combination of sponsor congruity, sponsor motive, and perceived credibility yielded a nonsignificant effect ($p = .17$).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This research examined psychological effects of sponsorship congruity on e-sponsors and e-newspapers through an online experiment with student and non-student adult subjects. As predicted, sponsorship congruity had a linear effect on sponsor evaluations and revealed that low congruity sponsors had the lowest and high congruity sponsors the highest evaluations. These findings support the traditional view on sponsorship and suggest that relevant sponsorship links are needed for positive sponsor evaluations.

However, these findings say nothing about the effects of sponsor congruity on evaluations of the contexts to which sponsors associate. To examine this, a separate hypothesis was tested. The findings supported the inverted-U prediction in that low and high congruity sponsor links yielded lower evaluations and moderately congruent sponsor links yielded higher evaluations for the e-newspapers. These findings support the incongruity hypothesis, suggesting that sponsorship effects may not be as straightforward as suggested by prior studies.

A third hypothesis that drew on persuasion knowledge was offered to explain the two competing theories. Sponsor motive, as predicted, moderated the effects of sponsor congruity on evaluations of the e-newspapers, in particular the perceived credibility of the e-newspapers. Individuals were more suspicious of sponsor motives in high (versus low or moderate) congruity sponsorships, presumably due to a “change of meaning” that occurred, first, through asking individuals to think about the sponsorship from the sponsor’s viewpoint and, second, through their thinking about the sponsorship from the viewpoint of the e-newspaper. Once thoughts about the latter occurred, the meaning of the sponsorship presumably changed. In effect, pairing high congruity sponsors with relevant news stories increased skepticism toward the sponsor and prompted individuals to question why the sponsors selected a highly relevant news story with which to associate.

Although the congruity hypothesis is a predominant theory used to explain sponsorship effects, these findings suggest that there are limits to what congruity can explain. An alternative, incongruity hypothesis was needed to determine circumstances under which congruity/incongruity can yield positive/negative effects for sponsored contexts. The findings suggest that researchers interested in understanding sponsorship effects must take into account the sponsorship link, the perceived meaning of that link, and separate effects that result from the link—both in terms of the sponsor and the sponsored contexts.

Sponsor motive moderated the effects of sponsor incongruity on evaluations of the e-newspapers. This suggests two things. First, context
has not been examined to a large extent in past sponsorship studies. However, it is clear from these findings that context type mattered when judging and evaluating the sponsor-context link and, hence, should be accounted for in future sponsorship studies.

Next, the findings suggest that the unique nature of editorial contexts might require different types of sponsorship linkages. While a highly congruous match may increase psychological processing of the sponsor, it does so at the reputation of the e-newspaper. In news contexts, a moderate amount of congruity is apparently needed to provide enough “distance” between news and advertising while still providing a relevant link, thus resulting in higher positive evaluations of the e-newspapers. The Persuasion Knowledge Model provided a theoretical framework for understanding this process, suggesting that individuals actively process persuasion tactics and think about the motives of persuasion agents under some circumstances. In the present study, high congruity sponsors presumably “blurred” editorial/advertising bounds resulting in higher levels of skepticism about the sponsor’s motives, which decreased evaluations of the e-newspaper presumably through the change of meaning hypothesis. An implication is that the perceived meaning of sponsor-context alignments can change depending on whether individuals are asked to focus on the sponsor, the context, or both.

These findings suggest that context type is an important factor to take into consideration when examining sponsorship effects. In the present study, individuals appeared to think about the sponsor-context link, as indicated by their evaluations of the sponsor’s motives. Two implications follow. First, the findings suggest that different sponsored contexts can produce different outcomes depending on the nature of those contexts. Past sponsorship studies have focused primarily on entertaining contexts such as sporting events, the arts, and, to a lesser degree, social causes. Individuals in these contexts are highly involved with the event or cause, which may be different than contexts that support Internet sponsorships. Online, sponsors can integrate with Web site content so seamlessly that the sponsor can become part of the content itself. This was evidenced to some degree after parceling out sponsor motive from memory for the news content. An implication is that nontraditional contexts may require different theories and concepts that are unique to and capture nuances with a nontraditional environment. A second implication is that cognitive processing of Internet sponsorships may be more extensive than previously thought of with sports or social cause sponsorships. At present, there is disagreement over just how much sponsorships can accomplish in terms of psychological processes. Some scholars have found that sponsorships are best for increasing brand awareness, whereas others have shown that sponsorships can influence higher-order psychological and behavioral processes including attitude change and purchase intentions. According to this study, Internet sponsorships would appear to conform to the latter expectations.

Practically speaking, the findings suggest that the rule of thumb—to select a relevant context to sponsor—is too simplistic. In the present study, sponsors benefited from matching with highly congruent content
and accomplished the goal of increasing brand awareness (memory),
brand liking (attitude toward the ad), and behavioral intent (purchase
intent for the product). However, companies that use sponsorship as a
form of advertising must also consider long-term goals and conse-
quences. Sponsored contexts that are hurt by advertising practices, in
the long run, also hurt advertisers that sponsor these contexts. An im-
pli cation is that advertisers need to be aware of the effects of their sponsor-
ship practices. Advertisers want highly credible environments in which
to sponsor; however, if certain forms of sponsorship hurt those contexts,
advertisers should guard against using such practices.

An implication is that sponsorship policies are needed. In printed
newspapers, there are policies about the structure and format of print
ads. For instance, print ads of an “editorial” nature (called advertorials)
are distinguished from news content by using different fonts/sizes and
are labeled as commercial content. Similar policies are needed for e-
sponsorships in editorial environments online. For instance, a simple
ruled line that separates a sponsor from the news story may help to dis-
tinguish between the commercial message and the editorial content.
This would provide a standardized guideline for sponsorship use across
e-newspapers and decrease potential confusion resulting from the use of
sponsorships in news contexts. An implication is that more attention
should be devoted to thinking about the structure and format of spon-
sorships to minimize risks and maximize benefits to e-newspapers that
use this marketing tactic.

Last, past sponsorship studies have focused primarily on tradi-
tional sponsorship contexts and have not kept pace with sponsorships
in new media environments such as the Internet. An extension of these
findings is that more attention is needed to examine alternative contexts
in which sponsorships appear. E-sponsorships are a predominant form
of Internet advertising used by Web sites of all types. If the Internet, due
to its content-heavy context, prompts individuals to pay greater atten-
tion to certain forms of e-sponsorships, an implication is that the
Internet may be a better environment in which to sponsor, particularly
for organizations that want highly credible contexts at an affordable
cost.

The sponsorships employed here were fictitious and were based
on hypothetical associations to represent extreme (although not unreal-
istic) manipulations of sponsorship congruity/incongruity. The spon-
sorship links may have provided participants with only one kind of
sponsor/product information. Follow-up studies can overcome this
limitation by testing the effects of other types of sponsor/product infor-
mation. Additionally, the context examined was a news Web site.
Companies sponsor a variety of Internet sites and the effects of sponsor-
ships in different types of sites will need to be examined as well. Last,
the Change of Meaning hypothesis was used to explain the moderating
effects of sponsor motive on sponsor congruity. The assumption is that
a change of meaning can occur after time is spent with the persuasion
tactic. No study to date has isolated how much time is enough time to
prompt a change of meaning. In this study, subjects were given nine
minutes to read each news story. The findings appeared to support a change of meaning, as demonstrated by the change in evaluations about the sponsors and the sponsored contexts. However, more research is needed to isolate how much time is needed for this process to occur as well as the precise nature of this process.

As Internet sponsorships continue to grow in popularity, additional research is needed to understand their effects on evaluations of sponsors and sponsored contexts. Brands that participate in advertising practices that hurt the reputations of contexts to which they associate ultimately hurt themselves by decreasing consumer trust in the brand and the context in which the brand advertises.

NOTES


25. Rodgers, Cameron, and Brill, “Ad Placement.”


34. Friestad and Wright, “The Persuasion Knowledge Model.”


41. James Crimmins and Martin Horn, “Sponsorship: From Management Ego Trip to Marketing Success,” *Journal of Advertising Research*


44. Because Roy’s Largest Root tests the discriminant function of the dependent variables for its ability to discern group differences, it provides a slightly more conservative estimate of power than Wilks’ Lambda (see Keselman et al., “Statistical Practices of Educational Researchers”).


47. For justification, see Rodgers, “The Effects of Sponsor.”


49. Cameron and Curtin, “Tracing Sources of Information Pollution.”