Abstract

Purpose – This article investigates how firms can use social media such as *Facebook* to recruit top job prospects.

Design/methodology/approach – In the context of a fictitious event presumably sponsored by potential employers, a sample of university students became members of a private and secret *Facebook* user group dedicated to this event for a period of four days. They were exposed to event sponsorship activation messages varying systematically with respect to the mode of processing (i.e, passive or active) and their focus (i.e., the brand or the event).

Findings – The results show that expectations as regards the salary that they would require to become employees were higher in the active mode of processing. Also, attitude toward the sponsor as an employer was more favorable when the activation messages focused on the brand rather than on the event. Further analyses showed that the effects of message focus and mode of processing on the attitudinal responses toward the sponsoring employers were mediated by the degree of elaboration and richness of social interactions of the *Facebook* group's members as well as their attitude toward the activation messages.

Practical implications – Managers seeking to gain a recruiting edge through their social media presence should use online messages that stimulate more active processing and that have high entertainment value since this leads to more favorable responses toward the employer. These messages should insist more on the brand than on the event that is sponsored.

Originality/value – This study is the first study to foray into the usage of social networking sites for recruitment purposes. It represents one of the few research efforts to monitor the interactions of users in a social media platform by means of a controlled experiment performed *in situ* through the creation of an *ad hoc Facebook* group.

1. Introduction

Among social media platforms, social networking sites (SNSs) such as *Facebook* allow individuals and organizations to build a public or semi-public virtual profile and to create a list of users with whom relations can be developed. Information technologies have become increasingly prevalent among businesses and are being employed toward a wide array of objectives that are either consumer related, such as how ads' influence can be leveraged with SNS applications (e.g., Li *et al.*, 2012), or employee related such as how open source software projects shape personnel and human resources management (e.g., Blount *et al.*, 2005; Ke and Zhang, 2009; Yun *et al.*, 2012).

However, no study has looked at how information technology such as SNSs can augment a company's capacity to attract and recruit the most promising job applicants. Because human capital is a key determinant of an organization's competitiveness, hiring and retaining the best candidates is a major stake in the arms race toward building a sustainable competitive advantage (Cable and Turban, 2003). A few pioneer studies have linked human resource benefits with the brand power of the firm or its products. DelVecchio *et al.* (2007) have shown that a brand's image or reputation has a significant impact during the final stages of the hiring process when prospective employees must accept or reject an offer. Kim *et al.*'s (2011) study has confirmed the key role played by the brand during the recruitment phase of the hiring process. However, what is missing from this emerging stream of research is an investigation of how the firm's brand can be best put to use in order to enhance its appeal among the finest prospects. In other words, how can firms leverage their brand to reap the most benefits from their recruitment efforts?

In this article, it is proposed that event sponsorship through SNSs can be advantageously used to promote an employer's brand among potential recruits. To that aim, we present a study conducted with a *Facebook* user group created specifically for the need of this research. *Facebook* was chosen as the SNS in this study because it is a powerful medium to reach new graduates as it is approaching a penetration rate of 100% in this population in the USA (World Higher Education Database Online, 2011). It is also very flexible by allowing sponsors to tailor their messages to the audience, and its interactive nature fosters the development of strong relationships between users and brands (Vries *et al.*, 2012).

This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge pertaining to the organizational benefits that can be garnered from SNSs. It shows how marketing investments, such as event sponsorship, can be recouped cross-functionally in terms of recruitment through an appropriate SNS strategy and yield positive returns in terms of employee recruitment when a suitable SNS presence is in place.

2. Conceptual background

2.1 Event sponsorship

Event sponsorship corresponds to a contractual agreement where a company (i.e., the sponsor) offers financial or in-kind support to a popular event in return for the rights to promote this partnership for commercial benefits (Carrillat and d'Astous, 2014; Cornwell *et al.*, 2005). Event sponsorship represents an essential marketing communication tool with spending reaching $53.3 billion worldwide (International Event Group, 2013). This marketing communication strategy contributes to build tangible and deep relationships between the event audience and the sponsor's brand (Close *et al.*, 2006; Fournier, 1998;

Vries *et al.,* 2012). Companies typically engage in event sponsorship to increase brand awareness, improve their image, increase their sales, as well as foster employees' motivation and attract top job prospects (Gardner and Shuman, 1987; Grimes and Meenaghan, 1998; Piquet, 1985; Sneath *et al.*, 2005). Although the latter two objectives are often reported as being a priority for sponsoring firms (Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013), no empirical study to date has investigated the role that sponsorship plays in achieving them.

2.2 Information technologies and the recruitment of top prospects

How information technologies can be leveraged to improve upon human resource management has been documented in the research literature in the past few years (Blount *et al.*, 2005; Chapman and Webster, 2003; Ke and Zhang, 2009; Yun *et al.*, 2012). Research is however needed to understand how new technologies can assist firms in the early phase of the selection process, that is at the stage of attracting the best talents. Employee recruitment is a process (Barber *et al.*, 1994) where an organization undertakes different actions in order to generate an appropriate number of qualified applicants and enhance their likelihood to accept an eventual job offer (Breaugh, 1992). Organizational attractiveness, defined as one's belief that the organization is a prime working place (Rynes *et al.*, 1991), is an essential element of a successful personnel management strategy (Chapman *et al.*, 2005; Gomes and Nemes, 2011). Indeed, the reputation and strength of the corporate brand are key drivers of the best candidates' inclination toward an organization (Johnson and Roberts, 2006). Research has shown that a company's image, as well as its role in the community, are essential decision factors used by job candidates looking for potential employers (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993; Highhouse *et al.*, 2003; Rynes and Barber, 1990). It is argued in the next section that sponsoring an event

and activating this sponsorship within a SNS environment can enhance a company's attractiveness as a future employer.

2.3 Event sponsorship activation

In order to fully benefit from event sponsorship, brands must engage in activations aimed at leveraging their association with the event. Activations may take different forms such as samples, animation, advertising, sweepstakes, or promotional initiatives (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Nickell *et al.*, 2011; Woodside and Summers, 2011). Research has shown that sponsor identification, attitude toward the sponsor, image transfer, and the perceived congruence between the event and the brand are significantly improved when efficient sponsorship activations are carried out concomitantly with an event sponsorship program (e.g., Cornwell *et al.*, 2006; Crimmins and Horn, 1996; Grohs *et al.*, 2004; Olson and Thjømøe, 2009; Quester and Thompson, 2001; Woodside and Summers, 2011).

2.4 Event sponsorship activation through SNS

In order to activate their sponsorship, practitioners increasingly rely on new technologies at the expense of traditional advertising (Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013). As a result, the proportion of activation campaigns that include a social media presence is now estimated to be 74% (International Event Group, 2012). However, research regarding this practice is sparse. From the point of view of sponsorship activation, social media platforms do not simply serve to inform users of the brand-event association, they incite them to exchange with the sponsor, thus creating a virtual experience that is susceptible to increase their commitment to the brand (Liang *et al.*, 2011-2012). For instance Pentina *et al.* (2013) have shown that the strength of the relationship with a SNS increases users' loyalty to the network and to the hosted brands that they follow.

2.5 Different types of SNS sponsorship activation

While sponsorship activation through a SNS can be instrumental in the development of a bond between users and the brand, the relationship building capability of SNSs is likely to depend on two major factors: 1) the degree to which users interact with the firm once they receive the sponsorship activation message (Pagani and Mirabello, 2011-2012; Shen *et al.*, 2010; Vries *et al.*, 2012; Zhang *et al.*, 2010) and 2) whether it is the sponsoring brand or the sponsored event that is put forward in the activation message. These two factors referred to as *activation processing mode* and *activation focus*, respectively, form the basis for the four types of activation messages investigated in this study and described below.

2.5.1 Sponsorship activation processing mode

The effectiveness of SNSs as a marketing communication platform in general, and in the context of a sponsorship activation strategy in particular, is likely to depend on the extent to which users actively interact with corporate profiles. This interactivity can be defined as the amount of influence two or more parties have on each other when communicating (Liu and Shrum, 2002). Interaction among members of brand communities has been shown to increase their commitment to the brand (Jang *et al.*, 2008). When interacting actively with corporate profiles, cognitive processing is in an active, as opposed to a passive, mode (MacInnis and Price, 1987).

The nature of the tasks performed by users in reaction to the sponsor's activation messages has a direct impact on the level of cognitive elaboration. Numerous studies in cognitive psychology have demonstrated that tasks that incite people to process information at a deeper level result in better recall and recognition (see e.g., Lockhart and

Craik, 1990). Research results in the context of social media confirm this trend. For instance, Vries *et al.* (2012) have shown that highly interactive brand posts within online communities enhance the frequency of consumers' responses. Because communications that engage consumers lead in general to more favorable responses (e.g., Weeks *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2010), sponsorship activation strategies that incite consumers to actively interact with the sponsoring brand in the context of a SNS platform should have a greater positive impact on sponsorship effectiveness than more passive strategies.

2.5.2 Sponsorship activation focus

Sponsorship activation messages via SNSs may emphasize different focal elements such as the event, the sponsor, or both. Results reported by Söderman and Dolles (2010) suggest that in the beginning of a partnership, sponsors emphasize their association with the event with the objective of consolidating the brand-event relationship in the eyes of consumers. When the brand-event association is sufficiently strong, sponsorship activation may thus switch to a brand focus. However, beyond these results describing the current focus strategies deployed by sponsors, no research has attempted to investigate which focus brings the most benefits for sponsors.

3. Research context and dependent variables

In general, research addressing issues related to online consumer behavior has relied on surveys where people are interrogated to self-assess their level of interaction, of influence, or other measures of theoretical constructs (see e.g., Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Huang *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2012; Zhang and Daugherty, 2009; Zeng *et al.*, 2009). Although they may bring useful information, studies using opinions to estimate causal relationships among theoretical constructs lack internal validity because individuals do

not necessarily have the capacity to estimate the impact of the environment on their behavior and, moreover, may not be conscious of the influence of other variables on their behavior. In addition, the external validity of these studies is limited because they are removed from the natural environment in which relationships between constructs of interest unfold. To avoid these limitations, the participants in the present study were exposed to different sponsorship activation conditions through a controlled experiment within the *Facebook* environment. Their level of interaction as members of a *Facebook* group was monitored during the experiment to assess the effects of the manipulations on several responses.

4. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

The conceptual framework for this study is displayed in Figure 1. As can be seen, one of the attributes of sponsorship activation, namely the orientation of the message content (focus of the message: event *versus* brand), is presumed to impact on consumer attitude toward the sponsor as an employer. The other attribute of sponsorship activation, namely the degree to which it incites consumers to be active in their interactions with the brand (processing mode: passive *versus* active) is expected to impact the attitude toward the sponsor through a sequential mediation process: first by giving rise to social interactions that vary with respect to their elaborateness and richness which, in turn, are presumed to lead to a better attitude toward the message. In addition, the processing mode of sponsorship activation is hypothesized to have an impact on the salary that one would ask if hired as an employee of the sponsor. The research hypotheses that follow from this conceptual framework are presented below with their theoretical justifications.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

A brand focus puts the emphasis on the brand's attributes in the context of supporting the event whereas an event focus insists more on the attributes of the event itself (Söderman and Dolles, 2010). Hence, a brand-focused activation should expose individuals to the sponsoring brand's attributes more directly than an event-focused activation. As a result, SNS users are more likely to process the brand's benefits and to develop a positive reaction toward the attitude object of the message (i.e., the brand) with a brand-focused message than with an event-focused message (Burke and Edell 1989). Thus:

H₁: A social network event sponsorship activation that focuses on the brand leads to a more favorable attitude toward the sponsor as an employer than a sponsorship activation that focuses on the event.

Processing information in an active, as opposed to a passive, mode should result in that information being more elaborated, better encoded, and integrated with multiple cognitive structures (MacInnis and Price, 1987). Hence, this should influence both the frequency and content of social interactions in a social media setting by inciting users to post more elaborate (longer) and richer (more informative) comments. Thus:

H₂: A social network event sponsorship activation that incites consumers to be active in their interactions with the brand leads to (a) more elaborate and (b) richer social interactions than a sponsorship activation that is passive.

It is proposed that the influence of sponsorship activations' mode of processing on attitude toward the sponsor takes place through the sequential effect of attitude toward the message that ensues from more elaborate, and richer, social interactions (Figure 1). First, as shown in the rationale leading to H2, in SNSs, sponsorship activations that are

more engaging for users incite them to interact with other users as well as with the brand or the company. Following a conative route to attitude formation (Kamins and Mark, 1983), this interaction behavior should lead users to develop a more favorable attitude toward the advertising message. Second, according to resource-matching theory, a message is more likely to be appreciated when the intensity with which consumers process it matches the intensity required by the content of the message. In such a resource-matching situation, the message leads to more favorable evaluations of its elements (e.g., Anand and Sternthal, 1987). Because SNS users are strongly involved with the object around which their community revolves (Vries *et al.*, 2012), they are likely to be deeply engaged cognitively and to allocate a large amount of resources when processing information (Greenwald and Leavitt, 1984; MacInnis and Price, 1987). Therefore, sponsors' messages that incite active processing should better match the resources allocated to process them by SNS users, which in turn should lead to more favorable evaluations of these messages. Attitude toward the advertisement is often a precursor of attitude toward the brand featured in the advertisement (Mitchell and Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981). Based on the above rationale, a sequential mediation process underlying sponsorship activation in a SNS context is hypothesized.

H$_{3a}$: In the context of a social network event sponsorship activation, the degree of elaboration of social interactions and the attitude toward the activation message play a sequential mediating role in the relationship between the sponsorship activation processing mode and the attitude toward the sponsor as an employer.

H$_{3b}$: In the context of a social network event sponsorship activation, the richness of social interactions and the attitude toward the activation message play a sequential

mediating role in the relationship between the sponsorship activation processing

mode and the attitude toward the sponsor as an employer.

As specified earlier, engaging activation messages are more task-like in nature than

more passive ones as they generally require to solve a problem or to craft an elaborate

answer to a question (i.e., through the usage of metaphors). In order to understand the

relationship between the manner with which activation messages are processed and the

expected salary from potential employees, the self-determination theory of motivation is

relevant in the context of completing a task.

Self-determination theory asserts that individuals' well-being depends on the

fulfillment of three fundamental needs known as autonomy (control over one's actions),

competence (achieving efficacy at optimally challenging tasks), and relatedness (being

connected to others) (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Studies based on self-determination theory

have generally found that fulfilling the competence need increases work engagement

(Deci *et al.*, 2001). Thus, the use of more engaging and more cognitively demanding

activations by a potential employer should help fulfill job seekers' competence need,

which in turn should ratchet up expected compensation (DelVecchio *et al.*, 2007). In

addition, studies have found that competent students have access to many employment

offers and can be selective (e.g., Gomes and Neves, 2011). Hence, potential job

applicants whose competence needs are satisfied through their interaction with the firm

via challenging and engaging activation messages should expect a salary commensurate

with the perception of their worth on the hiring market. In sum, a greater level of

cognitive effort by individuals should lead to a greater level of interactivity and higher

requirements in terms of salary in reaction to a sponsoring company's activation

messages because this is likely to contribute to enhancing their self-perceptions as potential candidates. Thus:

H4: A social network event sponsorship activation that incites consumers to be active in their interactions with the brand leads to a higher required salary from consumers than a sponsorship activation that is passive, in the event that they would work for the sponsor.

5. Method

5.1 Overview

University students were recruited to participate in an academic research project (i.e., the "event") related to the practices of recruiting companies; the event was presumably sponsored by two well-known business organizations. The participating students became members of a new *Facebook* group created by these potential employers (the sponsors of the academic research project). The research project was presented to the participants as an opportunity to become known to attractive employers and only participants with a high degree of interest in maintaining good relationships with employers were selected. In order to ensure the success of this latter measure, the participating students belonged to the University's pool of academic competition; a group of students handpicked by the University's academic competition coordinator after a stringent selection process (i.e., academic achievement, career plan, experiences, motivation) who are highly involved in out-of-the-classroom activities.

For a period of four days, the participants formed a private and secret *Facebook* user group and were prompted to react to sponsorship activation messages that differed on a daily basis with respect to their focus (event *versus* brand) and mode of processing

(passive *versus* active). After having been solicited through their personal *Facebook* e-mail boxes, 43 individuals accepted to be part of the study and 31 of them participated to all the observation and data collection points. The degree of elaboration and the richness of social interactions that resulted were assessed through a content analysis of the messages posted by the participants. In addition, at the end of each day, the participants completed a questionnaire containing measures of the other dependent variables.

5.2 Choice of sponsors

Eight well-known companies listed in the Canada's Top 100 Employers Repertory were evaluated by a group of 40 business students with respect to their familiarity, their appreciation, their perceived reputation, the pride associated with being eventually their employee, and the intention to recommend their products or services. Two companies, *L'Oréal* and *Deloitte* (a Canadian professional services firm), obtained the best scores on all the measures and were therefore selected as sponsors for the experiment (M > 4.93 on all measures across the 2 companies; 7-point Likert-type scales). A series of statistical tests showed that they were not perceived as being different on any of the measures used in this pre-test (ts < 1.06, ps > .30).

5.3 Sponsorship activation stimuli

A great deal of effort was allocated to the preparation of the sponsorship activation stimuli to be sent to the *Facebook* user group. Although all messages had to put forward the partnership between the event (the research project) and the sponsors, they had to differ in terms of their focus (event *versus* brand) and their capacity to stimulate cognitive processing (passive *versus* active). As regards the cognitive processing manipulation, both activation messages corresponded to a fairly high level of stimulated interactivity by

means of a question asked to participants (Vries *et al.*, 2012) in order to reflect the usual medium to very high interactivity of activation messages used on SNSs. The difference between the two lied in how deep the thinking process had to be (i.e., descriptive *versus* metaphorical) in the objective of creating a passive and an active mode of processing.

Four messages (passive-event, passive-brand, active-event, and active-brand) were designed and were pre-tested with a group of judges composed of 10 adult consumers and 10 graduate students. The focus manipulation consisted in: 1) displaying the logo of the company (i.e., brand focus), or that of the event (i.e., event focus) right at the beginning of the activation stimulus in order to clearly indicate which entity was sending the message, and 2) describing the features of the company, or of the event, in the first paragraph of the message. Following the focus manipulation, the sponsorship activation mode of processing manipulation consisted in asking a simple question in the passive condition (e.g., "What are in your opinion the three qualities that a brand manager should have?), and in prompting the participants to play the Chinese portrait game in the active condition (e.g., "If the job of consultant was an animal, which animal would it be?). Both conditions necessitated some level of interactivity but the Chinese portrait required more cognitive involvement (Vries *et al.*, 2012). As an example, Figure 2 presents the sponsorship activation stimulus corresponding to the brand focus/passive condition.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

5.4 Experimental design and procedure

The experimental design for this study is a 2 (sponsorship activation focus: event or brand) × 2 (sponsorship activation processing mode: passive or active) within-subjects design. The following sequence of experimental conditions was adopted for all

participants: passive activation focused on the event with *L'Oréal* as the sponsor (day 1), passive activation focused on the brand with *L'Oréal* as the sponsor (day 2), active activation focused on the event with *Deloitte* as the sponsor (day 3), and active activation focused on the brand with *Deloitte* as the sponsor (day 4). The *Facebook* group created for this study had a private and secret status to ensure that only the participants could access its content. The sponsorship activation message was posted each day at 7:00 am and the participants were informed that their eventual reactions to this message had to be posted before 3:00 pm. At 4:00 pm, they were invited to fill in an online questionnaire containing measures of the dependent variables (discussed below). At the end of the experiment (day 5), all participants completed an online questionnaire with measures of control variables and socio-demographics, and were informed that the academic research project (the event) was fictitious and that the two stimulus sponsors had never been associated with that project.

5.5 Measures

5.5.1 Attitude toward the activation message

The measure for this variable was adapted from MacKenzie and Lutz's (1989) scale of attitude toward the ad. It was composed of two seven-point bipolar numerical items with *totally disagree/totally agree* endpoints: 1) I reacted favorably to the message, and 2) I liked the message.

5.5.2 Attitude toward the sponsor as an employer

This concept was measured with several items aimed at covering the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of attitude. The perceived value of the professional experience

(cognitive dimension) resulting from eventually working for the sponsor was assessed with four items adapted from a scale developed by DelVecchio *et al.* (2007): 1) Working for 'the sponsor' would be a definite resume builder, 2) Having 'the sponsor' on my resume would make me stand out among other applicants for future jobs, 3) Having the sponsor on my resume would lend credence to my abilities when searching for another job, and 4) Having worked for 'the sponsor' would make me highly regarded by recruiters at other firms. These items, as well as all other items presented below, were rated using a seven-point *totally disagree/totally agree* bipolar scale. Three items were adapted from MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) and Cable and Turban (2003) to assess the affective dimension of the concept: 'the sponsor' is a company 1) that I like, 2) that seems more professional than other companies in the same domain, and 3) that has an excellent reputation on the campus. The intention to work for the sponsor (conative dimension) was assessed with two items adapted from Cable and Turban (2003): 1) I would like to work for 'the sponsor', and 2) I would feel proud to be an employee of 'the sponsor'. The intention to recommend the sponsor as an employer (conative dimension) was assessed with a single item: Taking into account the association between 'the sponsor' and the academic research project, I would recommend 'the sponsor' as an employer if someone asked for my professional advice (see Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996).

5.5.3 Minimum required salary

This variable was measured with an open-ended question adapted from DelVecchio *et al.* (2007): What is the minimum annual salary that you would accept to work for 'the sponsor'? The participants' responses were converted into one of 15 salary categories ($20,000$-$24,999, $25,000-$29,999... $100,000 and more).

5.5.4 Manipulation check measures

Four items were developed to assess the extent to which the focus manipulation was successful: 1) The message on the wall was posted by the event, 2) The message on the wall was posted by the company that sponsors the event (reversed), 3) The message posted on the wall put the emphasis more on the sponsor of the event than on the event (reversed), and 4) The message posted on the wall put the emphasis more on the event than on the sponsor of the event. Two items were developed to verify the effectiveness of the processing mode manipulation: 1) I found that the task associated with the posted message required a great deal of thought, 2) The accomplishment of the task associated with the posted message required much effort.

5.5.5 Degree of elaboration of the social interactions

This variable was assessed by counting the number of words per comment after each of the sponsorship activation was posted during the experiment.

5.5.6 Richness of the social interactions

To assess this concept, a score of distinctiveness was computed for each posted comment on the basis of the signal value provided (Shannon, 1948). Comments with no signal value do not provide information and were assigned a score of zero. Totally unique comments not only enrich existing ones but allow creating entirely new avenues for discussion and were assigned a score of 3. Hence distinctiveness scores ranged from 0 (totally redundant) to 3 (totally unique). For each sponsorship activation, 31 comments were posted. The first comment appearing on the *Facebook* wall was considered unique and was awarded the maximum number of points (i.e., 3). Each following comment

received 1 point for each new (i.e., not redundant with previously posted comments) idea generated, up to a maximum of 3 points (i.e., 3 new ideas generated in the same comment).

5.5.7 Process measures

In order to verify that participants' level of cognitive processing was high enough, two additional measures were included to assess the veracity of the resource-matching theoretical framework. First, "Engagement with *Facebook*", or the extent to which the participants are generally engaged with *Facebook*, was measured with 16 items adapted from a scale that Calder *et al.* (2009) developed to capture online engagement (e.g., I contribute to *Facebook* conversations, I almost always use *Facebook* when I surf on the Web). In addition, "Attention paid to the activation message" was measured with two items: 1) The message was striking to me, and 2) I felt concerned by the message.

6. Results

6.1 Description of the sample

The participants were 15 male and 16 female students who were enrolled in an undergraduate business program offered in a major business school in the city of Montreal, where the study took place in December 2011. Together, they composed a fairly homogeneous sample with little variance with respect to their age (between 20 and 25 years old, mean age = 22) and their income (77.4% earning less than 20,000$ per year). As regards their field of specialization, all business disciplines were represented with accounting (five participants), marketing (seven participants), and finance (four

participants) being the largest sample categories, in agreement with the observed

distribution of specializations in the student population of the business school.

6.2 Creation of variables

The four items developed to verify the effectiveness of the focus manipulation were

factor analyzed in order to assess their dimensionality. Using the eigenvalue-greater-than-

one criterion, a single factor emerged explaining 74% of the variance. The mean of the

items served as an indicator for the concept (perception that the message was sent by the

event). The level of reliability was very good with Cronbach's alpha coefficient equal to

.88. In the case of the mode of processing manipulation, the two items were strongly

correlated ($r = .82$, $p < .001$) and were therefore averaged to create an indicator of the

perception that the task was demanding.

The items covering each dimension of the attitude toward the sponsor as an employer

concept were factor analyzed separately. In each case, a single factor emerged explaining

a fair proportion of the variance (perceived value of the professional experience: 90%;

evaluation of the sponsor: 62%; intention to work for the sponsor: 74%). The items were

averaged and the resulting means, along with the single item measuring the intention to

recommend the sponsor as an employer, were factor analyzed. This analysis produced a

single factor explaining 63% of the variance. The item and the means were averaged to

create an indicator for the attitude concept (Cronbach's alpha = .80).

The 16 items aimed at measuring the participants' engagement with *Facebook* were

factor analyzed. On the basis of a parallel analysis (Patil *et al.*, 2008), two factors were

retained. Twelve items loaded on the first factor which represented the concept of

engagement. Since the four items loading on the second factor expressed guilt associated

with using *Facebook* (e.g., I often feel guilty as regards the time that I spend socializing on *Facebook*), the average of the 12 items served as a measure of the engagement concept (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

The two items purported to measure the attitude toward the activation message were positively correlated ($r = .73$, $p < .001$). This was also the case with the two items developed to assess the degree of attention to the activation message ($r = .85$, $p < .001$). In each case, the average of the items served as an indicator of the concept.

6.3 Manipulation checks

A 2 (focus: event *versus* brand) × 2 (mode of processing: passive *versus* active) within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using as dependent variable the mean perception that the event (more than the sponsor) had sent the sponsorship activation message. The main effect of focus was the only statistically significant effect ($F(1, 30) = 64.51$, $p < .001$). As expected, in the event-focus conditions the mean perception that the message was issued by the event was higher (M = 4.83) than in the sponsor-focus conditions (M = 2.23).

The same analysis was performed using as dependent variable the mean perception that the task required by the event sponsorship message was demanding. This time, the only statistically significant effect was that of mode of processing ($F(1, 30) = 119.12$, $p < .001$). As expected, the task was perceived as more demanding in the active conditions (M = 4.87) than in the passive conditions (M = 2.76). Altogether, these results confirm that the focus and mode of processing manipulations were successful.

6.4 Test of research hypotheses H_1, H_2, and H_4

These three research hypotheses were tested separately using a 2×2 ANOVA with focus and mode of processing as within-subjects factors and the appropriate indicator as a dependent variable (i.e., attitude toward the sponsor as an employer, elaborateness as well as richness of the posted comments, and required salary).

6.4.1   Attitude toward the sponsor

In support of H_1, the attitude toward the sponsor was more favorable in the brand-focus conditions (M = 5.45) than in the event-focus conditions (M = 5.25) ($F(1, 30) = 12.00$, $p < .01$). The focus × mode of processing interaction was not statistically significant ($F(1, 30) = 0.32$, $p > .05$).

6.4.2   Elaborateness and richness of the social interactions

As predicted by H_{2a}, the length of the comments posted by the participants (i.e., the number of words, reflecting the degree of elaborateness) was on average much superior in the active mode of processing conditions (M = 71.44) than in the passive conditions (M = 23.95) ($F(1, 30) = 104.02$, $p < .001$). Unexpectedly, the main effect of focus was also statistically significant ($F(1,30) = 9.09$, $p < .01$) with a slightly higher average number of words in the event-focus conditions (M = 52.29) than in the brand-focus conditions (43.10). The focus × mode of processing interaction was not statistically significant. In support of H_{2b}, the richness of the comments posted by the participants (0-3 score) was on average greater in the active mode of processing conditions (M = 2.05) than in the passive conditions (M = 0.73) ($F(1, 30) = 43.64$, $p < .001$). No other effect was statistically significant.

[Insert Figure 3 and Figure 4 about here]

Additional analyses were performed to verify the assumption that the *Facebook* group members were significantly involved with the object of the community (i.e., the event). It was found that users scored an average of 4.90 on the scale measuring their engagement with *Facebook*. This average was significantly different from the mid-point of the scale ($t(30) = 5.01$, $p < .001$). The same pattern of results emerged when measuring the attention paid to the message by the participants (M = 5.08; $t(122) = 5.08$, $p < .001$). This indicated that when the sponsorship activation message incited an active mode of processing, it matched better the cognitive resources allocated by consumers to attend to the message, hence supporting resource-matching theory as the underlying cognitive mechanism for activation effectiveness.

6.4.3 Minimum required salary

In support of H_4, the main effect of mode of processing on the required salary in the event that the individual would work for the sponsor was statistically significant ($F(1, 30) = 13.87$, $p < .001$) with a higher mean required salary in the active processing conditions (M = 8.11, i.e., in the 55,000\$-59,999\$ range) than in the passive conditions (M = 7.10, i.e., in the 50,000\$-54,999\$ range). Neither the main effect of focus nor the focus × mode of processing interaction was statistically significant.

6.5 Test of the sequential mediation research hypotheses (H_{3a} and H_{3b})

H_3 proposes that the relationship between the sponsorship activation processing mode and attitude toward the sponsor as an employer is accounted for by a sequential mediation where the elaborateness (H_{3a}) and richness (H_{3b}) of comments, followed by the attitude toward the message, have both an intervening role. These mediation effects were tested by means of regression analyses (MacKinnon, 2008). In order to conclude that a

mediation effect is present, in the first regression model the independent variable (i.e., mode of processing [0 = passive, 1 = active]) must have a statistically significant impact on the first mediator (i.e., elaborateness or richness). In addition, the impact of the first mediator on attitude toward the sponsor as an employer must intervene through the second mediator (i.e., attitude toward the message).

For each regression model, the standardized residuals were plotted against the standardized predicted values in order to detect any violation of the assumptions of homoscedasticity and linearity. The assumption of normality was checked by examining the histogram of the dependent variable. In all cases, the data were consistent with the assumptions. In the case of the two regression models involving more than one independent variable, the tolerance and VIF values were respectively well above the recommended threshold of 0.4 (> 0.9) and well below the recommended threshold of 2.5 (< 1.1), indicating that multicolinearity was not an issue (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

With respect to the first regression model, the analyses conducted to test H_{2a} and H_{2b} showed that active messages generated both more elaborate and richer comments than passives ones, hence satisfying the first requirement of the sequential mediation model posited. A different regression model revealed that the elaborateness of comments had a positive impact on attitude toward the message, as shown in Table I (beta = .006, $t(121)$ = 2.52, $p < .05$). Furthermore, when attitude toward the message and elaborateness were both used as predictors of attitude toward the sponsor, the former had a positive and statistically significant effect (beta = .32, $t(120)$ = 3.61, $p < .001$) whereas the latter did not (beta = .001, $t(120)$ = -.06, $p > .05$). This brought support for H_{3a} according to which elaborateness and attitude toward the message sequentially mediate the impact of

sponsorship activation processing mode on attitude toward the sponsor. When richness was tested instead of elaborateness in the sequential mediation model, it had a positive influence on attitude toward the message, as shown in Table I (beta = .17, $t(121) = 2.52$, $p < .05$). In the next model, attitude toward the message had a positive influence on attitude toward the sponsor (beta = .33, $t(120) = 3.69$, $p < .001$) whereas richness did not impact the outcome variables (beta = -.03, $t(120) = .42$, $p > .05$). These results supported H_{3b} and the sequential mediating process underlying the relationship between processing mode and attitude toward the sponsor.

The operationalization of richness is based on the assumption that participants have read the comments posted by others in reaction to the activation message before posting theirs. An item was included in the questionnaire sent at the end of each day aimed at checking for this assumption (7-point disagree/agree bipolar scale): "I have been exposed several times during the day to the posted message on the group board as well as to the comments it generated" (Mean = 4.95, SD = 2.15). When this item was incorporated as a covariate in the mediation analyses discussed above, the results remained unchanged; hence showing that when accounting for the participants' knowledge of the previous comments, the sequential mediating effects of richness and attitude toward the message hold true.

[Insert Table I about here]

7. Discussion and managerial implications

The contributions of this study are manifold. First, this is the first study to foray into the usage of SNSs for recruitment purposes. Moreover, it is one of the few research efforts to monitor the interactions of users in a social media platform by means of a controlled

experiment performed *in situ* through the creation of an *ad hoc Facebook* group.

Furthermore, from a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study underscore the central role of resource-matching in showing that social media users tend to better respond to more cognitively challenging tasks. Finally, it is also the first research endeavor that provides empirical evidence concerning both the influence of sponsorship within a SNS environment and the benefits of sponsorship from the point of view of organizational attractiveness in a recruitment perspective

7.1 Contribution to the organizational attractiveness literature

A high degree of interactivity is often thought to be of paramount importance in order to connect with consumers in a social media environment (Vries *et al.*, 2012). Interestingly, the results of this study show that messages that stimulate more active processing enhance the attitudinal response toward the employer and at the same time elevate users' expectations in terms of salary. Managers should not necessarily shun higher salary expectations from applicants because this often indicates that they value the company and consider it among the successful employers that can afford to attract the best people through higher compensation (DelVecchio *et al.*, 2007). The participants in this study were selected on the basis of their potent motivation and competence. In addition, as shown by the social interaction data, more active messages generated more elaborate and richer comments. Hence, participants who agreed to invest more time and energy in the task could expect greater rewards in return, just like employees doing their best can anticipate a commensurate remuneration.

Another important consideration for managers wishing to use SNSs to promote their sponsorship activities is the imperious necessity to craft activation messages which are

well liked and, at the same time, conducive to an active type of information processing.

As shown by the sequential mediation results, the social interaction triggered when

responding to the activations had an impact on attitude toward the employer-sponsor only

through the evaluation of the message. These results indicate that it is essential that the

activation message provides good entertainment value while being sufficiently

cognitively demanding. This double constraint is difficult to satisfy since activation

strategies aimed at stimulating more elaborateness can sometimes derive toward tedious

tasks, even for consumers with a favorable disposition toward the brand. Consistent with

resource-matching theory, activations need to give just enough of a challenge and to be

adapted to the level of familiarity and knowledge of users. Managers should pay attention

to the level of cognitive resources members are willing to allocate to the group. They may

want to evaluate the cognitive challenge their sponsorship activations represent in making

sure, for instance, that the production of a satisfying response (satisfying for oneself, for

others as well as for the administrator) is not too time consuming for the average user.

As regards the improvement of the recruiting process, the present results are highly

significant for human resources managers. As demonstrated by Chapman *et al.*'s (2005)

meta-analysis, research has shown that attitude toward the employer (attitude toward the

sponsor in our study) is a significant intervening factor between the influence of

organizational image and recruiting outcomes such as job pursuit, job attraction, and

intention to accept an offer. In addition, Gomes and Neves (2011) found that

organizational attractiveness is also strongly linked to applicants' intentions to apply. As

a result, an improved attitude toward the organization is likely to benefit employers at

every stage of the recruitment process (Barber *et al.*, 1994). Hence, adopting a brand-

focus for their activations through social media should yield positive recruitment results

for managers of sponsoring firms.

7.2 Contribution to sponsorship research

The findings presented in this article bring the first empirical evidence of the recruiting

benefits that can be accrued from sponsorship, showing its impact on stakeholders

beyond consumers. In addition, this study shows how SNSs such as *Facebook* can assist

companies in deploying their activations toward the indirect (more numerous) audience

(Nickell *et al.*, 2011; Zhang *et al.*, 2010; Weeks, *et al.*, 2008). If on-site leveraging allows

sponsors to engage actively with event attendees through promotion, product

demonstrations, and the like (e.g., Coppetti *et al.*, 2009), the scope of these operations is

confined to the direct audience of the event. Finally, the few sponsorship studies that

have focused on activation have almost exclusively investigated the intensity of

activations rather than their substantive content (i.e., Crimmins and Horns, 1996; Olson

and Thjømøe, 2009). The findings of this study regarding the relative effectiveness of

different types of activations differing along the dimension of *processing* (i.e., active or

passive) and *focus* (i.e., event or brand) are therefore highly relevant. One particular

finding requires more explanation. The participants had a better attitude toward the

sponsor as an employer when the activation message emphasized the brand rather than

the event; we note that this is in line with research having demonstrated that consumers

are sympathetic to the business imperatives of sponsors and react positively to

commercially oriented sponsorships (e.g., Carrillat *et al.*, 2008; Quester and Thompson,

2011).

8. Limitations and need for further research

The research presented in this article has some limitations. First, the experimental design is within-subjects, which may bias the results to some extent. Although the volume of discussion in the group returned to a base level before each new activation, the possibility that responses to one activation influenced responses to the subsequent ones cannot be totally eliminated. Future studies in this area should try to avoid this potential problem by using between-subject designs.

In this study, the processing mode of the sponsorship activations was manipulated by means of text-based questions inciting different levels of elaboration in the formulation of answers. Although it remains to be seen whether the use of other types of media would bring different results, future studies could explore different means to operationalize activations, such as video media. In addition, to bring further insights into the mechanisms that explain users' responses to social media stimuli, it would be worthwhile to investigate other characteristics of sponsorship activation messages, such as their vividness (e.g., Vries *et al.*, 2012).

Because of research feasibility constraints (e.g., availability of participants), this study was conducted over a period of four days. However, sponsored events are often stretched over longer periods of time and it would therefore be pertinent to follow *Facebook* users in the context of sponsorship activities that extend over several weeks. For instance, using a quasi-experimental time-series design (Christensen, 2004), it would be interesting to monitor social interactions among users by going back to before the event started and going until after it ended.

9. Conclusion

SNSs offer exciting and challenging opportunities for marketers in general and sponsors in particular. However, research is needed to understand how SNSs users react to different marketing strategies that companies deploy to promote their products and services. In order to gather such strategic information, it is necessary to adopt research approaches that are in line with the inherent interactive nature of the social media environments. Although surveys of social media users' opinions are useful, they are greatly limited with respect to people's capacity to recall and analyze their own behavior as well as their capacity to evaluate the role and influence of different variables. Research methods in this area must become process-oriented, aiming at monitoring the impact of changes in the social media environment on user's responses and behaviors. In this context, experimental methods are particularly well suited to investigate in a systematic way the effects of different marketing strategies.

The research presented in this article has adopted such an orientation. Despite the real difficulties in implementing an interactive data collection and in constructing experimental manipulations in a virtual setting that adequately reflect underlying theoretical constructs – with the obvious limitations that ensue –, the present study brought interesting and managerially useful findings for the emerging literature investigating the different organizational benefits that can be derived from SNSs. In particular, it is hoped that this article will spur further research effort on the important role that SNSs can play in enhancing the image of brands and that of organizations, as well as facilitating the recruitment of top job prospects.
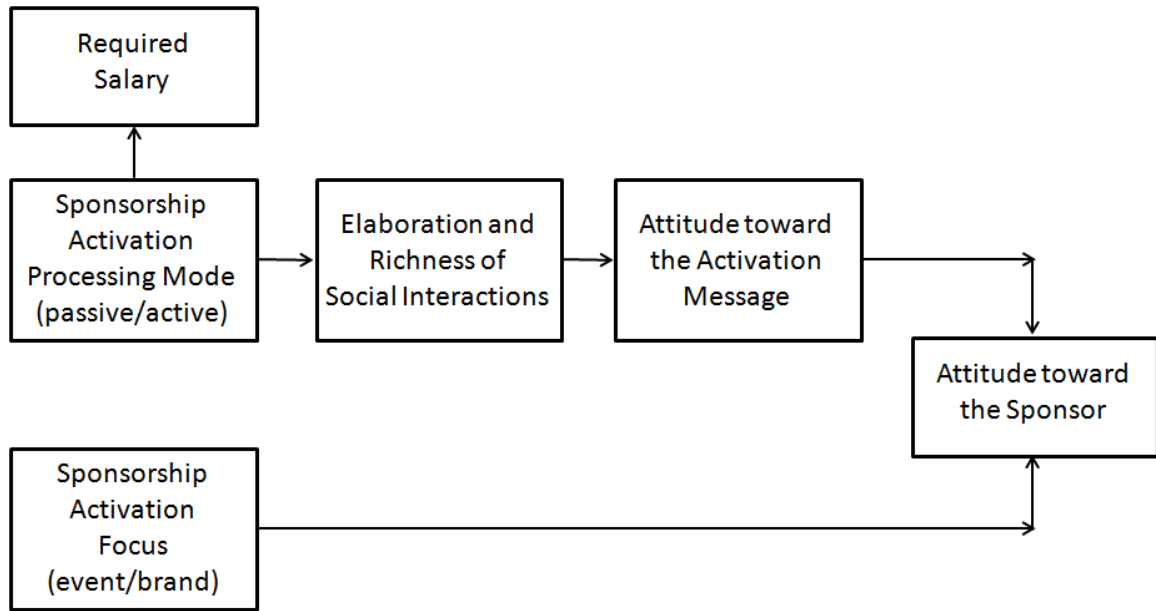
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┌─────────────┐
│  Required   │
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│ Sponsorship  │      │ Elaboration and │   │ Attitude toward │
│ Activation   │ ───▶ │ Richness of     │──▶│ the Activation  │────────┐
│ Processing Mode│    │ Social Interactions│ │ Message         │        │
│ (passive/active)│   └──────────────┘      └──────────────┘           ▼
└──────────────┘                                              ┌──────────────┐
                                                              │ Attitude toward │
                                                              │ the Sponsor     │
┌──────────────┐                                              └──────────────┘
│ Sponsorship  │                                                     ▲
│ Activation   │                                                     │
│ Focus        │ ─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
│ (event/brand)│
└──────────────┘
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F i g u r e 1 .

T h e c o n c e p t u a l f r a m e w o r k

Ann de L'Oréal

L'Oréal is a worldwide leader in cosmetics. Its products, distributed in 130 countries, are made with a passion for well-being, beauty, and the conquest of new markets. One key aspect of our organizational culture is field training. We offer students numerous prestigious summer internships aimed at training our future managers.

This is why each year we are present at the career development days of large universities to seek new talents. This year, we support the Academic Research Project of [University name]. We offer to future managers a working and learning environment where challenges and opportunities for surpassing oneself are constant.

In your opinion, what are the three work conditions that every employer nowadays should offer?

Looking forward to reading your comments!

Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · 2 seconds ago

F i g u r e 2 .

S p o n s o r s h i p a c t i v a t i o n s t i m u l u s e x a m p l e

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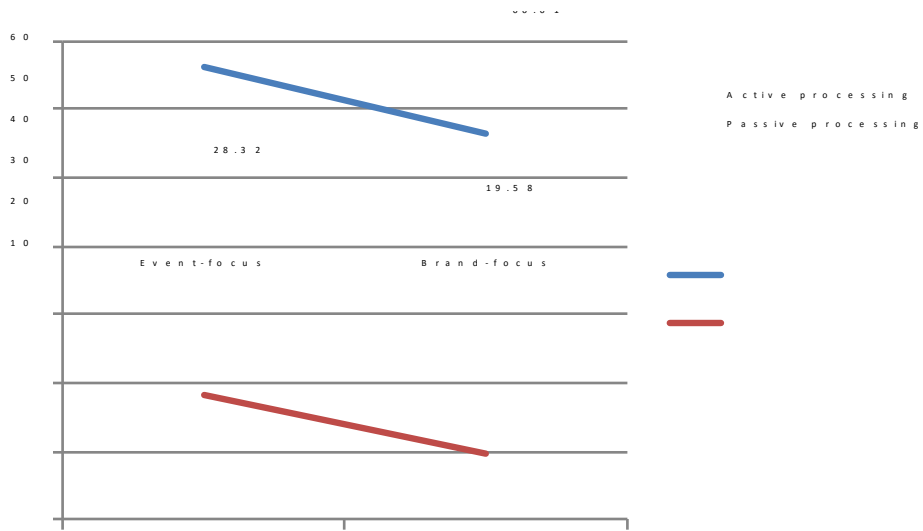
F i g u r e   3 .

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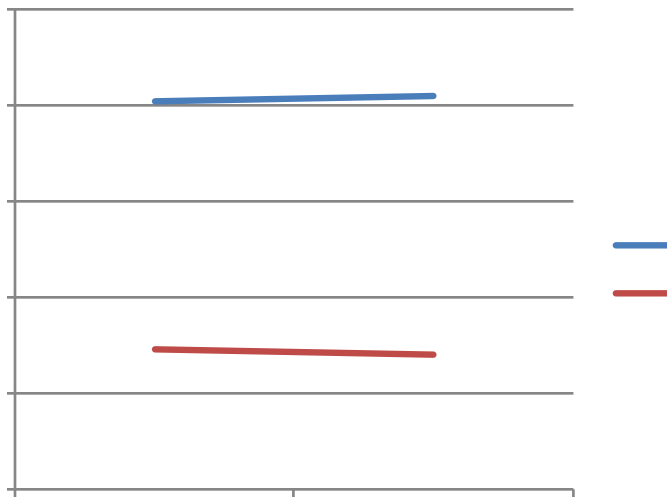
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F i g u r e   4 .

R i c h n e s s   o f   p a r t i c i p a n t s '   c o m m e n t s   a s   a   f u n c t i o n   o f   a c t i v a t i o n   s c o p e   a n d   p r o c e s s i n g

m o d e

Table I.

Sequential mediation analyses

Regression model	Model F[1]	Adj. R[2]	Constant[2]	Elaborateness[2]	Richness	Attitude toward the message
Attitude message = f(elaborateness)	6.34 (1, 121)*	.04	5.46 (36.47)***	.01 (2.52)*	-	-
Attitude toward sponsor = f(elaborateness, attitude toward the message)	6.79 (2, 120)**	.09	3.50 (6.85)***	.00 (-.06)	-	.32 (3.61)***
Attitude message = f(richness)	6.33 (1, 121)*	.04	5.52 (42.78)***	-	.17 (2.52)*	-
Attitude toward sponsor = f(richness, attitude toward the message)	6.89 (2, 120)**	.09	3.49 (6.83)***	-	-.03 (-.42)	.33 (3.69)***

Final outcome variable: Attitude toward the sponsor as an employer

[1] Degrees of freedom within parentheses.

[2] t value within parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

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