

**Examining the impact of group cohesiveness in multi-athlete
sponsorship and endorsement: An experimental study**

Alain d'Astous
HEC Montréal
alain.dastous@hec.ca

Nour Zahouani
Intac Assurance
nour.zahouani@hec.ca

Lilia Boujbel
TELUQ

ABSTRACT

In this research, two marketing communication strategies commonly used by firms to promote their products and brands in the context of sports marketing are compared: athlete sponsorship and endorsement. In contrast with previous research which has usually examined the impact of these strategies on brand attitude and purchase intention in dyadic settings (i.e., one brand and one athlete), this research considers the case where more than one athlete are involved. The results of an experimental study show that brand attitude and purchase intention depend on the inferences that consumers make as regards the commercial motivations of the brand when it engages in these strategies. These inferences are shown to be affected by the type of partnership (i.e., sponsorship *versus* endorsement) as well as by the perceived cohesiveness of the athletes who are either sponsored or act as spokespersons for the brand.

Because they attract millions of fans, sporting events offer significant communication marketing opportunities for firms wanting to promote their products and brands. While advertising certainly is an obvious way to do so, the sponsorship and endorsement of athletes represent two alternative and efficient marketing communication tools to reach markets of interest (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2014). The research presented in this paper focuses on these two strategies and attempts to contribute to the research literature in two ways: firstly, by contrasting them relative to their effects on usual consumer outcomes, such as brand attitude and intention to buy, and secondly, by examining how the number and cohesiveness of sponsored athletes or athletes that act as endorsers of a brand also affects these outcomes.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Athlete sponsorship

The sponsorship of athletes is a common marketing communication tool employed by firms (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2015). In this situation, the firm (i.e., the sponsor) provides an athlete or a group of athletes (e.g., a team) some financial assistance to cover various expenses such as travel and training costs, apparel, equipment, etc. In return, the sponsor is allowed to display its brand on various platforms associated with the sponsored entities, like the players' clothing, banners on the event's site, or ads presented during events. Research has shown that sponsorship increases brand awareness and sales (Speed and Thompson, 2000) and impacts a brand's image through relevant associations that are transferred from the sponsored entities to the brand (Meenaghan, 2005). For instance, by being the official provider of training and competition outfits for French athletes at the 2024 Olympic games, the French sportswear and sports equipment brand *Le Coq Sportif* wished to boost the level of attention to the brand among consumers and at the same time create the impression that the sport equipment available in its retail outlets and online is synonymous with great competitive performance.

Athlete endorsement

Athlete endorsement is another common athlete-brand partnership strategy employed by firms to promote their brands and products. In this case, one or more famous athletes get paid to act as spokespersons (or ambassadors) for the brand, typically through advertising (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2014; Keel and Nataarajan, 2012). For example, the basketball star James Harden has been associated with Adidas since 2015 in a long-term contract estimated at 200 million dollars (Fashion Network, 2015; see Henry, 2024 for more examples). Research on the use of celebrities as brand endorsers has shown that this communication tool generates more favorable brand evaluations (Silvera and Austad, 2004), leads to better memory of ads (Misra and Beatty, 1990), and greater brand awareness (Erdogan and Baker, 1999).

Consumer inferences

While sponsorship and endorsement both correspond to a partnership between brands and athletes, they are likely to lead to different inferences by consumers. A brand that associates itself with famous athletes may be perceived as motivated mainly by financial objectives. In contrast, a brand that helps athletes in their sporting career through sponsorship might be seen as driven by altruistic motivations. Unfortunately, research that contrasts endorsement and sponsorship are scarce. A study conducted by Carrillat and d'Astous (2014; see also d'Astous, Lmokhtari, and Boujbel, 2024) has shown that in the case of sponsorship, the athlete is seen as needing the support of the

brand and therefore as having less power relative to the brand. However, the opposite is true for endorsers since in that case it is the brand that needs the fame of the athlete to increase its perceived value. These findings are consistent with the idea that brands that use endorsement as a marketing communication strategy may be perceived as mainly seeking to attain commercial objectives whereas those that use sponsorship would be considered, at least partly, as being driven by altruistic motives. Thus, inferred commercial motivations appear to mediate the relationship between the type of brand-athlete partnership (i.e., sponsorship or endorsement) and consumer outcomes (i.e., brand attitude and intention to buy).

Multiple entities and their cohesiveness

Research that has examined the impact of athlete sponsorship and athlete brand endorsement has been typically limited to dyadic partnerships, that is, one brand and one athlete. However, it is common to encounter situations where more than one athlete are either sponsored (e.g., the case of sponsoring a team) or act as endorsers, although the latter is less frequent (see Singh, 2023, for a discussion of a well-known example). Because, in these situations, several athletes are involved, the relationships among them, notably their degree of cohesiveness, deserve to be examined. The case of sponsorship portfolios offers some insights to address this issue. Firms often invest in more than one sponsorship, creating so-called portfolios of sponsorships. Research in this area has shown that the congruence among the sponsorships has a positive impact on brand credibility (Rifon *et al.*, 2004), brand recognition, and attitude toward the sponsorships (Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006). Chien, Cornwell, and Pappu (2011) argue that a cohesive set of sponsorships contributes to creating a unified, more meaningful and clearer brand personality.

Having a sponsorship portfolio is different from sponsoring or being endorsed by a group of entities (e.g., athletes). Whereas sponsorship portfolios consist in commercial activities that may occur sequentially and independently, in the two latter situations, the brand's partners are associated with a brand through single marketing communication messages. The entities' degree of cohesiveness may lead to different consumer inferences regarding the firm's commercial *versus* altruistic motivations. In the case of endorsement by more than one athlete spokespersons, firms are generally proactive in selecting spokespersons and have total control over the composition of the group. Choosing a set of non-cohesive athlete endorsers may be perceived as a strategy to reach different target markets to optimize the brand's commercial impact. In multi-athlete sponsorship however, the athletes have less power relative to the brand. Because they need financial support from firms, they are generally proactive in trying to establish such partnership. Therefore, in this situation, firms typically have less liberty to decide the degree to which the sponsored athletes are interconnected. Hence, consumers may not naturally form inferences regarding the sponsor's motivations. Consequently, the perceived cohesiveness of the group of sponsored athletes should not affect the inferences made by consumers as regards the commercial motivations of the brand.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The conceptual model that has guided this research is displayed in Figure 1.

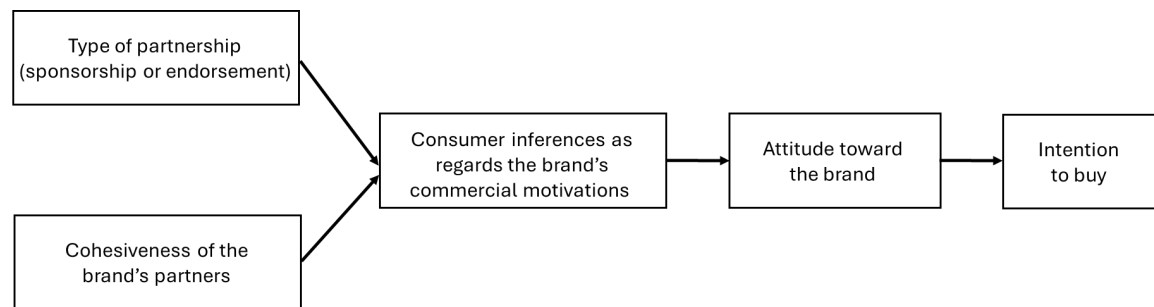


Figure 1. The conceptual model

The following research hypotheses are derived from this model and the preceding discussion:

H1: Consumer inferences as regards the commercial motivations of the brand play a mediating role in the relationships between the type of partnership (sponsorship or endorsement), the cohesiveness of the athletes participating in the partnership, and attitude toward the brand.

H2: Consumer inferences as regards the commercial motivations of the brand are stronger in the case of athletes acting as endorsers for the brand than in the case of athletes being sponsored by the brand.

H3: When the type of partnership is brand endorsement, the perceived cohesiveness of the group of endorsing athletes is negatively associated with consumer inferences as regards the commercial motivations of the brand.

H4: Consumer inferences as regards the commercial motivations of the brand are negatively associated with attitude toward the brand.

H5: Attitude toward the brand plays a mediating role in the relationship between perceived commercial motivations and intention to buy.

METHOD

The research hypotheses were tested by means of a 3×2 completely randomized factorial design combining the type of partnership (2 levels: sponsorship *versus* endorsement) and the degree of cohesiveness of the athletes (3 levels: a single athlete *versus* a cohesive group of this athlete with three other athletes *versus* a non-cohesive group of this athlete with three other athletes). The latter factor includes a one athlete 'group' condition that serves as a comparison point as well as a level that can be interpreted as a maximum degree of cohesiveness.

A preliminary study was conducted with 40 adult consumers with the objective of defining the experimental stimuli. Short-track speed skating was selected as sport because it is very popular in the country where the data were collected (Canada) and involves a limited number of athletes. Based on perceived familiarity and appreciation, the very popular French-Canadian speed skater Charles Hamelin (<https://olympique.ca/team-canada/charles-hamelin/>) was chosen to form the one-athlete experimental condition. Three other skaters of lesser notoriety were chosen to

complete the group of athletes. CCM was selected as the focal brand since it triggered positive, but not excessive familiarity and appreciation.

A convenience sample of 180 adult consumers (females: 46.7%; full-time workers: 75.1%; mean age: 37.3; college degree or more: 79.0%) participated in the experiment. They were selected by means of a questionnaire drop-off delivery procedure in residential areas of a large Canadian city (610 residences visited, contact rate = 69.3%, acceptance rate = 48.7%, final response rate = 91.9%). The participants were exposed in the questionnaire to a fictitious one-page realistic online article that varied according to the experimental condition they were in. The article first presented Charles Hamelin, mentioning that he had recently become either a sponsored athlete or an endorser for the CCM brand. To help the participants to understand the stimulus information, a short definition of the marketing communication tool corresponding to their experimental condition (i.e., sponsorship or endorsement) was provided. In the one-athlete condition, no further relevant information was added, whereas in the cohesive and non-cohesive group conditions, the article mentioned that Hamelin joined a group of three athletes who were described as forming with him either a cohesive group (tight-knit group, common objectives, training together, knowing each other well, participating together in several promotional activities for CCM) or a non-cohesive group (different stages in their career, different objectives, not knowing each other well, participating together in few promotional activities). A stimulus example is presented in the Appendix (in French).

The participants answered various questions after having looked at the experimental stimuli. Intention to buy a CCM product was assessed by a 11-point (0%-100%) scale. A 5-item additive scale was used to measure brand attitude (the CCM brand: bad/good quality, negative/positive opinion, does not like/like, inferior/superior to other brands, and undependable/dependable, see MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). A nine-item additive scale was used to measure the perceived commercial objectives of the firm (e.g., "By [sponsoring/using Charles Hamelin a spokesperson], CCM is motivated by a desire to reach commercial objectives"; see Rifon *et al.*, 2004). In addition, the perceived cohesiveness of the group of athletes was measured with an adapted 16-item scale developed by Lickel *et al.* (2000) to assess a group's degree of entitativity (i.e., the extent to which they form a unified entity). In the case of additive measures, 7-point bipolar numerical scales were employed for each item and the mean of the items served as an indicator of the concept.

RESULTS

Psychometric assessment

The three multi-item scales were found to be unidimensional and reliable: entitativity, $\alpha = 0.95$; perceived commercial motivations, $\alpha = 0.80$; attitude toward the brand, $\alpha = 0.90$.

Manipulation checks

As expected, the mean degree of perceived cohesiveness (entitativity) is significantly higher in the cohesive group conditions ($F_{[1, 117]} = 23.77, p < .001$), showing that the manipulation was successful. In this analysis, the effect of type of partnership as well as that of the partnership \times cohesiveness interaction were not statistically significant.

Test of the research hypotheses

The research hypotheses were tested by mean of ANOVA models. An ANOVA model using as dependent variable perceived commercial motivations and as independent variables the type of partnership and group cohesiveness led to a statistically significant main effect of type of partnership. No other effect was statistically significant. As predicted by H2, perceived commercial motivations are stronger in the endorsement (mean = 5.27) than in the sponsorship conditions (mean = 5.01) ($F_{[1, 175]} = 4.20, p < .05$). In addition, in this analysis the effect of group cohesiveness on perceived commercial motivations is statistically significant ($F_{[2, 87]} = 3.33, p < .05$) in the case of endorsement but not in that of sponsorship ($p > .65$). In support of H3, the perceived commercial motivations are stronger in the non-cohesive group (mean = 5.56), followed by the cohesive group (mean = 5.21), and the single athlete condition (mean = 5.03). An ANOVA model using attitude toward CCM as dependent variable and type of partnership, cohesiveness of the group, and perceived commercial motivations as independent variables led to a statistically significant effect of perceived commercial motivations ($F_{[1, 174]} = 4.87, p < .05$) and no other statistically significant effect, a result that is consistent with a full mediating effect of perceived commercial motivations, in support of H1. Also, as predicted by H4, in this analysis perceived commercial motivations are negatively correlated with brand attitude ($r = -0.13, p < 0.05$, one-tailed test). Finally, an ANOVA model using as dependent variable intention to buy and as independent variables all the other variables in the conceptual model (see Figure 1) led a statistically significant and positive effect of attitude toward CCM ($F_{[1, 171]} = 39.65, p < .001$) and no other statistically significant effects, giving support to H5.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this experimental study show that the type of athlete-brand partnership has an impact on the nature of inferences that consumers make. In general, athlete endorsement leads consumers to think to a greater extent that the brand engages in such partnership with the main objective of obtaining commercial benefits. In turn, making these inferences has a negative impact on brand attitude and ultimately on purchase intention. Interestingly, the results also show that commercial inferences are attenuated when the group of endorsing athletes is perceived as cohesive. Thus, firms that wish to use a group of athletes as spokespersons for their brands should either select a group of athletes that is naturally perceived as close-knit or, if this is not the case, try to emphasize in their marketing communication their interconnectedness (e.g., images of the endorsers training together, having fun together in some social setting, participating together in promotional activities). However, commercial inferences are most attenuated when there is a single athlete endorser (i.e., maximum cohesiveness).

The athlete sponsorship strategy appears to be safer as regards the attributions that consumers make with respect to the commercial benefits that the brand seeks to obtain. Nevertheless, it might be a good idea in this situation for firms to insist in their marketing communications on the support that the brand offers to the group of sponsored athletes in order to crystalize even more in the minds of consumers the idea that the brand is guided by altruistic motives. As the results of this study show, consumer inferences as regard the brand's commercial motivations do not depend on the perceived cohesiveness of the group of sponsored athletes. Thus, this should not be a factor of concern when elaborating the sponsorship programme.

REFERENCES

- Carrillat, F. A. and d'Astous, A. (2014), "Power Imbalance Issues in Athlete Sponsorship *versus* Endorsement in the Context of a Scandal", *European Journal of Marketing*, 48(5), 1070-1090.
- Carrillat, F. A. and d'Astous, A. (2015), "Sponsorship", in *Wiley Encyclopedia of Management*, 3rd edition, Vol. 9 (Marketing), eds. N. Lee and A. Farrell, 1-7.
- Chien, P. M., Cornwell, T. B., and Pappu, R. (2011), "Sponsorship Portfolio as a Brand-Image Creation Strategy", *Journal of Business Research*, 64(2), 142-149.
- d'Astous, A., Lmokhtari, I., and Boujbel, L. (2024), "Assessing the Impact of Scandals on Brand Attitude in Sport Sponsorship *versus* Endorsement," paper presented at the 23rd International Marketing Trends Conference, Venice, Italy.
- Erdogan, B. Z. and Baker, M. J. (1999), "Celebrity Endorsement: Advertising Agency Managers' Perspective", *Cyber-Journal of Sport Marketing* 3(3).
- Henry, A. J. (2024), "The Top 10 Highest Endorsed Athletes and their Brands": <https://blog.hollywoodbranded.com/the-top-10-highest-endorsed-athletes-and-their-brands>
- Keel, A. and Nataarajan R. (2012), "Celebrity Endorsements and Beyond: New Avenues for Celebrity Branding", *Psychology & Marketing*, 29(9), 690-703.
- Lickel, B., Hamilton, D. L., Wierzchowska, G., Lewis, A., Sherman, S. J., and Uhles, A. N. (2000), "Varieties of Groups and the Perception of Group Entitativity", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(2), 223-246.
- MacKenzie, S. B. and Lutz, R. J. (1989), "An Empirical Examination of the Structural Antecedents of Attitude toward the Ad in an Advertising Pretesting Context", *Journal of Marketing*, 53(2), 48-65.
- Meenaghan, T. (2005), "Evaluating Sponsorship Effects", *Global Sports Sponsorship*, 12(2), 243-265.
- Misra, S. and Beatty, S. E. (1990), "Celebrity Spokesperson and Brand Congruence: An Assessment of Recall and Affect", *Journal of Business Research*, 21(2), 195-213.
- Rifon, N. J., Choi, S. M., Trimble, C. S., and Li, H. (2004), "Congruence Effects in Sponsorship: The Mediating Role of Sponsor Credibility and Consumer Attributions of Sponsor Motive", *Journal of Advertising*, 33(1), 29-42.
- Silvera, D. H. and Austad, B. (2004), "Factors Predicting the Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsement Advertisements", *European Journal of Marketing*, 38(11/12), 1509-26.
- Simmons, C. J. and Becker-Olsen, K. L (2006), "Achieving Marketing Objectives through Social Sponsorships", *Journal of Marketing*, 70(4), 154-169.
- Singh, J. (2023), "Tiger Woods and Roger Federer Came Together to Stop Thinking About 'Yesterday' in an Iconic Commercial in 2008": <https://www.essentiallysports.com/golf-atp-soccer-news-tiger-woods-and-roger-federer-came-together-to-stop-thinking-about-yesterday-in-an-iconic-commercial-in-2008/>
- Speed, R. and Thompson, P. (2000), "Determinants of Sports Sponsorship Response", *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 28(2), 226-238.

Appendix

Experimental stimulus (condition: sponsorship, cohesive group)

Extrait *La Presse canadienne*,

Le mardi 26 juin 2022

Hamelin, nouvel athlète commandité par CCM

Lors d'une conférence de presse tenue à l'hôtel Delta de Montréal la semaine dernière, des représentants de la marque **CCM** ont annoncé un nouveau partenariat avec le patineur de vitesse canadien **Charles Hamelin** qu'ils commanditent à présent. En tant qu'athlète commandité, Charles Hamelin aura dorénavant le support financier et matériel de CCM, lui permettant ainsi de poursuivre sa carrière.

Le directeur des relations publiques de CCM, Yves Toupin, s'est dit enchanté de la conclusion de ce partenariat : « Charles Hamelin correspond parfaitement aux valeurs que notre entreprise veut mettre de l'avant auprès de ses clients : persévérance, goût de l'effort et dépassement. Nous sommes confiants qu'en tant que commanditaire officiel de cet athlète, nous contribuerons grâce à notre support à la poursuite de ses objectifs de carrière et à son succès ». Hamelin, qui était à la recherche d'un commanditaire depuis quelques temps afin de le soutenir dans ses futurs projets professionnels s'est à son tour dit très heureux que CCM lui accorde sa confiance.



Hamelin devient le quatrième athlète commandité par CCM, aux côtés de Guillaume Bastille, Patrick Duffy et Samuel Girard.

Ce quatuor de patineurs de courte piste forme un groupe très soudé. En effet, ils se sont tous les quatre qualifiés pour faire partie de l'équipe canadienne et s'entraînent ensemble avec le même objectif : remporter le maximum de médailles en patinage de vitesse lors des prochains Jeux Olympiques d'hiver. Ces patineurs sont motivés par une profonde fierté de représenter le Canada à un niveau international.

Les quatre patineurs se connaissent très bien, et auront également l'occasion de collaborer en dehors des pistes de vitesse pour des activités publicitaires plusieurs fois par année.