



Guidelines for sponsorship signaling within socially complex markets



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Abstract Organizations use sponsorships to influence various marketing, financial, and public relations outcomes. Sponsorship communications occur in socially complex markets where messages diffuse quickly. Such messages are also widely accessible to and influenced by various audiences, which can be supportive, neutral, skeptical, or decisively antagonistic. These conditions require managers to adopt nuanced and holistically integrated ways of making their messages acceptable and engaging for a wide variety of audiences, while also being robust to scrutiny. The article addresses this challenge by drawing on signaling theory to present a process model and guidelines for managing sponsorships within socially complex markets. Specifically, it outlines how different message content and sponsorship characteristics combine to influence signal reception, market responses, and feedback. The model is then merged with research on sponsorship authenticity to guide managerial application. Initially, sponsors establish the signal content and primary target audiences through selecting sponsee partners with whom they have authentic fit (Guideline 1). Sponsors can then develop specific characteristics of commitment, observability, and credibility (Guidelines 2–4). Finally, sponsors should conduct prelaunch and postlaunch assessments to adapt to how the sponsorship is received by various audiences and subgroups on an ongoing basis (Guideline 5).

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1. Sponsorship signaling within socially complex markets

Organizations use sponsorships with the assumption that consumers will become more aware of their brands and will transfer the image, sentiment, and goodwill that they hold toward a

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sponsored property to the organizations' brands, products, and services (Gwinner, 1997; Kim et al., 2015). Sponsorships account for substantial global spending and are engaged to influence consumer, sales, financial, and public relations outcomes (Cornwell, 2019; Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Jensen et al., 2016; Robinson, 2006). However, sponsorship information has become more accessible to a wider set of audiences, it travels faster, it is less controlled by the sponsoring brands, it can be more or less aligned across information sources, and it is more likely to be scrutinized by a variety of audiences (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hanna et al., 2011; Jurgens et al., 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). These socially complex marketing environments require managers to adopt more holistic and nuanced ways of making their messages more engaging for a variety of audiences and more robust to scrutiny. In addition to traditional consumer and investor audiences, managers must consider the messages that sponsorships send to a wider variety of societal members, like local or online communities, special interest groups, or other consumer subgroups (Jurgens et al., 2016). This situation aligns closely with newer perspectives on sponsorship that emphasize authentic engagement and more holistic considerations of the interconnected factors impacting sponsorship effectiveness (Cornwell, 2019; Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). Such an approach helps sponsors harness audience engagement and information-diffusion opportunities provided by the audiences' increased access to information from different sources. At the same time, it also helps the sponsors reduce potential liabilities like various forms of consumer boycotts, protests, or generalized backlash that could come from audiences' increased scrutiny and control of marketing narratives.

The article advances this conversation by presenting a managerial process model and applied guidelines for sponsorship communications. This perspective draws on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973) to outline different message content and configurations, to explain how sponsorship characteristics influence signal reception, and to reveal how sponsors can use feedback to account for different audiences. It complements applied research on sponsorship management that considers the mechanisms of strategic sponsorship benefits (Jensen et al., 2016; Robinson, 2006), sponsor-sponsee alignment and coordination (Farrelly & Quester, 2005; Urriolagoitia & Planellas, 2007), navigating the complexities of cause sponsorships (Berglind &

Nakata, 2005), managing sponsors' vulnerability to ambush marketing (Pitt et al., 2010), and managing sponsorships with online influencers and opinion leaders (Campbell & Rapp Farrell, 2020; Lin et al., 2018). We explain how sponsorship messages are sent, received, and responded to under the conditions of various sponsorship characteristics. We then offer guidelines for making sponsorships more authentically engaging by virtue of their continuity, reliability, integrity, and symbolism, rather than focusing narrowly on simplistic functions of exposure and interaction frequency (Cornwell, 2019).

2. Sponsorship signaling processes

Woisetschläger et al. (2017, p. 121) define sponsorship as "a cash or in-kind fee paid to a property—typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes—in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property." Sponsorships are often engaged to target multiple primary audiences that include consumers, investors, employees, governments, and nongovernment organizations. Their messages can also go on to reach an even wider set of potential audiences, such as online communities, special interest groups, political entities, and specific groups of supportive or antagonistic consumers (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Jurgens et al., 2016). Some audiences are the intended message receivers, others are not; some will receive the message positively, while others will be reserved, skeptical, or even antagonistic.

Sponsorship research has frequently applied signaling theory to explain aspects of the sponsor-audience interface (e.g., Clark et al., 2002; Goh et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2012). Signaling theory proposes that signaling communications occur in transactions in which buyers or investors do not have complete information about products or services, and that sellers or other entities present signals to convey the products or services as being high-quality and worthy of investment (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973). Signaling processes occur over time and involve multiple parties, whereby signalers send information to signal receivers. Signals can convey the quality of the signalers' products and services, inform signal receivers about the signalers' trustworthy intentions, and have associated costs and benefits that differ according to specific characteristics of the signals sent (Connelly et al., 2011; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973). The vast range of audiences receiving signals can then provide feedback through consumer or peer ratings, support from fans, collective action from

critics, and a range of other word-of-mouth interactions (Connelly et al., 2011; Hanna et al., 2011; Jurgens et al., 2016).

Figure 1 outlines a generalized framework of how sponsorships can function to send signals through which sponsors communicate with consumers and other audiences (Connelly et al., 2011; Kirmani & Rao, 2000). This figure provides summary definitions of key concepts and summarizes how organizations use sponsorships to send informative signals to various audiences who might otherwise lack the information possessed by the sponsoring organizations. We call this communication process *sponsorship signaling*, defined as the provision of explicit, implicit, or accidental information through sponsorships. Sponsorship signals capture indirect messages sent to correct for information that people lack. Sponsorship signaling processes comprise five components: signal content, signal reception, sponsorship characteristics, market response, and signaling feedback.

2.1. Signal content

Signal content captures the categories of meaning that sponsorship signals are intended to convey. In this regard, sponsorship signals can have a variety of content that can serve different functions and carry various meanings for people according to the type of sponsee, deal characteristics, and other environmental characteristics (Lin & Bruning, 2021; Schramm, 1955; Woisetschläger et al., 2017). They can also take different forms according to the type of information conveyed and the ways this information is conveyed (Kim et al., 2012).

With regard to function, this content and its nuanced meanings can convey knowledge about the brand's quality or about the intentions of the sponsoring organization (Connelly et al., 2011). *Quality signal content* provides information that communicates the usefulness and personal appeal of the organization's brand(s), products, and services (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kim et al., 2012). *Intention signal content* provides information that conveys the sponsor's reliability as a provider of products and services, while also revealing the sponsor's virtue as a social entity (Andrews et al., 2014; Darnall et al., 2018; Du et al., 2008).

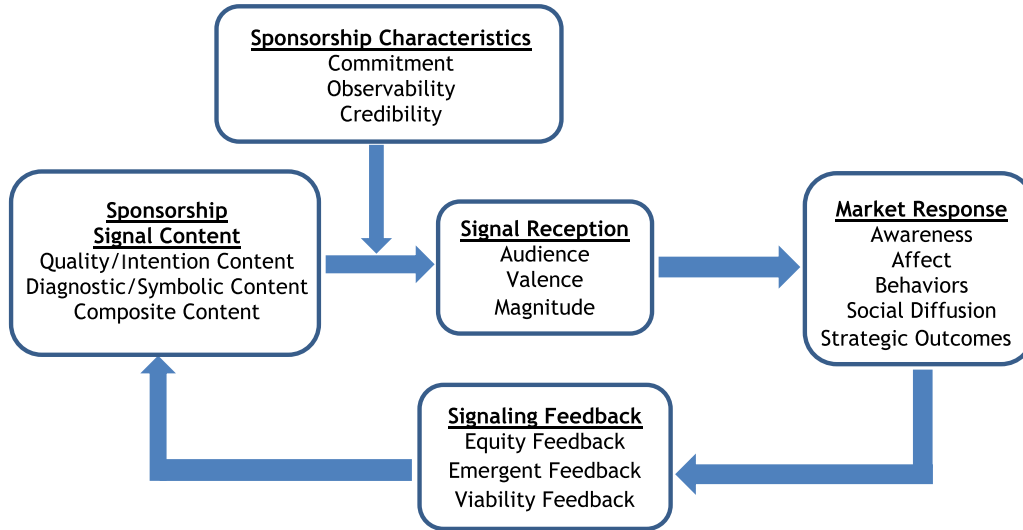
Sponsorship signals have content that differs in form according to whether the information is conveyed either in a more nuanced and diagnostic manner, or in a more holistic and symbolic manner (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kim et al., 2012). *Diagnostic signal content* conveys descriptive facts that are used by stakeholders to construct meaning through analysis and evaluation. It requires additional

cognitive processing to transform the information received into an interpretable message. *Symbolic signal content* conveys more generalized and abstract ideas that are processed in direct and holistic ways to influence affective reactions. Symbolic content differs from diagnostic content because it conveys messages directly without receivers needing to analyze and construct the message's meaning and implications. Next, we describe signal content according to its quality/intention functions and diagnostic/symbolic forms.

Diagnostic quality content conveys information that influences people to view the sponsoring organization's brands, products, and services as more useful (Clark et al., 2002; Kim et al., 2012; Ponsford & Agarwal, 1999). It is often processed through evaluative, rule-based analysis as people assess diagnostic cues to reveal underlying quality (Kim et al., 2012; Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Spence, 1973). This type of content manifests as information that people consciously and volitionally use to form their judgments, evaluations, decisions, intentions, and other conscious thoughts. Sponsorships are often engaged to convey to consumers that a company is an industry leader and has a high-quality brand, or to convey to investors that a product is useful and serves a market need. For example, STIHL, a global producer of forestry equipment such as chainsaws and other machinery, sponsored the World Logging Championships, a competitive, forestry-relevant sporting event. The company also rounded out its sporting portfolio with sponsorships of the European Student Championship in Forestry Skills (where students competitively engaged technical and professional forestry skills), Nordic skiing, and the European Tree Climbing Championship. In sponsoring these events, STIHL displayed its commitment to excellence in the forestry industry, signaling that the company dedicates the same attention and resources to the quality of its products, services, and internal processes.

Symbolic quality content directly conveys holistic and personally meaningful virtues to people through sponsorships (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Kim et al., 2012; Kirmani & Rao, 2000) by increasing personal appeal, social identification, and a prestigious brand image (Lin & Bruning, 2020; Mazodier & Merunka, 2012; Schwaiger et al., 2010). A considerable body of research explains how sports sponsorships associate a brand with the in-group fans of sports entities and how sponsors integrate their brand images with consumers' self-perceptions to induce positive affective responses (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Lin & Bruning, 2020). In a more specific instance, the Loch Lomond distillery

Figure 1. A conceptual model of sponsorship signaling processes



Summary definitions of key concepts
Sponsorship signal content: the meaning sponsorship signals intend to convey.
Quality content: functions to convey information about usefulness and personal appeal.
Intention content: functions to convey information about reliability and social virtues.
Diagnostic content: intends to convey information in the form of descriptive facts.
Symbolic content: intends to convey information in the form of more generalized and abstract ideas.
Composite content: intends to convey multiple types of information that have different functions and forms.
Signal reception: the message as it is perceived by signal receivers.
Audience: the categorical group(s) a signal receiver is a member of.
Valence: the audience's positive/negative reception of the signaled message.
Magnitude: the scale and salience of signal reception.
Sponsorship characteristics: relative levels of standard qualities that influence signal reception.
Sponsorship commitment: benevolent investments that sponsors make when they engage a sponsorship.
Sponsorship observability: aspects that make the signal easier to receive and interpret.
Sponsorship credibility: the trustworthiness of the sponsorship messaging. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional credibility: presents the sponsor as being capable of completing its role in the sponsorship. • Historical credibility: presents the sponsorship as aligning with the partners' experience(s) over time. • Moral credibility: presents the sponsorship as aligning with the values important to key stakeholders. • Holistic coherence: presents an internally consistent integration of signal content and characteristics.
Market response: the audience's (or audiences') reactions to the sponsorship.
Awareness: the degree to which the signal receiver can recognize and recall a sponsor and the sponsor's role(s).
Affect: the valenced psychological reactions of signal receivers.
Behaviors: the intentions and discrete actions of signal receivers.
Social diffusion: the process through which information is passed between people.
Strategic outcomes: the organization-level outcomes of a sponsorship.
Signaling feedback: information on the benefits or losses accrued from sponsorship signaling.
Equity feedback: the value of brand equity benefits and penalties derived from sponsorship signaling.
Emergent feedback: the information coming from autonomous activity and word of mouth within the market.
Viability feedback: information on whether the sponsorship is a positive business relationship for all parties.

has sponsored The Open, a prestigious golf tournament that is played throughout the United Kingdom, draws a robust international audience, and is recognized as the oldest golf tournament in the world. Loch Lomond obtained the official title "Spirit of the Open" and symbolically leveraged the partnership, for example, by associating special edition products with The Open that presented a

short reference to the specific tournament (e.g., "150th Saint Andrews") on the bottle and packaging, with imagery of The Open's famed Claret Jug trophy also included.

Diagnostic intention content conveys the sponsor's bond with and sense of dedication toward consumers and other audiences in ways that can be processed through evaluative assessments of

the sponsor's involvement, commitment, and dedication to a social group. Prior research shows that a company-sponsored oral health campaign elicited reciprocal patronage and support from within the community in which it was launched (Du et al., 2008) and that regionally proximal sponsorships can be positively interpreted by consumers as intrinsically committed partnerships (Woisetschläger et al., 2017). A more specific instance of diagnostic intention content is reflected in Purina Canada's sponsorship of Humane Canada, a group dedicated to improving the lives of animals across the country. Purina is a pet food brand that is owned by Nestlé, is headquartered in the United States, and has an office in Canada. By sponsoring Humane Canada, Purina showed its commitment to the cause of animal welfare in the country through investment and collaboration. The brand's actions conveyed a commitment to animal welfare, and by extension, to the welfare of animals cared for by Purina customers.

Symbolic intention content influences stakeholders to have a greater personal attachment to and involvement with the sponsor according to the sponsor's socially responsible brand image, social contribution, and altruism. For example, consumers' purchase decisions can be influenced by symbolic support for social causes presented via "ecolabels" that convey environmental protection efforts (Darnall et al., 2018). This type of intention content can bypass consumers' purposeful evaluation and scrutiny to influence their behaviors in a more direct way (Andrews et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2012). For a specific example, the yogurt brand Dannon partnered with the National Football League (NFL), the American Cancer Society, and the National Breast Cancer Awareness Month through its A Crucial Catch program, which supported fundraising and outreach programs to women from underserved communities. The supporting communications of this program displayed a picture of an American football player catching a pass in an advertisement presented in different shades of pink—the color leveraged for breast cancer awareness and action—with Dannon's corporate logo at the top of the ad right next to the logo for the NFL's breast cancer campaign. This communication had distinctively symbolic content that was manifested through the picture of the player, the use of the NFL's A Crucial Catch logo (which included the well-known pink ribbon) used to support the cause, and the more holistic use of various shades of pink within the ad.

Composite signal content can occur when sponsorships convey multiple distinct types of information. In general, sponsorships could signal a

combination of quality and intention content that is conveyed in more diagnostic or symbolic ways. For example, sponsors might use a blend of quality and intention content, as Dannon did when it entered a multiparty partnership with an elite sports league and a prominent social cause, or as STIHL did in sponsoring a competitive sporting event that supported forestry students' professional development. Purina's sponsorship of Humane Canada signaled a synthesis of dedication to product quality and social contribution. Therefore, the potential composite nature of sponsorship signals enables them to convey sets of different message content, and the proportional emphasis of the different signal content can vary across sponsorships according to the sponsor's objectives.

2.2. Signal reception

Signal reception captures the message as it is perceived or understood by people—that is, signal receivers—who can be grouped into one or more different sponsorship audiences (Connelly et al., 2011; Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Jurgens et al., 2016). *Signal reception audience* is a categorical distinction that specifies the group(s) a person is a member of. For example, a person could belong to a brand's consumer audience, to an organization's financial investor audience, to a political candidate's electorate, or to a special interest group that may either support or oppose the sponsoring organization (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020; Jurgens et al., 2016). They may also be established critics of a brand, organization, or political entity, or they may be members of a group that views the sponsor or sponsee as a rival entity (Jurgens et al., 2016; Lin & Bruning, 2020). A given person can be a member of more than one sponsorship audience.

The people within these different audiences can also receive sponsorship signals in more positively or negatively valenced ways, as well as in more amplified or muted ways, such that signal reception for any given person varies along continuums of valance and magnitude (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Schramm, 1955). *Signal reception valance* represents the more positive or more negative reception that audiences have when interpreting the message. It ranges from very positive to very negative. It can have more diagnostic valenced content that signals, for example, that a product has high or low durability, or that a company is more or less committed to the local community. It can also have more symbolic valenced content that signals, for example, that a company is within consumers' in-groups or out-groups, that a company has high or low status, or that a company is

environmentally responsible. While sponsors will try to convey positive information to their audiences, some signal content could be negatively received as conveying information detrimental to the sponsor or sponsee. In this regard, signals can be received negatively because of unintended or unfavorable message interpretations (Carrillat & d'Astous, 2014; Lin & Bruning, 2020; Messner & Reinhard, 2012), or incongruence and confusion (Schramm, 1955; Woisetschläger et al., 2017). For example, sports sponsorships may be viewed negatively by fans of a rival team. Sponsors can also be seen as overly instrumental in their motives for sponsorship. This could be especially problematic if the sponsors of charities or community programs are perceived as being instrumental and duplicitous rather than intrinsically committed and benevolent.

Signal reception magnitude captures the scale and salience of signal reception through the amplification or muting of sponsorship signals (Kim et al., 2012; Schramm, 1955). Signals can be amplified when they have characteristics like visibility, clarity, consistency, intensity, quantity, and frequency that improve the signals' strength and people's exposure to the signals (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998). For example, sponsorship-linked marketing communications are often engaged to amplify the message conveyed by a sponsorship. Similarly, sponsors can benefit from articulating the nature of the sponsorship to clarify the congruence the sponsor has with the sponsee in a way that elicits favorable consumer responses. Muting can occur when there is less communication about the sponsorship or when the communication that does occur lacks clarity.

2.3. Sponsorship characteristics

Sponsorship characteristics capture relative levels of standard qualities that can influence the valence and magnitude of how signal content is received. In this regard, they change the valenced meaning of messages, amplify messages, and distort messages according to broader categories of commitment, observability, and credibility (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Schramm, 1955). *Commitment* captures the benevolent investments that sponsors make when they engage a sponsorship to convey the brands' virtues underlying their messages (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995). These investments can involve tangible resources like money and time, or less tangible contributions like behavioral investments in the partnership. *Observability* captures the consistency, clarity,

intensity, salience, visibility, and frequency of signals that increase the signals' strength and effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998). *Observability* will generally increase consumers' and other audiences' awareness of the sponsors' brands, products, and services by indicating or accentuating the presence of the sponsor within the market and positioning them as a collaborator with the sponsee. For example, greater prestige could make sponsorships more prominent and appealing, while sponsorships characterized by negative notoriety could also make the partnerships observable for unintended, negative reasons. *Credibility* represents the trustworthiness of the sponsorship messaging according to whether it is perceived to be convincing and to have strong integrity (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995). *Credibility* can reflect how sponsorship signals differ in projecting the sponsor's competence, truthfulness, or virtue. These three characteristics can increase the positively valenced reception of quality and intention signals by demonstrating the organization's confidence to make investments and concessions, but they could also amplify negative signal reception in situations that an audience deems undesirable.

2.4. Market response

Many outcomes considered within the sponsorship literature can be categorized as awareness, affect, behaviors, and strategic outcomes that can influence each other in sequence (Cornwell et al., 2005; Jensen & Cobbs, 2014; Poon & Prendergast, 2006). We add the consideration of social diffusion into this set of outcomes to explain how individual people's responses emerge to have strategic impact. *Awareness* represents the degree to which a person can recognize and recall a sponsor according to their presence in the market, the specific role they play in the market, and the specific role they play in the sponsorship. *Affect* captures valenced perceptions, beliefs, evaluations, liking, preference, trust, and general emotional content that people hold toward the sponsor. These affective outcomes can occur either through nuanced evaluations or through direct and holistic transfers of symbolic information (Kim et al., 2012). *Behaviors* capture intentions that people hold toward the sponsor and any discrete actions they engage to patronize, support, or oppose the sponsor.

Social diffusion represents the process whereby information is passed between people in an accelerating manner that fosters increasingly prominent and shared cognitions and behaviors

within a specific audience or a broader population. This process explains how the thoughts and behaviors of individual people can be contagious and converge to become more consistent and shared within and across collectives (Bond et al., 2012; Iyengar et al., 2011; Roberson & Colquitt, 2005; Vosoughi et al., 2018). In the sponsorship signaling model, it specifically explains how people's idiosyncratic responses accumulate to have strategic implications for organizations of all scopes and sizes. For example, social diffusion is an important mode of transition between consumer responses and aggregated sales and financial outcomes. *Strategic outcomes* represent organization-level outcomes that capture the general concepts of aggregate sales and financial brand equity, or the outcomes that come from branding compared with those that would occur even if the given product or service did not have the branding (Ailawadi et al., 2003). This type of outcome captures sales or stock returns, as well as societal outcomes like constituent support for government entities, societal volunteer support for nonprofits, and broader customer or community goodwill. These strategic outcomes are often the product of focused groundswells of aggregated individual responses within a specific audience, market, or other social entity.

2.5. Signaling feedback

Organizations considering whether to engage new or continuing sponsorships should evaluate the effectiveness of their sponsorship signaling on an ongoing basis (Connelly et al., 2011; Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Thjømøe et al., 2002). These considerations can be informed by *signaling feedback*, or information on the benefits or losses accrued from sponsorship signaling that is derived from broader evidence of sponsorship effectiveness. Signaling feedback takes multiple forms that include equity feedback, emergent feedback, and viability feedback. *Equity feedback* captures the value of brand equity benefits and penalties that are derived from sponsorship signaling according to awareness, affect, behaviors, and strategic outcomes (Jensen & Cobbs, 2014; Mazodier & Rezaee, 2013; Thjømøe et al., 2002). It reflects traditional perspectives of brand equity and can vary in accuracy according to the organization's competence in monitoring consumer and market responses. *Emergent feedback* refers to the information coming from autonomous actions and word of mouth within the market that can have different meanings, valances, and magnitudes (Close Scheinbaum et al., 2017; Connelly et al.,

2011; Jurgens et al., 2016). This information can come from different audiences within the market, can be positive or negative, and can vary in magnitude (Connelly et al., 2011). It also provides an indication of potential social diffusion of certain information within the market. *Viability feedback* captures whether the sponsorship is a positive business relationship for the sponsees and other stakeholders directly involved in the partnership (Cornwell et al., 2018; Jensen & Cornwell, 2021; Toscani & Prendergast, 2018). Mutually beneficial sponsorships will strengthen the business relationship through reciprocal benefit, commitment, and influence (Beitelspacher et al., 2018; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In this regard, sponsorships could be more or less viable according to both internal stakeholder reactions and sponsor-sponsee matching considerations.

3. Managerial guidelines for authentic sponsorship signaling

The previously described model outlines a general process of sponsorship signaling that can be integrated with an organization's objectives and target markets to achieve important sponsorship outcomes. These considerations integrate the previously described sponsorship signaling model with Cornwell's (2019) principles of sponsorship authenticity to guide sponsor-sponsee matching and the development of sponsorship characteristics. Cornwell outlines how sponsor and sponsee characteristics converge to form partnerships that are more or less authentic according to four dimensions: continuity (i.e., timelessness and history), credibility (i.e., promise fulfillment), integrity (i.e., value communication), and symbolism (i.e., identity construction cues). This authentic engagement is then enacted through partnering, leveraging, and activation to subsequently influence people's responses. Herein, we infuse Cornwell's four principles of authenticity into the actionable stages of our sponsorship signaling process (i.e., signal content, sponsorship characteristics, and signaling feedback) to offer sequential prescriptive guidelines for putting the sponsorship signaling model into practice. As a first step, we suggest establishing the signal content and primary target audience through selecting a partner sponsee that has an authentic fit with the sponsor (Guideline 1). We then suggest specific considerations for sponsorship characteristics of commitment, observability, and credibility (Guidelines 2–4). We conclude with a set of suggestions to conduct prelaunch and postlaunch

assessments of sponsorship feedback to enhance the effectiveness of sponsorships over time (Guideline 5). These guidelines will help managers account for variable signal reception across different audiences and adapt to multisource signaling feedback derived from the market responses of specific or aggregated audiences. Guidelines and suggestions are summarized in Table 1.

3.1. Guideline 1: Make authentic fit a core principle

The first step and core principle of sponsorship effectiveness should be to carefully choose a sponsee partner to establish authentic signal content. This decision also helps to set the scope of the target market and the other possible audiences that might directly or indirectly receive the sponsorship messaging. Sponsorships can be engaged with a variety of entities in sports, pro-

social causes, culture and community, and media and programming domains that would each provide different sponsorship messaging and signaling content (Lin & Bruning, 2021). Different types of sponsorships can connect a sponsor with a variety of audiences and with diverse segments of the market. For example, sponsoring local sports teams would connect sponsors to fans and constituents within a specific region; and the localized set of these fans could often have vastly different cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic characteristics. International cause initiatives would also have audiences characterized by a substantial amount of internal diversity as they span multiple countries and often operate globally. These different subgroups within a specific audience would likely have distinct needs and concerns that could lead them to receive sponsorship signals differently. Therefore, sponsors should base their partnering decisions on a nuanced understanding of the scope and composition of the target audi-

Table 1. Managerial guidelines for sponsorship signaling

Guideline 1: Make authentic fit a core principle
1.1. Choose a sponsee partner based on the combination of sponsorship objectives and different types of fit.
1.2. Develop an understanding of the diverse audiences and market segments engaged by the sponsorship.
1.3. Cultivate authentic fit with the sponsee to leverage commitment, observability, and credibility.
Guideline 2: Engage in sponsorships that are characterized by commitment
2.1. Prioritize tangible commitments before fostering perceptions of commitment.
2.2. Increase commitment authenticity through social investments that cultivate shared values and identities.
Guideline 3: Increase the observability of sponsorships
3.1. Engage sponsorship-linked marketing like public relations messaging and social media communications.
3.2. Present diagnostic information at multiple levels of fidelity to balance clarity with information richness.
3.3. Present symbolic imagery in multiple simple messages to foster more complete imagery by conveying complementary information that is easily absorbed.
3.4. Support symbolic imagery with diagnostic information in an easily retrievable online repository.
Guideline 4: Develop and manage sponsorships to have greater credibility
4.1. Establish functional credibility by ensuring capability and demonstrating tangible competencies.
4.2. Reinforce historical credibility derived from connections to the sponsee, industry, audience, and region.
4.3. Ensure moral credibility by conveying one's values and by leveraging values shared with the sponsee.
4.4. Send a consistent message through signal content and commitment/observability/credibility characteristics.
Guideline 5: Conduct pre- and postlaunch assessments, and adapt to signaling feedback
5.1. Conduct prelaunch assessments of sponsorship communications to understand how target audiences and unintended audiences could receive and respond to the message.
5.2. Conduct postlaunch assessments of sponsorship communications to understand how target audiences and unintended audiences actually received and responded to the message.
5.3. Adapt current sponsorships and future plans to account for feedback from different audiences.

ence(s) in addition to any audiences that would indirectly receive the sponsorship signals.

To address sponsor-sponsee fit, [Olson and Thjømmøe \(2011\)](#) reveal that sponsors should consider their fit with the sponsees' audiences, geographic representation, generalized reputation, and various dimensions of image (e.g., components of being exciting, honest, friendly, unique, modern, successful, attractive, and strong). Again, these considerations of fit should account for the within-audience diversity in addition to the more obvious between-audience diversity. The next step is then to cultivate authentic fit with the selected sponsee by leveraging a historical basis for the relationship and shared values, ensuring the tangible objectives, and conveying a symbolic message that audiences can identify with ([Cornwell, 2019](#)). In this regard, the sponsorships of STIHL and Purina each have a good degree of fit owing to their sponsorship of sponsees closely aligned with their core product lines. In the latter case, the sponsee (i.e., Humane Canada) is geographically relevant to the sponsor, Purina Canada. Sponsorships engaged by these companies would likely have been less effective if they involved less congruent sponsees. If STIHL had sponsored an urban basketball tournament in a large U.S. city, the message would not have been directed toward the ideal target market. If Purina Canada had sponsored an animal shelter in Ireland, the sponsorship might not have targeted the appropriate geographic market. As we describe next, managing specific sponsorship characteristics will also help cultivate a more authentic fit and generally increase sponsorship effectiveness.

3.2. Guideline 2: Engage in sponsorships that are characterized by commitment

Once the signal content and primary target market(s) are established, other characteristics of the sponsorship can be managed to influence how the signal is received by different audiences. We suggest that sponsorships should be characterized by commitment to enhancing the strength and viability of the core partnership. In this regard, sponsorships characterized by commitment deliver on their promises and seek useful, mutual benefits for all partners, including for subgroups within broader sponsorship audiences. This commitment can be considered as a set of tangible decisions and behaviors enacted by partners within a sponsorship, or as a set of perceptions inferred by various sponsorship audiences. Both tangible and perceived commitments are necessary, but prioritizing tangible commitments before proactively

fostering perceptions is both more authentic and more robust against critique than the reverse. Tangible contributions include investments or in-kind contributions like sponsorship fees, contract duration, branding concessions, risk mitigation, proactive audience engagement, or a variety of other resources and contributions (e.g., [Connelly et al., 2011](#); [Farrelly & Quester, 2005](#); [Henderson et al., 2019](#); [Woisetschläger et al., 2017](#)). Sponsors should also project greater authenticity according to shared values and identities that could be fostered through social investments into the sponsorship ([Cornwell, 2019](#)). These in-kind social investments could include personnel hours dedicated, interpersonal connections, shared mental models across partnering entities, issue advocacy, and other collaborations. Both partners and audiences can access information that could indicate whether a sponsorship is unbalanced in favor of one party in the relationship, or whether the relationship is relatively impersonal and superficial. Therefore, it is important to refine the sponsorship's characteristics to convey mutual commitment in a way that aligns with the desired operational and narrative objectives of all partners. One example of a sponsorship characterized by commitment is the National Hockey League's Hockey Fights Cancer initiative, in which teams as well as individual players have participated. In this case, the league's substantial participation in the initiative is well integrated throughout the league's different markets.

3.3. Guideline 3: Increase the observability of sponsorships

Sponsorships characterized by observability make the sponsorship's message (i.e., signal content) more prominent, clear, accessible, and prone to being diffused throughout the social networks connecting various audiences. This characteristic can be increased by making the message clearer and more congruent. It can also be increased through complementary sponsorship-linked marketing, like public relations messaging, social media communications, and detailed documentation on the sponsor's website, as examples. Observability can elaborate diagnostic information in order to clarify or emphasize nuanced details of the sponsorship, and it can amplify symbolic imagery to foster more holistic identity construction and maintenance ([Cornwell, 2019](#); [Kim et al., 2012](#)). Conveying diagnostic information could require a more nuanced approach because the information might need to be conveyed differently to specific audiences. One approach is to present

information at different levels of fidelity through different sections of a communication channel. Consider the example of Coca-Cola's sustainability initiative, for which the organization has dedicated a multitiered section of its website to describing sustainability initiatives. Upon arriving at the sustainability page, online visitors encounter summary information on the founding principles of the initiative. Visitors can then look further into these principles by clicking the "explore" option for each principle, which leads them to a catalogue of more specific information, like Coca-Cola's sustainable packaging initiative or links to its environmental, social, and governance reports. This general strategy of developing multiple levels of information about the initiative could be adapted by sponsors with different resources and goals.

Conveying symbolic imagery requires a strategy that fosters audiences' identification and attachment to the sponsor according to the sponsor's connection with the sponsee (Cornwell, 2019). Therefore, while each message needs to be simple enough to be processed automatically (Kim et al., 2012), a wide set of simple-but-complementary messages could help foster more nuanced imagery for the audiences. Given the identification objectives of symbolic information, the messages should also be conveyed through implicit imagery rather than through explicit verbal or written statements. This implicit imagery is exemplified by the teams in the National Hockey League wearing lavender jerseys for pregame warm-ups to support the league's Hockey Fights Cancer initiative. Note that symbolic information can be more convincing when supported by organized diagnostic information.

3.4. Guideline 4: Develop and manage sponsorships to have greater credibility

Sponsorship credibility captures the overall trustworthiness of the partnership and its communications. Herein, we describe four types of credibility that can be fostered through sponsorships. Sponsorships characterized by *functional credibility* present the sponsor as being capable of completing its role in the sponsorship (Cornwell, 2019; Mayer et al., 1995). As an example, Coca-Cola demonstrates its functional credibility through the quality and detail of informative content it provides at various levels of fidelity on its website. Sponsorships characterized by *historical credibility* present the partnership and deal characteristics as aligning with the sponsorship

partners' development and experience over time. For example, STIHL was historically connected with the forestry industry dating back to 1926, and it has been an industry leader since 1971, making the company a natural fit for the World Logging Championships and other forestry-related sponsees. Sponsorships characterized by *moral credibility* present the partnership as aligning with communicated values and as pursuing the values most important to the stakeholders of the partnering entities. Dannon's partnership with A Crucial Catch reflects morals of compassion and prosocial care by promoting health interventions to disadvantaged communities, which represent important segments of both the brand's and the league's audiences. Sponsorships characterized by *holistic coherence* present the integrated synthesis of signal content with commitment, observability, and credibility characteristics to provide messages that are internally consistent for various audiences. The Hockey Fights Cancer initiative is highly integrated, as it was coordinated at the league level, occurred in live instances at the events of individual teams, involved the direct participation of individual players, and had a dedicated communication channel on the League's website that was connected to communications on the individual teams' webpages. Together, these aspects of credibility help sponsorships, and organizations' formal communications about these sponsorships, withstand the scrutiny of skeptical or antagonistic audiences.

3.5. Guideline 5: Conduct pre- and postlaunch assessments, and adapt to signaling feedback

When engaging sponsorships, sponsors should proactively plan for unintended audiences, unintended reception of their messages, and different sources of feedback. They should assess the potential audiences and these audiences' possible and actual receptions of the sponsor's messages both before and after the sponsorship campaigns have been launched. Prelaunch assessments should clarify the target audience(s) of the messages, relevant subgroups within these audiences, and secondary audiences that might not be the initial targets of the sponsorship messaging but will nonetheless encounter it. These assessments should then be used to predict how the audiences could receive and respond to the sponsorship messages. While some criticism might be unavoidable, sponsors should prepare for possible critiques to minimize negative backlash, and then

adapt to emergent critiques from nontarget audiences or subgroups by refining their messaging for both the intended and unintended audiences.

Once sponsorships have been launched, sponsors should closely consider the types and precision of feedback they use to assess the ongoing benefits and viability of sponsorships. When possible, feedback should draw from primary consumer and sales data on market responses, secondary online sentiment and word-of-mouth data emerging from various audiences, and data about sponsor-sponsee relationships. This feedback should be incorporated with the organizations' objectives on an ongoing basis so as to manage sponsorship effectiveness, to catch negatively received or ineffective signals early, and to adjust signals to optimize messaging.

4. Conclusion

This article explains how different message content and configurations interact with sponsorship characteristics to influence signal reception, market responses, and feedback. This process is leveraged to offer guidelines for authentic sponsorship communications to help organizations avoid negative signal reception from both intended and unintended audiences. Thus, practitioners should consider establishing the signal content and primary target audience by selecting a sponsee with whom their organization has an authentic fit, by ensuring characteristics of commitment, observability, and credibility, and by conducting prelaunch and post-launch assessments to adapt to signaling feedback. Researchers should assess the proposed typologies and relationships, particularly for understudied sponsorship topics like composite signal content, variable signal reception across diverse audiences, social diffusion, and signaling feedback, as well as the unconditional effects of sponsorship characteristics, like the nuanced types of credibility. By observing these guidelines, organizations can achieve their goals through authentic sponsorship initiatives that will withstand the scrutiny of today's increasingly informed, interconnected audiences.

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