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Quality and Intention Signaling: A Meta-Analysis of How Sponsorship Relates to Consumer Responses According to Content, Observability, Credibility, and National Culture

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ABSTRACT

Organizations use sponsorships to inform consumers about their quality and positive intentions. Prior research has explained how these sponsorships signal quality to reduce selection challenges and prosocial intentions to reduce moral hazard concerns. Yet, previous meta-analyses do not assess and compare the relationships that sponsorship signaling has with consumer responses across samples of treatments (i.e., using sponsorships vs. not using sponsorships) that convey primarily quality or intention content. Thus, our meta-analysis focused on how sponsorship treatments relate to consumer responses according to samples conveying generalized content (quality and intention content combined) and distinct quality or intention content. The results suggest that sponsorship treatments conveying generalized content positively related to consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. They also suggest that signaling quality content has more positive relationships with consumers' cognitive and affective outcomes than signaling intention content, and that the relationships quality and intention signaling content have with consumers' affective responses are moderated by different conditions. Theoretically, quality and intention signaling processes appear to operate in distinct ways. Managerial takeaways are that sponsorships can positively relate to consumer outcomes, these relationships can be accentuated or diminished under various moderating conditions, and sponsorships for cause marketing in particular could require clearer and more credible messaging.

Organizations use sponsorships to inform consumers about their quality and positive intentions. *Sponsorship* has traditionally been considered a form of advertising for which an organization (the sponsor) provides cash or in-kind contributions to another entity (the sponsee) in exchange for association or other benefits (Cornwell 2019). These sponsorships, and associated sponsorship-linked marketing, have become important components of worldwide advertising spending (Cornwell and Kwon 2020; Jensen 2017), and research suggests that they positively relate to consumers' attention, affect, and behaviors (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Herrmann, Kacha, and Derbaix 2016).

From a theoretical perspective, sponsorship research has embraced signaling theory as a guiding logic (Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt 2002; Goh, Pappu, and Chien 2021; Jensen et al. 2024; Mazodier and Merunka 2012), aligning with the substantial relevance of the theory to research on advertising and cause marketing (Rosengren et al. 2020; Schamp et al. 2023). Signaling logic asserts that signalers help signal receivers (the consumers) overcome information asymmetries by sending cues through their effortful investments that an organization or brand provides high-quality products and services, and that the organization holds trustworthy intentions toward their multiple stakeholders

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(Connelly et al. 2011; Erdem and Swait 1998; Kirmani and Rao 2000; Spence 1973). When applied to sponsorships, this perspective explains how sponsors convey messages with quality or intention content to audiences (such as groups of consumers) in ways that can differ according to various sponsorship characteristics (Lin and Bruning 2024).

In this regard, *quality content* conveys information about a brand's usefulness and personal appeal (Connelly et al. 2011; Kirmani and Rao 2000), which can be reflected through sponsorships of sports, entertainment, and arts entities (Pope et al. 2009; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010). Theoretically, quality content helps consumers avoid adverse selection challenges arising from their lack of knowledge about the relative quality, usefulness, and personal meaning of a brand's products or services (Kirmani and Rao 2000).

Alternatively, *intention content* conveys information about the sponsor's reliability and social virtues (Connelly et al. 2011; Kirmani and Rao 2000), which can be reflected through sponsorships of cause entities (Andrews et al. 2014; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011). Intention content helps reduce moral hazard challenges for consumers by clarifying an organization's exchange intentions through social commitments (Connelly et al. 2011; Kirmani and Rao 2000).

The paper's main objective is to assess and compare how sponsorship signaling relates to consumers' responses for *generalized content*, defined as all sponsorship signaling that includes both *quality content* and *intention content*, along with more focused assessments of specific signaling that involves sponsorships conveying distinct quality or intention content. Operationally, we meta-analyze how sponsorship treatments (i.e., using sponsorships vs. not using sponsorships) relate to consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, and we consider these relationships for treatments that convey specific quality content (through sports, entertainment, and arts sponsorships) and/or intention content (through cause sponsorships). These analyses are run for the total sample that captures generalized content, as well as quality and intention content subsamples, to summarize the relationships that sponsorship treatments have with consumer responses and reveal significant moderating conditions for distinct types of signal content.

It is hoped that the results can help managers (and researchers) develop sponsorship initiatives (or treatments) that are more memorable, more persuasive, and better calibrated to the quality- and intention-focused messaging that fulfills distinct consumer information needs. In this regard, whereas quality

content fulfills consumers' needs to understand product and service value, intention content fulfills their needs to understand product and service provider reliability. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of these distinct signaling processes should help focus theory and application.

As part of this broader contribution, other unresolved issues are also addressed. We include assessments of cognitive outcomes to capture consumers' awareness, interest, and memory, as a category of outcome distinct from the previously meta-analyzed affective and behavioral outcomes elicited by social bonds, value propositions, and other environmental forces (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Kim et al. 2015; Knoll and Matthes 2017; Schamp et al. 2023). We also assess moderators across generalized/quality/intention content. These analyses provide novel comparisons of sponsorships of longer-term entities (e.g., teams, programs, or initiatives) with sponsorships of shorter-term events as a credibility indicator, and assessments of cultural dimensions (i.e., uncertainty avoidance and power distance) as characteristics that could increase consumers' susceptibility to signaling.

Theoretical Model

Prior Meta-Analytic Research on Sponsorship

Previous meta-analyses (Table 1) have assessed the direct relationships that sponsorship characteristics have with consumer responses (Kim et al. 2015; Rego and Hamilton 2022). They have also assessed whether using sponsorships versus not using sponsorships impacts consumer and financial outcomes, and whether certain characteristics moderate these relationships (Eshghi 2022; Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers 2021; Schamp et al. 2023).

To date, however, research has not assessed how sponsorship treatments relate to consumer responses across a sample of treatments that specifically convey quality or intention content. The meta-analysis by Kim et al. (2015) did not compare the sponsorship treatment conditions with no-sponsorship conditions and did not report how sponsorship treatments relate to consumer responses uniquely for quality and intention content. Additionally, the meta-analyses by Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers (2021) and Schamp et al. (2023) exclusively assessed cause sponsorships that conveyed intention content. Moreover, previous meta-analyses do not assess moderators of the relationships that sponsorship treatments have with consumer responses across sponsorship treatments that convey quality and intention content.

Table 1. Sponsorship relationships reported or compared in our paper and prior meta-analyses.

Meta-Analytic Relationships Reported or Compared	Kim et al. (2015)	Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers (2021)	Eshghi (2022)	Rego and Hamilton (2022)	Schamp et al. (2023)	Our Study
Types of Relationships Assessed						
• Reporting direct observational relationships that sponsorship characteristics have with consumer responses	✓			✓		
• Reporting how sponsorship treatments (sponsorship conditions vs. no-sponsorship conditions) relate to consumer responses		✓			✓	✓
• Reporting how sponsorship treatments relate to financial outcomes			✓			
• Reporting how sponsorship characteristics moderate sponsorship treatment relationships with consumer outcomes		✓	✓		✓	✓
• Reporting the mean and moderated sponsorship treatment relationships with consumer outcomes (including cognitive outcomes) across effect sizes that reflect quality and intention content						✓
• Comparing how sponsorship treatments that reflect quality content (vs. intention content) relate to consumer outcomes						✓
• Comparing the pattern of moderation that sponsorship characteristics have on sponsorship treatment relationships with consumer outcomes using separate quality and intention content subsamples						✓
Moderator Variables Assessed						
• Reporting the moderating relationships for domestic (vs. nondomestic sponsors/sponsees) to reflect signal credibility			✓		✓	✓
• Reporting the moderating relationships for national culture dimensions to reflect signal receiver susceptibility to sponsorship signaling					✓	✓
• Reporting the moderating relationships for sponsorships of longer-term entities (vs. events) to reflect signal credibility						✓

Overview of Sponsorship Signaling Model

We draw on signaling theory (Connelly et al. 2011; Erdem and Swait 1998; Kirmani and Rao 2000) to propose that sponsors communicate (signal) the quality or social virtues of their brands, products, and services to receivers who lack complete information about them. Figure 1 outlines these propositions to show how sponsorship signals comprised of generalized/quality/intention content influence consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, and how these relationships are moderated by signal observability, credibility, and receiver characteristics (i.e., national culture dimensions).

In the model, sponsorships are proposed to elicit positive consumer responses by sending signals that provide information that conveys the effort and investments put into the quality of the sponsor's brands, products, and services, or pursuing the organization's prosocial intentions. For example, STIHL, a producer of forestry equipment, has sponsored events such as the World Logging Championships and the European Student Championship in Forestry Skills that would signal superior quality through invested associations with these market-relevant competitions. An example

of intention content would be the Canadian pet insurance company, Petsecure, sponsoring Humane Canada, a social organization with the mission of improving the lives of animals in Canada.

Signal receivers (consumers) can also infer different meanings from signal content according to characteristics of the sponsorship (i.e., signal observability and credibility) and the receivers themselves (i.e., national culture dimensions). *Signal observability* makes messages more noticeable and easier to receive and interpret (Connelly et al. 2011; Erdem and Swait 1998). This observability can be reflected in characteristics of familiarity, structural fit, and audiences' exposure to multiple brands. Continuing a previous example, the STIHL sponsorship of the World Logging Championships would be quite observable because of their relative familiarity within the forestry industry and the fit of their product with the event.

Signal credibility makes the message more benevolent and trustworthy, such that signaled information can be used in a more confident way (Connelly et al. 2011; Erdem and Swait 1998; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995).¹ This characteristic can be reflected in sponsorships involving domestic sponsors, domestic

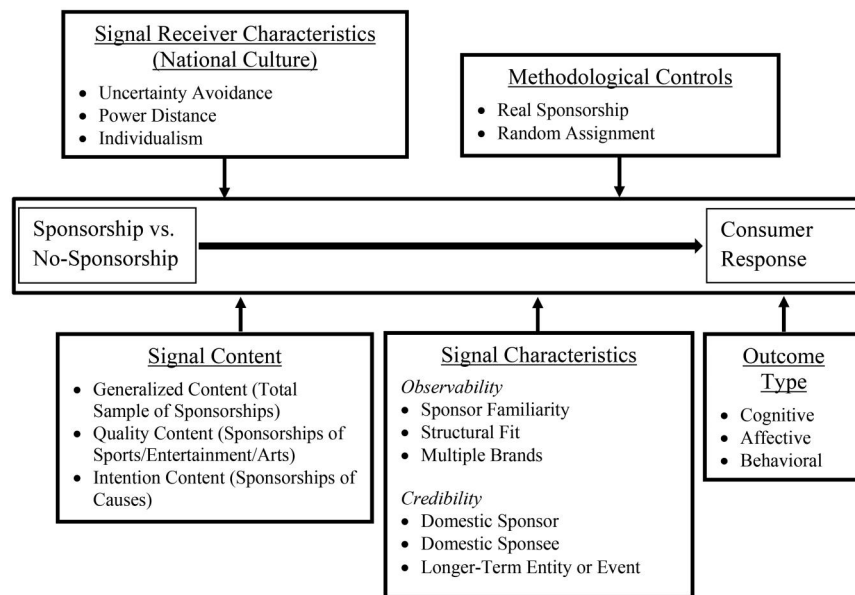


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

sponsees, and longer-term entities. In this regard, the Petsecure sponsorship of Humane Canada would seem more credible because both the sponsor (Petsecure) and the sponsee (Humane Canada) would be considered domestic entities for the target audience of Canadian consumers.

The moderating implications of consumers' cultural contexts represent *signal receiver characteristics* that reflect susceptibilities to signaling. For this purpose, we consider uncertainty avoidance to account for people's tendency toward skepticism, power distance to account for people's tendency to defer to prominent or respected entities, and individualism to account for people's different social orientations. Next, we develop hypotheses and research questions that will be assessed using the total sample to understand generalized signaling relationships, as well as specific quality and intention subsamples to understand distinct signaling relationships.

Consumer Responses to Sponsorship Signaling

A recent synthesis of sponsorship definitions reveals that *sponsorship* represents, "a purposeful exchange relationship between a sponsoring entity and a separate sponsored entity in support of a tangible activity, event or dialogue engaged by the sponsored entity" (Lin and Bruning 2021). This definition and its defining characteristics show that sponsorships involve a sponsor, a sponsee, and an exchange of benefits between these two parties; a tangible activity, event, or dialogue engaged by the sponsee; a purposeful and mutual engagement in the partnership; a more global,

international, or regional scope; and the potential for parallel sponsorship-linked marketing to clarify or promote the sponsorship (Cornwell and Maignan 1998; Meenaghan 1983; Woisetschläger et al. 2017).

Sponsorships have been proposed to elicit consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005). *Cognitive outcomes* capture aspects of interest, awareness, and descriptive knowledge (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Kim et al. 2015; Knoll and Matthes 2017). These outcomes can often be associated with the advertising mode (sponsorship) creating attention and interest directed toward the advertiser (sponsor) through controlled and automatic engagement with the sponsee (Knoll and Matthes 2017).

Affective outcomes capture evaluations, attitudes, emotional outcomes, and intentions (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Kim et al. 2015; Knoll and Matthes 2017). These outcomes are likely to be associated with positive perceptions, evaluations, beliefs, behavioral intentions, or other valenced responses from consumers according to the sponsor-sponsee relationship and the characteristics of this relationship. In this paper, behavioral intentions are categorized as affective outcomes to account for their reflection of persuasion effects that have substantial similarities with other affective outcomes (van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Eisend 2021).

Behavioral outcomes capture enacted behaviors (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005; Kim et al. 2015; van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Eisend 2021). These enacted behaviors can be associated with affective outcomes, as well as environmental mechanisms of influence, such as norms, reinforcement, and other factors

that influence behaviors like purchase decisions (Ajzen 1991; Schamp et al. 2023; van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Eisend 2021).

Prior experimental research shows that different types of sponsorships can positively relate to various consumer responses (Andrews et al. 2014; Herrmann, Kacha, and Derbaix 2016; Mazodier and Merunka 2012; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010). For example, Herrmann, Kacha, and Derbaix (2016) conducted a field study of visitors at a tournament within the Association of Tennis Professionals circuit, and found that both users and non-users of the sponsor's brand had significantly higher levels of recall and recognition for those exposed to the sponsorship. Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor (2010) conducted a field experiment examining the effects of companies sponsoring "high-brow" arts (e.g., literature, art, museums, and classical music) over a period of 1 year. These sponsorship conditions were compared with a control group. Results showed that the sponsorship communications increased consumers' perceptions of the brand's likability and attractiveness. Mazodier and Merunka (2012) found that consumers exposed to Olympic sponsorships experienced significant increases in brand affect, brand trust, and brand loyalty, whereas no such increases occurred for the control group. Additionally, Andrews et al. (2014) conducted a field experiment on more than 17,000 consumers, which revealed that cause sponsorships elicited more purchase behaviors compared with the control conditions. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1: Sponsorship will have positive relationships with consumers' (a) cognitive, (b) affective, and (c) behavioral outcomes.

Quality Versus Intention Content

Sponsorship signals can involve different types of messaging, which can be distinguished according to quality content that conveys usefulness and personal appeal, and intention content that conveys social reliability and prosocial virtue (Lin and Bruning 2024). Research has considered different sponsorship contexts that involve sports, prosocial causes, and entertainment and arts sponsees (Cornwell 2019). In this regard, consumers could perceive sponsorships as sending quality signals that convey status and prestige when the sponsored properties are engaged in sports, entertainment, and arts activities (Dens, De Pelsmacker, and Verhellen 2018; Pope et al. 2009; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010); or as sending intention signals that convey compassion and social responsibility when the sponsored properties are

engaged in prosocial cause activities (Andrews et al. 2014; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011).

Quality Content

Sponsorships of sports, entertainment, and arts entities are proposed to involve quality content that is associated with perceptions of status and prestige, given the often ambitious, competitive, and elite nature of these types of properties. For example, sponsoring sports entities could involve sports events such as the Olympics or events within the Association of Tennis Professionals circuit (Herrmann et al. 2014; Mazodier and Merunka 2012), sports teams such as the Houston Rockets or the McLaren Formula 1 team by Mercedes Benz (Ohme and Boshoff 2019; Pope et al. 2009), or sports leagues such as the Premier football league in the United Kingdom (Bennett 1999; Dos Santos et al. 2023). In general, these sponsorships involve investments in partnerships with entities that pursue competitiveness and high achievement (Cornwell, Pruitt, and Van Ness 2001; Pope et al. 2009) in ways that convey quality.

Sponsorships of entertainment and arts entities could involve entertainment groups such as the Australian Symphony Orchestra (Olson 2010; Prendergast, Poon, and West 2010), a variety of entertainment and arts festivals such as the Salzburg Festival (Olson 2010; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010), cultural television programming (Corkindale, Neale, and Bellman 2023; Dens, De Pelsmacker, and Verhellen 2018), and other concerts and events (Simões and Agante 2014). In general, these sponsorships involve investments in partnerships with entities that pursue status, prestige, and cultural refinement (Close, Krishen, and Latour 2009; Gwinner 1997; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010) that would also convey quality.

Research suggests that consumers can respond favorably to quality signaling through sponsorships of sports, entertainment, and arts entities (Becker-Olsen 2003; Mazodier and Merunka 2012; Pope et al. 2009; Schwaiger, Sarstedt, and Taylor 2010). However, quality signaling benefits could be offset when sponsorships are perceived as instrumental and commercialized (Grohs and Reisinger 2014; Woisetschläger et al. 2017).

Intention Content

The virtuous images conveyed by cause sponsorships are proposed to be associated with consumers' perceptions that the sponsors hold trustworthy and reliable intentions as potential exchange partners. Sponsoring prosocial causes could involve sponsorships of environmental sustainability initiatives (Kull and Heath

2016), health-related initiatives (Arora and Henderson 2007; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011), and other charities focused on social causes, such as education programs, animal welfare, and poverty reduction (Andrews et al. 2014; Sabri 2018; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). These sponsorships involve investments into partnerships with entities that practice compassion and social responsibility in ways that relate to positive consumer responses (Andrews et al. 2014; Connelly et al. 2011; Krishna and Rajan 2009; Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers 2021; Schamp et al. 2023).

Indeed, Krishna and Rajan (2009) revealed that cause sponsorships could spill over from one of a brand's products onto their other products, suggesting that these sponsorships can impact how consumers engage with the sponsors as virtuous commercial entities. Andrews et al. (2014) found that cause sponsorships elicited consumers' real-world purchase behaviors. More broadly, meta-analyses by Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers (2021) and Schamp et al. (2023) found that cause-related marketing had positive effects on consumers' attitudes and intentions. However, these findings together with other research suggests that cause sponsorships can also be subject to consumers' scrutiny (Schamp et al. 2023; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006), which could reduce credibility in ways that relatively offset the benefits of intention signaling. Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of sponsorships conveying primarily quality or intention content, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 1: How does sponsorship signal content that conveys primarily quality (vs. intentions) moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Signal Observability

Sponsor Familiarity

Sponsor familiarity captures the degree to which consumers know about the sponsor prior to being exposed to the sponsorship. Whereas sponsor familiarity could make sponsorship signals easier to observe and receive, it might also restrict the sponsorship's potential to convey new information. Consumers' prior knowledge about a sponsor could make the sponsor more memorable and appealing (Close, Krishen, and Latour 2009; Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005). Supporting this possibility, the meta-analysis by Kim et al. (2015) suggests that consumers' level of

exposure to the sponsor and sponsorship had a significant positive correlation with consumers' cognitive outcomes, as well as significant (but weak) correlations with their affective and behavioral outcomes. These findings suggest that sponsorship signals could be more memorable and persuasive when the entities involved are more familiar.

At the same time, greater sponsor familiarity could minimize the unique persuasive benefits sponsorship signals have regarding consumer responses due to previously established knowledge, evaluations, and intentions. Signaling theory specifies how messages (signals) are sent to reduce consumers' asymmetric information (Kirmani and Rao 2000), suggesting that sponsor familiarity could restrict the proportion of information not previously known by consumers. Knoll and Matthes's (2017) meta-analysis of celebrity endorsement effects shows that familiarity negatively impacts consumer responses. Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of sponsor familiarity, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 2: How does sponsor familiarity moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Structural Fit

Structural fit refers to the fit or congruence between a sponsor and sponsee that is inherent in the details and characteristics of the sponsorship matching, and it can serve as a stimulus condition to elicit fit perceptions. The broader fit construct involves the tangible aspects of sponsorships, including similarity, consistency, typicality, representativeness, complementarity, and comprehensibility of the matching between sponsors and sponsees, as well as audience (consumer) fit perceptions (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). When predicting consumer responses, structural fit is a precursor condition that can relate to consumers' valanced and subjective fit perceptions.² It can manifest as natural, created/articulated, functional, symbolic, or complementary fit. When applied to sponsorship signaling, structural fit is expected to make messages more observable, easier to process, and more conducive to positive responses (Cornwell et al. 2006; Kim et al. 2015; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Speed and Thompson 2000).

The observability benefits of sponsorship fit appear through correlations with memory, affect, and intentions (Kim et al. 2015; Speed and Thompson 2000; Woisetschlager et al., 2017). Manipulations of fit have also been shown to have positive experimental effects

on these outcomes (Cornwell et al. 2006; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Specifically, Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) found that better-fitting sponsorships positively predicted clarity perceptions, as well as subsequent affect and intentions. Sponsorship fit can also clarify multi-party sponsorships (Carrillat, Harris, and Lafferty 2010; Carrillat, Solomon, and d'Astous 2015). Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 2: Structural fit will moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, whereby high structural fit will be associated with more positive relationships.

Multiple Brands

The presence of *multiple brands* captures whether consumers are exposed to other brands and brand information when processing and responding to the sponsorships. Research on the effects of multiple brands and "cluttered" sponsorship environments appears mixed, with different implications (Boeuf, Carrillat, and d'Astous 2018). Multiple sponsor/non-sponsor brands could obfuscate the signaled information by interfering with consumer signal reception. Interference occurs when competitive advertising within the environment reduces consumers' capacity to recall brand information (Keller 1987, 1991), and these effects can occur when information on other brands interferes with how consumers process sponsorship messaging (Boeuf, Carrillat, and d'Astous 2018).

However, multiple brands could also make the sponsor's message more distinct and observable, such as when an incongruent sponsorship occurs in an otherwise "cluttered" environment (Boeuf, Carrillat, and d'Astous 2018) or when consumers prefer sponsoring brands over non-sponsoring brands within cluttered choice experiments (Arora and Henderson 2007).³ Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of multiple brands, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 3: How does the presence of multiple brands moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Signal Credibility

Domestic Sponsors

Domestic sponsors primarily operate in one nation or national region. They could have different credibility implications according to potentially offsetting trustworthiness components of ability or benevolence/integrity

(for a description of these components, see Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). Nondomestic sponsors could be seen as more capable due to their international status and success, which could convey prominence and signal their ability and trustworthiness (Cobbs, Groza, and Pruitt 2012; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995).

However, consumers could also view domestic sponsors as more authentic and committed "insiders" relative to nondomestic sponsors that could seem less integrated, authentic, and trustworthy (Cornwell 2019; Johanson and Vahlne 2009). Research suggests that consumers can respond less positively to sponsorships with low geographic fit (Woisetschläger et al. 2017) and even hold animosity toward nondomestic sponsors in ways that can have negative implications on favorability and purchase intentions (Angell et al. 2021; Meng-Lewis, Thwaites, and Pillai 2013). Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of sponsors' domestic status, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 4: How does a sponsor's domestic status moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Domestic Sponsees

Domestic sponsees are primarily associated with one nation or national region, and they could have different credibility implications according to ability or benevolence/integrity. Nondomestic sponsees could be seen as more prestigious partners due to their international scope. A meta-analysis by Kim et al. (2015) found that sponsee prestige positively correlated with consumers' affect and behavior.

Conversely, consumers can view domestic sponsees as more personally relevant and integrated into the local market (Johanson and Vahlne 2009). Regional proximity can make sponsors' motives come across as more benevolently committed rather than instrumental (Woisetschläger et al. 2017), and consumers can be more accepting of sponsorships involving more local properties (Plewa et al. 2016). Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of a sponsee's domestic status, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 5: How does a sponsee's domestic status moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Longer-Term Entities Versus Events

Sponsorships can involve different sponsee entities, including less intense but more permanent social

entities such as teams and initiatives, or more intense but shorter-term events. It is possible that sponsorships with longer-term entities could convey greater benevolence and relational integrity, whereas sponsorships with events might convey greater status and prestige. Sponsorships with longer-term entities such as teams, leagues, or programmatic initiatives could signal more committed relationships (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011; Walraven, Bijmolt, and Koning 2014) in a way that conveys greater integrity/benevolence/commitment according to their more continuous involvement with the sponsee (Cornwell 2019; Woisetschläger et al. 2017), whereas consumers could perceive events as shorter-term commitments that are more commercial, contractual, or instrumental in ways that relate to negative consumer responses (Grohs and Reisinger 2014; Kim et al. 2015; Woisetschläger et al. 2017).

However, sponsorships are often engaged to reap the prominence and status benefits of shorter-term events, such as Olympic Games or the Chicago Blues Festival, that bring together a premier roster of participants (Gwinner 1997; Mazodier and Merunka 2012). The events' prestigious participants, as well as the scope of impact and relevance, could foster perceptions about the sponsee's prominence and impact in ways that make the sponsorship messages more trustworthy (Kim et al. 2015; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). Kim et al. (2015) reveal that sponsee prestige had significant positive meta-analytic correlations with consumers' affect and behaviors. Events can also attract more identified and receptive fans from farther afield (Scheinbaum, Krishen, and Lacey 2022). Given the potential benefits and drawbacks of sponsoring longer-term entities versus shorter-term events, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 6: How does the sponsorship of longer-term entities (vs. events) moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

The Cultural Context of Signal Receivers

The cultural context of a study represents sample-level characteristics that could make signal receivers more or less receptive to signaling (Connelly et al. 2011; Schamp et al. 2023). Hofstede (2001, p. 9) defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." We focus on dimensions of uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and individualism to account for

distinct modes of consumer receptivity to sponsorship signaling.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance captures the degree to which societal members are uncomfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity, and not knowing how the future will unfold (Hofstede 2001). Consumers in these cultures can be less open to change and innovation (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011), and societies characterized by higher uncertainty avoidance tend to have lower levels of generalized social trust (Kong 2013). People in these societies can also be less positive in their responses to companies' investments in marketing initiatives (Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier 2014), and they can generally be less receptive to information from commercialized sources (Dawar, Parker, and Price 1996). Therefore, people in nations with high uncertainty avoidance could be more skeptical of the signaled message's credibility, so we predict the following:

Hypothesis 3: Uncertainty avoidance will moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, whereby higher uncertainty avoidance will be associated with less positive relationships.

Power Distance

Power distance captures the degree to which societal members with less power accept an unequal distribution of power and higher levels of interpersonal inequality (Hofstede 2001). Consumers in nations with higher power distance operate on the principle that people have established positions within the social hierarchy, and social entities within these contexts convey status to elicit respect and deference (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011). Consumers from countries higher in power distance can be more susceptible to advertising and marketing communications (Möller and Eisend 2010; Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier 2014). Thus, the relationships that sponsorships have with consumer responses could be more positive in countries characterized by higher power distance where people could be more receptive and deferent to signaling from higher-status sponsors and sponsees. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 4: Power distance will moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, whereby higher power distance will be associated with more positive relationships.

Individualism

Individualism refers to contexts in which societal members prefer more loosely bound social networks where they are only responsible for themselves and their immediate families (Hofstede 2001). This context

is contrasted against collectivism, which represents societal members' preferences for more tightly bound social networks wherein a broader set of in-group members can rely on each other's support and reciprocal loyalty. This distinction is often reflected in people's focus on thinking of themselves in more independent and idiosyncratic ways instead of more communal and mutual ways. Consumers with certain characteristics could be prone to signaling effects (Connelly et al. 2011), whereby those in more individualistic cultures could see greater personal value from quality signals and more trustworthy transaction opportunities from intention signals.

Conversely, consumers in more collectivist cultures have identities more intricately tied to the social systems (de Mooij and Hofstede 2011), which could make them more susceptible to in-group association (Lin and Bruning 2020; Madrigal 2000) and more responsive to the communal benefits of locally or socially focused sponsorships (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2011; Woisetschläger et al., 2017). Given the different possible implications of a signal receiver context characterized by individualism, we guide this assessment with the following research question:

Research Question 7: How does individualism moderate the relationships that sponsorship has with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes?

Methods

Database Compilation

We selected experimental papers that provided estimates of the relationships that sponsorship treatments had with consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. We identified relevant papers published through searches of electronic databases using ABI/INFORM, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. For search terms, we used "experiment" together with "sponsor*," "cause," "event," or "sport" in any available search field. We also searched leading journals, including *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *Journal of Advertising*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Marketing Science*, and *Journal of Retailing*. Additionally, we conducted a cross-reference search to find overlooked papers (Harari et al. 2020). The search period covered manuscripts that were published up until April 2023.

Our research sought to assess and compare the mean and moderated relationships that sponsorship treatments had with different consumer outcomes

across generalized/quality/intention content under different theoretical conditions. Pursuing this objective required a homogeneous base of effect sizes to provide a consistent empirical foundation for our analyses of more nuanced outcomes, subsamples, and moderating conditions. Thus, we focused the scope of consideration on the relationships that sponsorship treatments (vs. no-sponsorship control conditions) have with consumer outcomes.⁴ Papers were screened according to relevance by assessing titles, abstracts, and methods sections. Then, the relevant papers were assessed according to the inclusion/exclusion criteria described next.

First, because the empirical focus of our study is sponsorship signaling treatments, we only included effect sizes that compared the outcomes of a sponsorship treatment group with the outcomes of a no-sponsorship control group.⁵ For treatment groups, a sponsor sponsoring an object (sponsee) was required, whereas the control group must include an organization not engaged in a sponsorship. We excluded effect sizes that did not compare valid sponsorship treatments with valid no-sponsorship control conditions (e.g., Cornwell et al. 2006; Johar and Pham 1999; Ruth and Simonin 2006; Woisetschläger et al. 2017). We also excluded effect sizes with control conditions that reflected alternative marketing tactics, such as televised advertising (e.g., Olson and Thjømøe 2009), price discounts (e.g., Chang and Liu 2012; see meta-analysis by Schamp et al. 2023), or ambush marketing (e.g., Brownlee, Greenwell, and Moorman 2018).

For sponsorship treatments, we excluded effect sizes that captured distinct advertising strategies, such as sponsorships of individual people who reflect celebrity endorsement or influencer marketing (e.g., Kim, Duffy, and Thorson 2021; see meta-analysis by Knoll and Matthes 2017). Moreover, our focus was on positive quality/intention content, so we excluded effect sizes that specified sponsorship treatments with the a priori expectation of conveying negative or stigmatized information that would constitute harmful signal content (e.g., Olson 2018).

Second, we only included effect sizes that captured positive consumer cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes directed at the sponsors. We excluded consumer responses directed toward other entities (e.g., sponsor-sponsee partnerships, sponsees, rivals and ambushers, consumers' personal outcomes, or communication platforms). For example, we excluded effect sizes that had outcomes capturing the fit and creativity of the sponsor-sponsee partnership (e.g., Madrigal and King 2017) or sponsee support (e.g.,

Goh, Pappu, and Chien 2021). We also excluded papers that did not report statistics necessary for calculating effect sizes (e.g., sample sizes, means, standard deviations, t-statistics, F-statistics, proportions, and Chi-square statistics). When essential information was not reported in an otherwise relevant study, we contacted the authors.

A total of 102 papers were retained, including 92 journal articles (from 43 different journals), 3 conference papers, and 7 doctoral or master's theses. There were 139 studies and 610 effect sizes obtained from the papers (150 effect sizes for sports sponsorships, 63 effect sizes for entertainment and arts sponsorships, and 397 effect sizes for cause sponsorships). The sample was drawn from 25 different countries⁶ and comprised 52,125 participants drawn from studies with sample sizes ranging from 33 to 11,794 ($M = 391.92$, $SD = 1236.10$).

After reaching a consensus on the definitions and coding criteria for the variables of interest (Supplemental Online Appendix A), two authors independently coded all the papers (Chandy and Tellis 2000; Srinivasan, Lilien, and Rangaswamy 2006). The agreement between the two coders showed good interrater reliability (Fleiss's Kappa = 95.9%, Krippendorff's alpha = 95.9%), and the coders resolved disagreements through discussion.

Effect Sizes

We calculated standardized mean difference estimates (d) (Lipsey and Wilson 2001) for the primary effect-size metric. Relative to other metrics, it most closely reflects the structure of primary data being meta-analyzed and is commonly used within meta-analyses on sponsorship and closely related advertising topics (Knoll and Matthes 2017; Schamp et al. 2023). With this metric, positive d -values indicated that sponsorship treatments had stronger positive relationships with consumers' responses than no-sponsorship conditions, and negative d -values indicated that no-sponsorship conditions had stronger positive relationships with consumers' responses than sponsorship treatments.

Estimates were calculated using all available statistical information and were corrected for sample size in the form of a Hedge's g statistic to address upwardly biased estimates calculated from smaller samples (Hedges 1981; Lipsey and Wilson 2001). We attenuated effect sizes by correcting for the reliabilities of dependent variables. When the reliability was not reported, we used the average reliability from across the datasets in its place (Eisend 2017; Hunter and Schmidt 2004).

We also translated the primary g values into common language effect size values (CLES: McGraw and Wong 1992) to facilitate applied interpretations and inform practical implications (Schamp et al. 2023). In this regard, the CLES values provide the probability that a person sampled from the group exposed to sponsorship treatments would have a more positive response than another person sampled from the group not exposed to sponsorship treatments.⁷

Hierarchical models were used to account for multiple effect sizes from a given study that could be correlated (Abraham and Hamilton 2018; Chang and Taylor 2016; Cheung 2014). Specifically, we followed the established meta-analytic procedures of calculating hierarchical models for both mean effect sizes (intercept-only estimations) and moderated relationships using the `rma.mv()` function from the `metafor` meta-analysis package in R (Carrillat, Legoux, and Hadida 2018; Schamp et al. 2023; Viechtbauer 2010). This function uses the inverse of the variance-covariance matrix as its weighting matrix to account for estimated between-study heterogeneity, estimated within-study heterogeneity, sampling variability, and covariances (Viechtbauer 2010, 2023).

We addressed publication bias in several ways. First, we included unpublished studies consistent with previous meta-analyses in advertising and marketing (Eisend and Tarrahi 2014; van Berlo, van Reijmersdal, and Eisend 2021, van Berlo et al. 2024). Second, we calculated fail-safe N values using the Rosenthal (1979) and Rosenberg approaches (2005) to estimate the number of additional null effect sizes that would need to be added to the sample to make the results nonsignificant at $\alpha = .05$ (*cognitive*: Rosenthal fail-safe $N = 189$, Rosenberg fail-safe $N = 151$; *affective*: Rosenthal fail-safe $N = 19,955$, Rosenberg fail-safe $N = 11,859$; *behaviors*: Rosenthal fail-safe $N = 263$, Rosenberg fail-safe $N = 202$). Third, our assessment of funnel plots (Supplemental Online Appendix B) did not suggest that publication bias posed a substantial threat because of the following: they show relatively symmetrical plots; Egger's regression test results (Egger et al. 1997) did not show significant funnel plot asymmetry; and trim-and-fill analyses (Duval and Tweedie 2000) did not estimate any studies were missing from the plots. Cook's distance measures (Cook 1977) revealed no outliers.

Analyses and Results

Average Meta-Analytic Effect Sizes (Intercept-Only Model)

An intercept-only hierarchical model provides the intercept as the mean of the outcome variables, and

we used this procedure to calculate the mean effect size for each specific outcome type. The results presented in Table 2 show a significant mean effect size for cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes (see “Generalized Content” effect sizes). The results of Q -statistic and I^2 assessments showed significant effect size heterogeneity for all outcomes, confirming the usefulness of the moderator analyses we ran (Borenstein et al. 2009; Chang and Taylor 2016).

Moderator Analyses

We assessed how sponsorship and contextual characteristics moderated the relationships that sponsorship treatments had with cognitive and affective outcomes using hierarchical models to account for theoretical covariates and correlations between observations. Moderator analyses were not run for behavioral outcomes due to an insufficient number of behavioral effect sizes. For cognitive and affective outcomes, we assessed multivariate models that included theoretical moderators and empirically relevant methodological controls.⁸ These multivariate models helped account for all covariates simultaneously.⁹

Table 3 provides the results of the moderator analyses, and Table 4 summarizes the findings from these analyses. Significant moderators for cognitive outcomes included quality content (operationalized as sports, entertainment, and arts sponsorships) and sponsor familiarity. Significant moderators for affective outcomes included quality content, sponsor familiarity (negative coefficient), structural fit, and longer-term entities.

Analysis of Quality and Intention Content Subsamples

We also assessed the mean effect sizes and patterns of moderation for sponsorship treatments conveying quality and intention content.¹⁰ The results presented in Table 2 reveal that sponsorship treatments had

significant positive relationships with cognitive outcomes for the quality content subsample, affective outcomes for both the quality and intention content subsamples, and behavioral outcomes for the intention content subsample. We also ran multivariate moderator analyses predicting affective outcomes for quality and intention content subsamples (Table 5). The results are summarized in Table 4. Real sponsorship (whether the treatment involved a real-life sponsor, sponsee, and sponsor-sponsee partnership) was the only significant moderator for affective outcomes in the quality content subsample. Significant moderators for affective outcomes in the intention content subsample included structural fit and longer-term entities.

Discussion

Our research sought to assess and compare the mean and moderated signaling relationships that sponsorships have with consumer responses across generalized/quality/intention content. The study complements previous meta-analyses (Kim et al. 2015; Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers 2021; Schamp et al. 2023) by revealing that sponsorship treatments conveying generalized content had significant positive relationships with consumers’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. It also suggests that these relationships can be moderated by aspects of signal observability and credibility (Lin and Bruning 2024). Perhaps the most substantial results were that quality/intention content moderated how sponsorship treatments related to cognitive and affective outcomes, whereas this distinction also showed different patterns of moderation across subsamples. These findings suggest the relevance of distinguishing quality signaling that projects effort and competence through advertising processes (Rosengren et al. 2020) from intention signaling that conveys sincere social responsibility (Schamp et al. 2023). Specific insights and implications are discussed next.

Table 2. Mean effect sizes.

Outcomes	k	ES	N	Attenuated g (SE)	Attenuated g (95% CI)	CLES	Q Statistic	I^2
<i>Generalized Content (Total Sample)</i>								
Cognitive	12	.69	2898	.54(.08)**	(.39, .69)	65%	554.76, ($p < .001$)	91.19%
Affective	116	.505	29,239	.27(.03)**	(.21, .33)	58%	5395.27, ($p < .001$)	95.00%
Behavioral	11	.36	22,135	.20(.09)*	(.02, .39)	56%	342.15, ($p < .001$)	96.44%
<i>Quality Content (Sports, entertainment, and arts)</i>								
Cognitive	9	.60	2521	.57(.07)**	(.43, .71)	66%	363.73, ($p < .001$)	88.26%
Affective	27	.149	11,416	.34(.04)**	(.27, .41)	60%	800.50, ($p < .001$)	88.06%
Behavioral	1	.4	1249	.20(.13)	(−0.06, .45)	56%	5.72, ($p > .1$)	48.47%
<i>Intention Content (Cause)</i>								
Cognitive	3	.9	377	.33(.34)	(−0.33, 1.00)	59%	183.29, ($p < .001$)	96.48%
Affective	89	.356	17,823	.23(.04)**	(.15, .31)	56%	4588.20, ($p < .001$)	95.73%
Behavioral	10	.32	20,886	.21(.11)*	(.01, .42)	56%	333.06, ($p < .001$)	97.03%

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. Meta-regression moderation results for cognitive and affective outcomes.

Moderator	Cognitive Outcomes ($k = 12$; $ES = 69$; $n = 2898$)	Affective Outcomes ($k = 116$; $ES = 505$; $n = 29,239$)
Intercept	-1.84(1.52)	-0.19(.39)
<i>Sponsorship Signal Content</i>		
Sports, entertainment, and arts vs. cause sponsorship	.77(.38)*	.50(.12)**
<i>Sponsorship Observability</i>		
Sponsor familiarity	.82(.38)*	-0.16(.08)*
Structural fit	.21(.17)	.40(.07)**
Multiple brands	-0.40(.84)	-0.02(.08)
<i>Sponsorship Credibility</i>		
Domestic sponsor	-0.54(.71)	.08(.11)
Domestic sponsee	-0.56(.48)	-0.03(.08)
Longer-term entity vs. event sponsorship	.67(.40)	.44(.12)**
<i>Signal Receiver Characteristics</i>		
Uncertainty avoidance	-0.04(.10)	-0.00(.00)
Power distance	.06(.16)	.01(.00)
Individualism	-	-0.00(.00)
<i>Methodological Controls</i>		
Random assignment	.81(.48)	.06(.09)
Real sponsorship	-	.12(.12)

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

If there were linear dependencies in the model, the model matrix was not of full rank. In these situations, the `rma.mv()` function from R automatically reduces the model matrix to full rank by removing redundant predictors (Viechtbauer 2010, 2023). Individualism and real sponsorship were automatically dropped by R in the analysis predicting cognitive outcomes due to their redundancy.

Table 4. Summary findings.

Variable	Significant Findings
	<i>Mean Relationships (Table 2)</i>
Sponsorship relationships with cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant positive relationship with cognitive outcomes for generalized content Significant positive relationship with affective outcomes for generalized content Significant positive relationship with behavioral outcomes for generalized content Significant positive relationship with cognitive outcomes for quality content Significant positive relationship with affective outcomes for quality content Significant positive relationship with affective outcomes for intention content Significant positive relationship with behavioral outcomes for intention content
	<i>Signal Content Moderators (Table 3)</i>
Sports, entertainment, and arts vs. cause sponsorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality content (sports, entertainment, and arts sponsorships) had a significantly more positive relationship with cognitive outcomes than intention content (cause sponsorships) Quality content (sports, entertainment, and arts sponsorships) had a significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes than intention content (cause sponsorships)
	<i>Signal Observability Moderators (Tables 3 and 5)</i>
Sponsor familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly more positive relationship with cognitive outcomes for generalized content Significantly less positive relationship with affective outcomes for generalized content
Structural fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes for generalized content Significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes for intention content
Multiple brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
	<i>Signal Credibility Moderators (Tables 3 and 5)</i>
Domestic sponsor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Domestic sponsee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Longer-term entities vs. events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longer-term entities had a significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes than events for generalized content Longer-term entities had a significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes than events for intention content
	<i>Signal Receiver Moderators (Tables 3 and 5)</i>
Uncertainty avoidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Power distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Individualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
	<i>Methodological Controls (Tables 3 and 5)</i>
Random assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None
Real sponsorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly more positive relationship with affective outcomes for quality content

Theoretical Implications

Sponsorship Signaling of Quality and Intention Content

As a general and overarching theoretical implication, the results supported aspects of the sponsorship signaling model across sponsorship treatments that convey

primarily quality or intention content. Previous meta-analyses have assessed how sponsorship characteristics directly relate to consumer responses (Kim et al. 2015) and how cause sponsorship treatments influence consumer responses (Rego, Hamilton, and Rogers 2021; Schamp et al. 2023). We complement these studies by

Table 5. Subsample meta-regression moderation results for affective outcomes according to quality and intention content.

Moderator	Affective Outcomes for Quality Content ($k = 27$; $ES = 149$; $n = 11,416$)	Affective Outcomes for Intention Content ($k = 89$; $ES = 356$; $n = 17,823$)
Intercept	1.57(.67)*	-0.63(.63)
<i>Sponsorship Observability</i>		
Sponsor familiarity	-0.16(.11)	-0.15(.09)
Structural fit	-0.01(.10)	.49(.08)**
Multiple brands	-0.15(.16)	.06(.10)
<i>Sponsorship Credibility</i>		
Domestic sponsor	.33(.19)	.03(.14)
Domestic sponsee	-0.23(.17)	-0.04(.10)
Longer-term entity vs. event sponsorship	.14(.27)	.47(.14)**
<i>Signal Receiver Characteristics</i>		
Uncertainty avoidance	-0.01(.01)	-0.00(.00)
Power distance	-0.01(.01)	.01(.01)
Individualism	-0.00(.01)	-0.00(.00)
<i>Methodological Controls</i>		
Random assignment	-0.07(.22)	.01(.13)
Real sponsorship	.55(.23)*	.05(.17)

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

analyzing treatments that convey quality and intention content in both simultaneous and independent analyses. Our results reinforce the proposition that organizations can help consumers overcome information asymmetries by sending (sponsorship) signals that convey the quality of the organizations' brands, products, and services or the organizations' trustworthy intentions (Connelly et al. 2011; Kirmani and Rao 2000). Moreover, they support the proposition that these signals can be more memorable and persuasive according to elements of observability and credibility (Connelly et al. 2011; Erdem and Swait 1998).

The results also reinforce the theoretical importance of distinguishing quality and intention content by showing that quality (vs. intention) content moderated consumers' responses to sponsorship treatments. Here, quality content is shown to have more consistently positive relationships with consumers' cognitive and affective outcomes than intention content. Additionally, the subsample analyses of affective effect sizes revealed different patterns of moderation across the quality/intention content subsamples, indicating that different conditions moderate these unique signaling processes. The only significant moderator for the relationship that quality content treatments had with affective outcomes was real sponsorship (i.e., whether the treatments presented a real-life partnership—an indicator of methodological credibility). Meanwhile, the relationship that treatments conveying intention content had with affective outcomes was moderated by characteristics reflecting both observability (structural fit) and credibility (longer-term entity). Schamp et al. (2023) found that cause marketing can have its effects moderated by a variety of conditions, and this finding aligns with our observation that consumers' reactions to intention content could

be less reliably positive and more conditional than their reactions to quality content.

Going forward, research should continue to examine how quality and intention content fulfill consumers' respective needs to understand product and service value and product and service provider reliability. Broadly, we encourage more research on signal content, reception processes, moderating characteristics, and social diffusion (Lin and Bruning 2024), and how these aspects of signaling processes can be influenced by characteristics of authentic sponsorship (Cornwell 2019). This research should also seek to integrate the quality/intention signaling perspective with the nuanced components of Cornwell and Kwon's (2020) ecosystem model to address specific decision, audience, motivation, engagement, and contextual and environmental characteristics, as well as subsequent evaluation and decision outcomes. Research should also consider how the quality/intention distinction relates to signal reception by non-consumer audiences (Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt 2002; Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel 2018; Jensen et al. 2024) and as it occurs in partnerships with celebrities, influencers, and other opinion leaders (Kim, Duffy, and Thorson 2021; Knoll and Matthes 2017; Lin, Bruning, and Swarna 2018).

Sponsorship Signal Observability

Our findings partially align with those of Kim et al. (2015) because structural fit significantly moderated how sponsorship treatments related to affective outcomes for both generalized and intention content. However, it did not significantly moderate relationships with affective outcomes for quality content, which raises questions about whether sponsorship fit should be considered more universally beneficial

(Cornwell 2019; Kim et al. 2015). Our results may differ from those of Kim et al. due to our examination of a different type of relationship that sponsorship fit has with consumer responses. Whereas they assessed direct meta-analytic correlations the sponsorship fit characteristic had with consumer responses, we assessed how sponsorship fit moderated the relationships that sponsorship treatments had with consumer responses. The two studies also operationalized fit in different ways because Kim et al. assessed a composite of structural fit and self-reported fit perceptions whereas we focused on structural fit in a way that distinguished it from valanced fit perceptions, which can represent a proximal outcome and could be susceptible to common method bias when independent variables and dependent variables are both assessed using self-reported measures.

It is possible that fit perceptions capture valanced evaluations of sponsorship signaling that are closely related to other affective responses as a consequence of their shared valance (e.g., Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). It is also possible that consumers process quality and intention content in unique ways that differentially elicit valanced fit perceptions and other related affective outcomes. For example, relative to intention content, consumers might process quality content in more automatic and holistic ways that could bypass detailed fit evaluations to a greater extent (for more information on sponsorship message processing, see Kim, Stout, and Cheong 2012). Future research should examine the interplay of structural fit, perceived fit, and affective outcomes across quality and intention content.

The results also revealed that sponsor familiarity had substantially different relationships with cognitive and affective outcomes because it made relationships with cognitive outcomes more positive and relationships with affective outcomes less positive in the generalized content sample. This point reveals a paradoxical challenge for sponsors. Familiarity could allow sponsors' messaging to be more observable (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005) and, in some cases, more personally appealing (Close, Krishen, and Latour 2009). However, familiarity could also reduce the persuasive benefits of this messaging due to familiar sponsors having less room to gain unique additional marketing benefits (Knoll and Matthes 2017) or having their motives more closely scrutinized (Speed and Thompson 2000). Future research should clarify these different possibilities.

Our findings did not suggest that the presence of multiple brands interfered with the observability and

persuasiveness of sponsorship treatments across outcomes and samples. Thus, research should continue to assess whether the presence of multiple brands could have countervailing mechanisms, such as interference and positive contrasts, and if certain conditions accentuate or diminish one or more of these potential mechanisms.

Sponsorship Signal Credibility

Our results reinforce the emerging idea that sponsorships with more continuity are positively received by consumers (Cornwell 2019; Walraven, Bijmolt, and Koning 2014; Woisetschläger et al. 2017). Here, we approached this issue by comparing the sponsorship of longer-term entities, including teams, leagues, and social initiatives with event sponsorships. The results revealed that sponsorships of longer-term entities had more positive relationships with cognitive and affective outcomes across generalized and intention content. In this regard, sponsorships of longer-term entities could validate intention content by emphasizing authenticity, benevolence, and commitment (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). However, these moderating relationships were not significant in the quality content subsample. Thus, future research should assess how and when sponsorships of longer-term entities make signaling more persuasive and why these relationships might differ across quality versus intention content.

Our results did not suggest that the domestic status of sponsors or sponsees moderated the relationships that sponsorship treatments had with consumer responses. However, this finding could be the result of potentially conditional and/or countervailing mechanisms. Thus, it is worth continuing to assess the mechanisms and situations where sponsorship treatment relationships are moderated by the credibility derived from sponsors' and/or sponsees' international prestige and competence (Cobbs, Groza, and Pruitt 2012) and national insider status (Johanson and Vahlne 2009; Schamp et al. 2023), as well as possible consumer animosity (Angell et al. 2021; Meng-Lewis, Thwaites, and Pillai 2013).

Signal Receiver Characteristics (Cultural Context)

Our results did not reveal that national culture significantly moderated how sponsorship treatments related to consumer outcomes. Although it is possible that national culture does not meaningfully moderate how sponsorship treatments relate to consumer responses, it is also possible these relationships could become clearer in focused primary research that directly

measures cultural values across diverse samples. Prior research does suggest that consumer responses can be associated with national culture (Samaha, Beck, and Palmatier 2014; Schamp et al. 2023), so we encourage more research on whether cultural variables such as individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance can influence consumers' responses to sponsorship signaling. Research could also assess other nationally or regionally relevant signal reception processes such as animosity (Angell et al. 2021) and receiver characteristics such as prior knowledge and geographic separation (Close, Krishen, and Latour 2009; Scheinbaum, Krishen, and Lacey 2022).

Limitations and Primary Research Needs

The complete coverage of all possible outcomes and characteristics was limited by the corpus of primary studies—a common limitation of meta-analytic methods. The sample statistics presented in Table 2 suggest that more research is needed on cognitive outcomes (particularly for intention content) and behavioral outcomes (particularly for quality content). It would also be helpful to know more about sponsorship relationships across different cultures and regions. Many of the studies analyzed were from places like the United States, Europe, and Australia, and more research is needed from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Managerial Implications

The results show that sponsorships can be associated with a meaningful lift in some outcomes for people exposed to various sponsorships relative to those not exposed. The translated CLES metrics presented in Table 2 suggest a 65% probability that a sponsorship treatment would relate to the lift in cognitive outcomes of a person exposed to generalized sponsorships. The probabilities for affective and behavioral outcomes are 58% and 56%, respectively. Moreover, the probabilities appear to be higher for quality messaging relative to intention messaging for both cognitive outcomes (66% vs. 59%) and affective outcomes (60% vs. 56%). Although the observed relationships range between small and moderate, they could be meaningful at scale. In summary, it appears that signaling quality content could be more likely than signaling intention content to predict consumers' cognitive and affective outcomes.

Nuanced decisions can also improve how sponsorships relate to consumer responses for the generalized

sample and some of the subsamples (see Tables 3 and 5). For generalized sponsorships, partnering with longer-term entities appears to be associated with improved cognitive and affective outcomes, and ensuring good structural fit could be associated with improved affective outcomes. Notably, sponsorship signals from more familiar sponsors could be more easily amplified; however, these sponsors might also need to overcome what appear to be liabilities of familiarity, whereby familiar sponsors are less persuasive. Thus, we suggest focusing sponsorship signaling on communicating information that consumers in their target audiences do not already know, while also taking extra care to reinforce the commitment and authenticity of the partnership to avoid sending unintentional messages of instrumentality. Managers signaling primarily intention content should clarify their message by ensuring good structural fit and proactively conveying benevolence, relational integrity, and authenticity (Cornwell 2019; Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. *Signal credibility* is distinguished from *intention content*, which conveys prosocial virtues of the signaler (sponsor), because signal credibility enhances the benevolence/cohesion/trustworthiness involved with the signal (message) itself.
2. This distinction between structural fit and perceived fit is inherent in experimental studies that manipulate the sponsor–sponsee fit and check the manipulation with participants' valenced fit perceptions (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Prendergast, Poon, and West 2010).
3. While findings from choice experiments reflect main treatment effects, they also reveal that sponsorships distinguish sponsors from other brands in crowded marketing environments.
4. As a preliminary condition, the effect sizes that were analyzed needed to account for sponsorship treatments and consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes. Thus, our study did not cover the bodies of sponsorship research with company-level outcomes, including sponsor–sponsee relational integrity or financial outcomes (e.g., Jensen and Turner 2017; Clark, Cornwell, and Pruitt 2002; Cobbs, Groza, and Pruitt 2012), or correlational assessments of how variables other than sponsorship treatments relate to consumer responses (e.g., Close, Krishen, and Latour 2009; Madrigal 2000; Speed and Thompson 2000).

5. Studies on corporate social responsibility were included if they compared a sponsorship treatment (in which an organizational sponsor provided benefits to a relevant sponsee) with a no-sponsorship control group.
6. The meta-analysis captured studies from North America, Europe, Asia, Oceania, and Africa.
7. A CLES value of 50% reveals that there is no effect (i.e., it is equivalent to a d value of 0); thus, a person exposed to the treatment would have the same probability of a positive response relative to a person not exposed to the treatment (McGraw and Wong 1992).
8. The methodological controls included in the moderator analyses were determined using a two-stage process in which we first ran multivariate meta-regression models that included potentially relevant moderators (Supplemental Online Appendix C). The results were used to select methodological controls that were empirically relevant to at least one of the cognitive or affective outcomes. Random assignment was a significant moderator for cognitive outcomes, and real sponsorship was a significant moderator for affective outcomes.
9. The average variance inflation factor (VIF) for the moderators was 1.83, and the highest VIF was 3.08 for Individualism. All values were below the conservative threshold of 4 and were comparable to VIFs from other meta-analyses (Chang and Taylor 2016; Schmidt and Bijmolt 2020).
10. The significant moderation found for the sponsorship signal content distinction reported in Table 3 provided empirical support for splitting the total sample into a quality content subsample (sports, entertainment, and arts sponsorships) and an intention content subsample (cause sponsorships) for affective outcomes.

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