The pivotal roles of product knowledge and corporate social responsibility in event sponsorship effectiveness

Russell Lacey a,⁎, Angeline G. Close b,†, R. Zachary Finney c,2

a University of New Orleans, Kirschman Hall, 332, 2000 Lakeshore Drive, New Orleans, LA 70148, United States
b University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154, United States
c University of South Alabama, MCOB #356, Mobile, AL 36688-0002, United States

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ABSTRACT
The authors apply consumer theories of cognition to event marketing specifically in relation to corporate sponsorships. Upon conducting field surveys with attendees (n = 1636) at an international sporting event with a multinational sponsor, the authors demonstrate the pivotal roles that 1) attendees’ knowledge regarding the sponsor’s product, and 2) perception of the sponsor’s commitment to corporate social responsibility have on successful event sponsorship. Specifically, structural model results show how attendees’ knowledge of the event sponsor’s products and perceptions of the sponsor as socially responsible enhance attendees’ commitment to the sponsor and intentions to purchase the sponsor’s products. These results provide scholars and managers with means of improving event marketing communications.

1. Introduction

Many marketing managers are shifting portions of tight promotional budgets from traditional advertising options to event sponsorships and community-based event marketing, as evidenced in part by a projected six percent growth in sponsorship investments in North America (International Events Group, 2009). This trend is especially pronounced when firms seek to demonstrate to their customer base that they are socially responsible in times of tight economic conditions and corporate scrutiny. While consumers demand social responsibility, industry demands that marketers replace instinctive event marketing methods with quantifiable, scientific approaches to effective event marketing and sponsorship.

Despite shifts towards community-based event marketing, questions remain about consumer perceptions and the role of event sponsor’s perceived corporate social responsibility as determinants of effective event sponsorship. Drawing from consumer theories in cognition, little is known regarding how attendees’ perceptions of the sponsor as socially responsible are shadowed by their existing experience with and knowledge of a sponsor’s products. Further questions surround how such product knowledge may influence attendees’ willingness to become committed customers of the sponsor.

These questions are embedded in a broader issue concerning how sponsorships of community-based events by large, multinational firms may influence local residents’ perceptions of the firm’s commitment to social responsibility. The authors examine how product knowledge may drive event attendees’ perceptions of the sponsor as more socially responsible. Such perceptions could, in turn, increase attendees’ commitment to the sponsor and intentions to buy the sponsor’s products.

This study builds on extant consumer theories that explain the respective importance of product knowledge and perception of the commitment to corporate social responsibility on event sponsor effectiveness. Specifically, the two main objectives of this study are:

1) to examine how attendees’ existing knowledge of an event sponsor’s products impacts their perceptions of the sponsor as being socially responsible;
2) to explain how attendees’ product knowledge and assessments of sponsor’s demonstration of social responsibility influence commitment to the sponsor and intentions to purchase the sponsor’s products.

To accomplish the objectives, a test model is used based on the 1636 field surveys collected at a professional cycling event.

The study’s main contribution is that it establishes how product knowledge and perception of commitment to corporate social responsibility each plays pivotal roles in determining consumers’ perceptions of an event sponsor and their intentions regarding that sponsor. The study reveals how attendees with existing product knowledge report more favorable associations about the sponsor, as a result of their attendance at the sponsored event. Corporate social
responsibility (CSR) mediates this relationship, revealing, therefore, that demonstrations of CSR favorably influence the positive outcomes for firms that engage in successful event sponsorships. Studies based on field data from sponsored events are relatively rare. Furthermore, as scholars have conducted few real-world, event marketing studies, these findings allow scholars to better understand how attendees' prior knowledge of an event sponsor's offerings impacts event-sponsorship outcomes. Also, these findings speak to venue managers and sponsors who are associated with the more than 40,000 sponsored events held annually in the U.S. alone.

This article proceeds as follows. First, the researchers present a brief background of sponsorship and event marketing as the context of the research. This background leads to a section examining the underlying theories of cognition, which inform the conceptual model. After developing the supporting hypotheses, the researchers describe their fieldwork at a professional cycling event that drew over 500,000 attendees in twelve host cities. The researchers then present the findings from structural equation modeling analyses. The paper closes with: a) the study's major contributions, b) the theoretical and managerial implications, and c) the limitations and avenues for future research.

2. Sponsorships and event marketing

Scholars define sponsorship as an investment in an activity in exchange for access to the commercial potential associated with that activity (Meenaghan, 1991). The sponsorship fee makes the event possible, while the sponsor receives access to the event attendees (and, hence, the potential to change the attendees' attitudes or behaviors) (Cornwell and Coote, 2005). Sponsorship entails two activities: an exchange with the event or venue and then communication of the association where the sponsor leverages that association with other marketing initiatives (Cornwell and Maigan, 1998).

Financial return on sponsorship investment is often only one goal of sponsors. Companies may financially invest in sponsorship, donate products and services in communities, or promote social causes in order to be a good citizen or give something back to the community or society (Bovair et al., 2002). As consumers are expected to like the social components of sponsorships (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006), sponsoring a healthy event in consumers' communities may play a valuable role in strengthening those consumers' commitment to the sponsor. Scholars, however, have yet to focus on how existing product knowledge influences the attendees' perception of sponsors as socially responsible.

Event marketing links a company's brand to an activity for the purpose of creating experiences for attendees and promoting a product or service. The synergies between sponsorships and event marketing encourage their joint application. Whereas sponsorship alone has a limited ability to relay specific product information, event marketing at sponsored events increases the quantity and types of information firms can convey to consumers (Grohs et al., 2004). Events are experience oriented and attendees voluntarily participate in such events; a potential advantage of sponsoring such experience-oriented events is that firms can gain wide exposure for their brands among large audiences (Close et al., 2006).

3. Theories of cognition in the context of sponsored events

Sponsoring events can build brand awareness and strengthen brand image through the transfer of the association with the event to the sponsors (Javalgi et al., 1994). Such transfers may increase firms' access to consumer segments that may not otherwise interact with the sponsor (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2006). If consumers and sponsors are both to make the most of event sponsorships, and the transfers between them, sponsors must reach consumers at a cognitive level. Extant theories explain how knowledge helps drive consumers' evaluations, processing of marketing, and responses to sponsorship messages (Roy and Cornwell, 2004). Sujan (1985) tests a cognitive theory and reveals that consumers with little information employ category-based information processing based on extant knowledge of the product category (e.g., cell phones). However, consumers who are knowledgeable about a given product (e.g., iphones), form attitudes and perceptions based on attribute information. Consumers' level of knowledge influences their ability to map attributes from a base domain to a more specific target. Yet, without base knowledge, or with little base knowledge, consumers will have difficulty perceiving the connections between the base domain and the target, as they do not draw from their schema to understand these relationships (Gregan-Paxton and Roedder-John, 1997; Moore and Homer, 2008; Roy and Cornwell, 2004).

Despite the prior research, scholars know little about the associations between attendees' extant knowledge of a sponsor's products and their assessments of the sponsor as socially responsible. Moreover, scholars also do not understand how event attendees' prior product knowledge of a sponsor influences their commitment to the event sponsor.

4. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

4.1. Product knowledge

Consumers' product knowledge represents product-related experience and accumulated information (Tsai, 2007). Consumers interpret product information based on knowledge activated at the time of comprehension (Lee and Olshavsky, 1954). In sponsorship terms, product knowledge relates to the familiarity, experience, expertise, and use of the sponsor's products. Thus, consumers may already possess product knowledge about the sponsor prior to attending a sponsored event. Yet, event sponsorship better equips attendees with relevant information, feelings, and experiences that can reaffirm and strengthen any extant knowledge about a sponsor's products.

Consumer responses to brand-building marketing activities may depend on the strength of the product knowledge the consumers' already possess. Consumers' familiarity with the sponsor influences their perceptions of the sponsor's products (Meenaghan, 1991). Consumers need some knowledge of a sponsoring firm's products in order to establish perceptions of those products. That is, attendees will have difficulty forming positive perceptions of an event's sponsor if they know nothing about the sponsor's products. An established research stream covers how product knowledge influences consumer perception (e.g., Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Brucks, 1985). These studies conclude that consumers first experience a mere exposure effect when introduced to a product. Then, as a consumer becomes aware of a product, his or her attitude toward that product becomes more positive (Zajonc and Markus, 1982). In turn, event sponsorships can deepen product awareness and knowledge as consumers are engaged in the sponsored activity.

In addition to product usage experiences, knowledgeable consumers develop their product knowledge structure through a central route of systematic, cognitive processing of marketing information (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 2004; Tsai, 2007). Consumers need product knowledge to form social associations about the event sponsor and to establish a preference for the sponsor's products. Product knowledge influences consumer response to marketing activities linking the event sponsor to social causes and to community events. Knowledgeable consumers are more engaged with the company and its community activities (Algesheimer et al., 2005), a component of corporate social responsibility.

4.2. Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Scholars define corporate social responsibility as a firm's status and activities related to its perceived societal obligations and interests
(Brown and Dacin, 1997). CSR extends beyond ethical firm behaviors. A firm has a moral obligation to make an overall positive contribution to the communities in which it operates (Maigainan et al., 1999; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Much of the CSR literature focuses on how managers can increase consumers’ perceptions of their firms as socially responsible and, thereby, improve their firms’ performance (e.g., Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009).

Firms increasingly demonstrate CSR through sponsorships. In particular, social sponsorships can improve attendees’ perceptions of a sponsoring entity (Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006). Firms may use event sponsorships to signal corporate values, such as John Hancock’s annual sponsorship of the Boston Marathon and American Airlines’ corporate sponsorship of Susan G. Komen for the Cure. This study examines whether a sponsorship from a for-profit source can improve attendees’ perceptions of the event sponsor as socially responsible.

Product knowledge enhances consumers’ perceptions of the sponsors’ products (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Sheinin and Biehal, 1999), and strong attendee perceptions of the sponsor’s CSR positively impact attendees’ purchase intentions directly and indirectly (Berger et al., 2007; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). Thus, the researchers examine both direct and indirect links from product knowledge to the perceived CSR of the sponsor, purchase intent, and commitment to the event sponsor. The next part of this section discusses commitment to event sponsor.

4.3. Commitment to event sponsor

Commitment to an event sponsor describes a consumer’s psychological or emotional attachment to a sponsoring firm and its products within product class/es (Lastovicka and Gardner, 1977; Pillai and Goldsmith, 2008). Specifically, commitment entails preference and reluctance to seek competing brands. Commitment to an event sponsor represents an affinity for the sponsor; commitment occurs when attendees prefer an event sponsor’s offerings. What happens if a firm sponsors an event or a charity that resonates with attendees as socially responsible? Such a sponsorship should strengthen attendees’ commitment to the event sponsor because of the favorable association for the sponsor.

Marketing theorists have established that a relationship exists between product knowledge and psychological commitment (e.g., Leung et al., 2005). Thus, product knowledge is the basis for a consumer’s commitment to an event sponsor. For example, sponsorships of sporting events in local communities provide a context for attendees to maintain product awareness of a telecommunications company that services their community. At the same time, attendees become aware of the company’s support of cancer research through its event sponsorship. In turn, knowledge activated at the sponsored event may enhance attendees’ perceptions of the sponsor as more socially responsible and commitment-worthy.

Previous research has shown that CSR initiatives lead to positive consumer attitudes and intentions toward the firm (e.g., Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Berens et al., 2005). Attendees at a sponsored event may not only experience heightened awareness of the sponsor’s CSR efforts but may also strengthen attendees’ commitment to the sponsor. CSR associations have a greater impact on attendee attitudes when the corporate sponsor is visible (Sheinin and Biehal, 1999), such as at an event with signage, exhibits, product displays, and sales professionals representing the sponsor.

4.4. Purchase intention

Firms sponsor events to elicit a variety of consumer responses, including increased interest in purchasing the firm’s products. Purchase intent is the likelihood that a consumer will buy a product. Scholars investigating the impact of sponsorship on purchase intention suggest that it is context dependent. While several studies find that sponsorship effectiveness positively influences purchase intentions (e.g., Close et al., 2006; Cornwell and Coote, 2005; Sneath et al., 2005), some find either weak or no support (e.g., Hoek et al., 1997; Javalgi et al., 1994). Thus, the authors present six hypotheses that suggest linkages that can help sponsored event marketing effectiveness in the context of a professional cycling event.

4.5. Hypotheses and model

Thus, based on the literature and conceptual framework, the article tests the following hypotheses via consumers’ self reports of their actual experiences at a sponsored event:

H1. An attendee’s knowledge of the sponsor’s products will have a positive impact on the attendee’s perceptions that the sponsor is socially responsible.

H2. An attendee’s knowledge of the sponsor’s products will strengthen his or her commitment to the event sponsor.

H3. An attendee’s knowledge of the sponsor’s products will strengthen his or her purchase intentions for the sponsor’s products.

H4. An attendee’s perceptions that a sponsor is more socially responsible will strengthen his or her commitment to the event sponsor.

H5. An attendee’s perceptions that a sponsor is more socially responsible will strengthen his or her purchase intentions for the sponsor’s products.

H6. An attendee’s commitment to the event sponsor will increase his or her purchase intentions for the sponsor’s products.

Fig. 1 displays the hypothesized model. In short, the model predicts that the attendee will positively link his or her existing knowledge of the sponsor’s product with a stronger perception of the sponsor’s CSR. Moreover, the positive effects of attendees’ existing product knowledge of the event sponsor are expected to also directly and indirectly influence their level of commitment to the event sponsor and purchase intentions for the sponsor’s products.

5. Methods

5.1. The event and title sponsor

As sporting activities account for more than two-thirds of all sponsorship spending in North America (Marketing News, 2008), the 2007 Tour de Georgia (TDG) was chosen as a sporting event context with international interest. The TDG is a seven-day sporting event that consists of a 667-mile cycling race and a series of festivals across twelve host cities. The TDG is the highest-ranked cycling race in North America. A total of fifteen teams competed at the TDG event, with eight professional cyclists on each team. In 2007, the 120 professional cyclists were from 23 different countries. In 2007, the race’s fifth year, the event attracted 515,000 spectators, representing all 50 states and nine countries. More than 50 million people worldwide viewed the TDG through video feeds, plus online views through streamed feeds of live race action (www.tourdlegeorgia.com).

Natural field settings are an emerging method to examine event marketing (e.g., Barros et al., 2007; Grohs, et al., 2004 Sirgy et al., 2008). The current study uses a field approach to examine a social and community aspect of event marketing. The tour raised awareness and revenue for the event’s chief beneficiary, the Georgia Cancer Coalition, a nonprofit organization that unites various stakeholders to strengthen cancer prevention, research and treatment. Publicity and fundraising for cancer research benefited from the synergy created by the association with the “Livestrong” cause-related marketing championed by past TDG winner Lance Armstrong.
In 2007, AT&T was the title sponsor of TDG. In this role, AT&T received the greatest promotional visibility among corporate sponsors, prominently displaying its brand name and logo on banners, signage, volunteer apparel, and on large-screen televisions that projected the race to the crowd. In addition, AT&T personnel interacted with attendees of the event. Attendees are accessible as they walk throughout the host venues. TDG offers a series of community events that are free of charge. High corporate visibility afforded AT&T an opportunity to strengthen and reaffirm attendees’ knowledge of AT&T and its products. The TDG also provides AT&T with an opportunity to demonstrate its CSR through its support of both a high profile sporting event and of cancer research.

5.2. Measurement

The article uses existing scales to measure all constructs of interest, though there are slight modifications to fit the study’s context. A panel of event sponsorship experts from both academia and industry reviewed the survey instrument. All scales are five-point Likert scales. To imbed the role of the event marketing sponsorship, scaled measures began with the following statement: “AT&T is a key sponsor of this race. So, please rate your agreement, where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.” The researchers sought to embed the measures into the context of event marketing or sponsorship-linked marketing, in order to help attribute the findings to the impact of the sponsorship.

The measures also include an adapted version of the four-item product knowledge scale created by Bloch, Sherrell and Ridgway (1989). This scale assesses the event attendees’ level of familiarity, usage, experience, and expertise with the event sponsor’s products. The Lichtenstein, et al. (2004) five-item measure of CSR assesses perceptions of the corporation’s commitment to giving back to the community, through support of both traditional and newer forms of CSR initiatives. Given the broad view of CSR, this scale assesses event attendees’ perceptions of the event title sponsor. This research adopts a behavioral approach to commitment. Thus, the survey measures commitment to the event sponsor through three items adapted from Yoo, Donthu and Lee’s (2000) brand equity scale. Finally, a modified version of Baker and Churchill’s (1977) four-item scale measures purchase intent. The Baker and Churchill scale is suitable because Cornwall and Coote (2005) report that measuring purchase intent with a sponsorship-linked purchase-

![Figure 1. Hypothesized model with results. All results standardized (t-values are in parentheses).](image-url)

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale items, composite reliability, AVE, and confirmatory factor analysis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lambda loadings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Please rate your agreement, where 1 = Strongly Disagree &amp; 5 = Strongly Agree</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have experience with AT&amp;T phone, cell, or Internet services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am familiar with AT&amp;T and their offerings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have expertise with AT&amp;T and their offerings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I regularly use AT&amp;T phone, cell, or Internet services.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T is committed to share profits to help community events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T is involved with the communities where it does business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local events benefit from AT&amp;T’s contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T puts charity into its business activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T is involved in corporate giving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to event sponsor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of this sponsorship, I consider myself to be committed to AT&amp;T.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT&amp;T would be one of my top choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wouldn’t seek a competitor if AT&amp;T was available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more likely to consider keeping or trying AT&amp;T.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would like to keep using or to have AT&amp;T as my provider.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would use AT&amp;T if it happens to be easily available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would actively seek AT&amp;T to be my provider.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Standardized solutions.
intent variable has a more positive social bias. That is, when researchers use a sponsorship-linked, purchase-intent variable, attendees are more likely to feel compelled to say that they would purchase the sponsor’s product as a result of the company’s support of the event. Table 1 provides a listing of the scale items.

5.3. Fieldwork, recruitment and sampling

Over the course of the seven-day race, the researchers and a team of trained upper-level business majors approached spectators attending the TDG and asked them to participate in the study. The students chose to participate as an option for extra credit. The field researchers approached attendees, outlined the purpose of the academic research project, and invited them to participate in the survey. To meet the sampling criteria, a participant had to be at least eighteen years old. Participants received official TDG shirts, pens, meal vouchers, and paper fans as incentives.

Respondents completed surveys at all twelve host venues: Peachtree City (n = 65), Macon (n = 171), Thomson (n = 34), Rome (n = 149), Chattanooga (n = 121), Chickamauga (n = 99), Lookout Mountain (n = 51), Brasstown Bald Mountain (n = 273), Dalton (n = 26), Lake Lanier (n = 390), Stone Mountain (n = 248), and Atlanta (n = 112).

Overall, 1739 participants completed the survey. After omitting surveys that were missing too many variables, the adjusted sample size was 1636. A one-way ANOVA with Scheffe post-hoc tests examined whether statistically significant differences exist any of the twelve host venues for each of the study’s four constructs. The analyses include sixty-six individual venue comparisons. The comparisons of group mean responses to the survey questions revealed no significant difference at p = .15 on all of the variables, which suggests that neither location nor date of the survey is likely to be an issue in interpreting the results of this study.

6. Data analysis and results

6.1. Demographic profiles

The demographic profile reveals distinct differences among the 1636 sample respondents. The majority (58.7%) of survey participants were men. Forty-five percent of participants were between the ages of 20 and 39 years old, with another 42.5% ranging from 40 to 60 years old. Also, analysis shows a dispersion of household incomes with 32.7% earning less than $50,000, 40.3% between $50,000 – $100,000, and 27% greater than $100,000. The majority (57.6%) of participants had attended the event in at least one previous year. Over forty percent (41.4%) of the participants surveyed traveled from another state or country, suggesting a dedicated following.

6.2. Measurement, reliability, and validity

The researchers assessed the data’s measurement properties to check measurement reliability and validity. First, the researchers created a covariance matrix and ran a confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.80. This analysis yields satisfactory results: \( \chi^2 \) = 1989.39; Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = .98; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .98; Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = .98; and, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = .037. Aside from the unsatisfactory chi-square statistic result (p = .00), each of the remaining absolute and incremental fit measures yields acceptable levels of fit (Hair et al., 2006).

The exogenous construct measures of the hypothesized model yield sound reliability and validity properties (Table 1). Analyses provide evidence of convergent validity in each construct with the parameter estimates ranging from \( \lambda = .80 \) to .93. In addition, Baggozi and Yi (1988) suggest that a significant factor loading on an item of interest provides strong evidence of convergent validity. The squared multiple correlations for all of the items in the model are large, ranging from .64 to .87. One may assess discriminant validity by comparing the variance extracted for each construct to the square of each off-diagonal value within the phi matrix for that construct. Average variance extracted ranges from .69 to .84. These results establish discriminant validity in that each measure exceeds the .50 benchmark (Baggozi and Yi, 1988). Finally, one may assess internal reliability through composite reliabilities. Composite reliabilities for all the measures are above the .70 threshold of acceptability (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

6.3. Estimation and fit

The proposed model has a resulting \( \chi^2 \) = 1989.39. The fit indices are: NNFI = .98, CFI = .98, IFI = .98, and SRMR = .037. Given that the structural model fit the data satisfactorily, the researchers then examined the standardized coefficients for the hypothesized relationships. Tests. Fig. 1 provides a graphic representation of the estimates of the structural model and Table 2 presents a summary of the hypotheses. Each hypothesized path of the structural model is highly significant (p < .001): (H1) Product Knowledge → Corporate Social Responsibility (t = 31.54); (H2) Corporate Social Responsibility → Commitment to Event Sponsor (t = 10.03); (H3) Corporate Social Responsibility → Purchase Intentions (t = 5.46); (H4) Corporate Social Responsibility → Commitment to Event Sponsor (t = 19.41); (H5) Corporate Social Responsibility → Purchase Intentions (t = 10.74); and, (H6) Commitment to Event Sponsor → Purchase Intentions (t = 30.92).

6.4. Findings

The proposed model examines the link between product knowledge and perception of commitment to CSR and their respective linkages to commitment to event sponsor and behavioral intentions. The study establishes that product knowledge and CSR perceptions are key variables that help strengthen attendees’ commitment to an event sponsor and purchase intent.

The event prominently featured the title sponsor and conveyed the sponsor’s support of the event. The results show the central role that informed attendees play in producing favorable event-sponsorship outcomes. The research reveals that positive links exist between attendees’ product knowledge and their perceptions of the commitment to social responsibility of the sponsor (H1), their commitment to the event sponsor (H2), and their purchase intentions (H3).

In line with studies in other contexts, attendees’ knowledge of the event sponsor positively influences their perceptions of the sponsor’s social responsibility associations. The results show that attendees use product knowledge to form favorable perceptions of the sponsor’s event sponsor positively in

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c}
\text{Hypothesis} & \text{Path} & \text{Path Name} & \text{Path Coefficient} \\
\hline
H_1 & Product Knowledge & Purchase Intent & \beta_{11} = .78 \quad & 31.54^* \\
H_2 & Product Knowledge & Commitment to Event Sponsor & \beta_{12} = .30 \quad & 10.03^* \\
H_3 & Product Knowledge & Purchase Intent & \beta_{13} = .11 \quad & 5.46^* \\
H_4 & CSR & Commitment to Event Sponsor & \beta_{14} = .57 \quad & 19.41^* \\
H_5 & CSR & Purchase Intent & \beta_{15} = .23 \quad & 10.74^* \\
H_6 & Commitment to Event Sponsor & Purchase Intent & \beta_{16} = .68 \quad & 30.92^* \\
\end{array}
\]

Where:
- \( \beta_{11} = .78 \) (p < .001), \( \chi^2 = 1989.39 \) (p = .000), NNFI = .98, CFI = .98, IFI = .98, and SRMR = .037.
consumers' product knowledge serves as a basis for commitment to the sponsor and future purchases intentions.

The results also support the hypothesized role that the sponsor’s demonstration of CSR plays in producing strategic event-sponsorship outcomes. The researchers found that attendees’ perceptions of the sponsor as socially responsible are positively linked to sponsor commitment (H4) and purchase intentions (H5). Here, the attendees’ responses reveal that their reported assessments of the sponsor’s CSR activities are linked to their reported levels of commitment to the event sponsor. Thus, the study shows that attendees’ assessments of the sponsor’s evidence of CSR directly influence their commitment to the event sponsor and directly and indirectly impact their intentions to purchase the sponsor’s products. Finally, given that sponsor commitment reflects preference for the event sponsor, the analysis also confirms that a direct link exists between sponsor commitment and purchase intent (H6). The Discussion section places these results in a broader context.

7. Discussion

The study reveals how attendees use their existing product knowledge to form favorable associations about the event sponsor. Product knowledge plays a pivotal role in favorably influencing event attendees’ assessments of event sponsors’ CSR initiatives. Product knowledge can also impact preference for the event sponsor. In the context of event sponsorship, attendees who are familiar with the sponsor’s products through their personal experiences are more likely to assess the sponsor more favorably. Though the study does not isolate the impact of the knowledge attendees possess about the event sponsor’s products prior to attending the sporting event, the findings show why sponsors should familiarize event attendees with their products before and during the event.

As a well-entrenched, multinational brand and the event’s title sponsor, AT&T has a long history of offering popular goods and services. AT&T effectively used attendees’ knowledge of AT&T’s products to influence attendees’ responses to AT&T’s event-sponsorship marketing activities at the TDG. This study shows how the event attendees’ product knowledge helps event sponsors forge stronger marketing relationships.

The results demonstrate that attendees’ perceptions of the sponsor’s CSR are linked to improved results for the sponsor. Consumers who a) already support a particular cause that a firm adopts or who b) become strong supporters of a firm’s CSR initiatives will be more likely to become patrons of the firm (i.e., a stronger link exists to purchase intentions) (Broderick et al., 2003; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). The results show a direct and indirect link between consumers’ CSR perceptions and their purchase intentions.

This study provides further evidence of the multifaceted role of CSR (Sen et al., 2006). The findings show the impact of CSR perceptions as a mediator and, therefore, suggest that managers should align the positioning of their firms’ CSR initiatives more closely with their firms’ other positions in the market. If the managers do so, the firm experiences stronger bonds between a) product knowledge and CSR, and b) CSR and commitment to the event sponsor. Indeed, most CSR initiatives fail to reach their potential because managers do not recognize the array of disparate benefits that CSR can provide to their firms. Due to their lack of insight, managers fail to coordinate CSR initiatives with other firm promotions (Docherty and Hibbert, 2003; Zablah et al., 2004). At too many firms, CSR is an ancillary activity that is not coordinated with a firm’s other attempts to position itself (Du et al., 2007).

The study provides a framework for managers to understand a) the basis of successful event sponsorships and b) the positive outcomes that firms receive when they engage in successful event sponsorships. Firm managers should work to coordinate event sponsorship and marketing strategies to provide attendees with experiences that foster associations between their knowledge about a sponsor’s products, their perceptions of the event sponsor’s CSR, and other key sponsorship outcomes. The results show that attendees who are more knowledgeable about the event sponsor’s products are more likely to have more favorable perceptions and behavioral intentions toward the sponsor than are less-knowledgeable attendees. Thus sponsors should leverage events as a way to enhance existing product knowledge with displays, marketing materials, and interaction with brand personalities or employees.

Events enable sponsors to communicate with current and potential customers in ways that are more contemporary and personal than other forms of marketing communication. Sponsors should use events to create more face-to-face marketplace interactions to develop relationships with the event attendees and engender associations between the sponsor’s products and the event beneficiary. At an event, sponsor representatives and consumers can engage in two-way communication about the sponsor and its offerings. Other types of firm-customer interactions, by contrast, (such as interacting in online communities or paying for an item in a store) often offer firms subsequent opportunities for their customers to leverage their existing product knowledge.

8. Limitations and future research opportunities

This study contributes to the sponsorship literature by establishing how product knowledge and CSR play a critical role in revealing consumers’ perceptions of event sponsors and purchase intentions in a real-world setting. Although the data fit the proposed model well and support each hypothesis, the research is not without limitations. First, this study examines attendees’ perceptions of a single sponsor at one sponsored event. Ideally, scholars can assess the reliability and validity of the measures on a separate data set. Similarly, scholars should replicate the current model and a) compare non-attendees with attendees, b) examine other sponsored events, and c) study events with other sponsors.

Second, the study did not focus on attendees’ awareness of the sponsorship. In future studies, sponsorship awareness may reveal an association with product knowledge. Third, the field study examined consumer perceptions and intentions at one point in time. Researchers could use longitudinal research to measure attendees’ familiarity with the sponsor’s products before, during, and after the event. Doing so could help isolate the impact of the event versus the impact of attendees’ prior knowledge of the sponsor’s products. Future studies on CSR and commitment to event sponsor also could benefit from longitudinal measures. After all, a firm’s reputation is built only over the long run (Ou and Abratt, 2007) and that firms build enduring loyalty only over the long term (Ledingham et al., 1999). Given the continuing efforts to understand how a firm’s social endeavors can increase customers’ loyalty (e.g., Schuler and Cording, 2006), researchers should undertake longitudinal studies on how firms build, sustain, and derive benefits from their event-based CSR activities.

Finally, the common, simultaneous use of sponsorships and event marketing makes separating the impact of the two practices difficult. At some point, scholars should attempt to delineate the impact of each method. Scholars also need to identify which event activities are most salient to attendees. Managers need to know which of the vast array of activities at sponsored events (free entertainment, interactive new product displays, promotional gifts, etc.) make the strongest, most positive impression on attendees. Important, unanswered questions include: Which activities make long-lasting impressions on consumers? Are consumers more receptive to event sponsors’ messages before, during, or after the event? How can firms embed the activities in the event in a way that emotionally appeals to attendees? Thus, another opportunity to enrich the research model would be to include affect measures such as enjoyment or satisfaction of different event marketing activities on event-sponsor effectiveness.