INTERFERENCE EFFECTS IN COMPETITIVE SPONSORSHIP CLUTTER

ABSTRACT

This article examines the effects on consumers' attitudes of the concurrent exposure of competitive brands sponsoring different properties during an event (i.e., sponsoring an event *versus* the athletes participating in this event), thus creating a *competitive sponsorship clutter*. In contrast with previous research having examined interference effects in advertising, the results of this research reveal that in a sponsorship setting, clutter effects on consumer responses depend on perceived sponsor-sponsee congruence, and do not result from higher information processing. More precisely, it was found that whereas the evaluation of a congruent sponsoring brand is negatively affected by clutter, the impact of clutter on attitude toward an incongruent sponsor is positive. In addition, articulating the sponsorship was shown to decrease the negative effects of clutter. Implications for research and practice are derived from these findings.

KEYWORDS: sponsorship clutter; congruence; competition; articulation

Ambush marketing, i.e. a situation where brands that do not officially sponsor an event indirectly pretend to be associated with the event to divert attention away from the official sponsor (Sandler & Shani, 1989), has been shown to attenuate the positive effects of a sponsorship program. In particular, Cornwell et al. (2006) found that the recall of a sponsoring brand diminishes when a non-sponsor competitor is mentioned. While Kodak is considered as the first ambusher, at the 1976 Montreal Olympics (Ferrand, Chappelet, & Séguin, 2012), ambush marketing has drastically evolved in the last decades and ambushers often use highly creative and sophisticated tactics to benefit from the positive association with an event. Some sporting events have addressed this issue by preventing athletes from using their image in advertising with a non-sponsor brand. As an example, Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter enforces an advertising blackout period on such competing brand imagery (Grady, 2016). However, these measures only protect right holders from ambush marketing that uses advertising and are not an efficient barrier to competition on fields. Rule 40 does not prevent athletes from wearing branded clothing during the event. As a result, although *Nike* was the only official sponsor in the International Olympic Committee's Top Program (IOC) of the Rio 2016 Olympics in the sports equipment category, competitors such as *Adidas*, *Reebok*, and *Puma* were also present on the fields. While *Nike* sponsored the event, its competitors sponsored teams or athletes participating in the Olympics, cleverly playing on sponsorship property levels (events *versus* players). Spectators attending the Olympics on site, or watching them on television, were thus exposed to stimuli from competitor brands in their visual field concurrently, i.e. during a same exposure. This example provides an illustration of *competitive sponsorship clutter*, i.e. a concurrent exposure to competitor brands simultaneously sponsoring different properties (events, teams, and athletes). Competitive sponsorship clutter may be seen as a common type of ambushing

(Chavanat & Desbordes, 2014), where brands have all secured a sponsorship at different property levels.

In the advertising domain, the impact of the presence of competitive advertising on communication effectiveness has generated a great deal of attention since the seminal studies of Burke and Srull (1988) and Keller (1991). While it is a widely accepted view that advertising clutter impacts brand evaluations through a detrimental effect on memory (Lee & Lee, 2007), the research presented in this paper calls into question the generalizability of this claim to a sponsorship context. In contrast with complex communication stimuli (e.g., advertisements), sponsorship stimuli (logos and brand names on-field) carry less wealth or quality of information, thus inducing lower information processing (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). The presence of competitors' logos on-field is then unlikely to affect the evaluation of the sponsor and the sponsorship program through memory but instead through a change in perceived congruence.

Crucially the paper's conceptual framework includes two distinct types of congruence. It distinguishes between *sponsor-sponsee congruence* and *competitors-sponsee congruence*, i.e. how much sense the association makes, respectively between the event and the sponsor, and between the event and the sponsor's competitors (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). The interplay between these two types of congruence is essential to understand how information is processed by consumers. More precisely, because competitors are strongly linked to the sponsor in consumers' mind (Kumar et al., 2014), the degree of competitors-sponsee congruence may modify the frame of reference through which consumers process the association between the sponsor and the sponsee.

In contrast with research using advertising stimuli, this research shows that consumers' responses in competitive sponsorship clutter derive from a change in the perceived congruence

3

of the sponsor-sponsee association that itself depends on the perceived level of competitors-sponsee congruence. The results further extend the sponsorship research literature by showing that sponsor-sponsee incongruence (i.e., a low degree of association between the event and its sponsor) has a positive effect on brand evaluation in a competitive sponsorship clutter environment. This result offers a new perspective on the examination of incongruent partnerships such as the association between *Skittles* and the American National Football League (NFL). In contrast, congruence can be suboptimal in the presence of competitor sponsors. Failing to account for the presence of competitors results in an unrealistic picture of the effects at work, which does not provide sponsorship managers with the full range of inputs necessary for optimal decision making. In a context where right holders need to fight against an increasing variety of ambush marketing initiatives (see Chavanat & Desbordes, 2014), this article investigates a common yet understudied strategy, i.e. sponsorship agreements at different property levels (events *versus* players).

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the literature on the effects of congruence in single-sponsor and multi-brand settings is reviewed. Then, recent conceptual developments on congruence and sponsorship articulation are discussed in order to motivate the research hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the research method and a discussion of the findings. The article concludes with the study's theoretical and managerial contributions.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Congruence Effects in Single-Sponsor Contexts

Congruence occurs when the mental representation of the sponsor-sponsee association conforms to an activated schema. As an illustration, a sports equipment brand such as *Adidas* is more

congruent with a sport event than with a musical event (Weeks, Cornwell, & Drennan, 2008) because consumers see more sense, or logic, in the former association (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). A strong congruence between the schema and the received information eases information processing and reinforces the association between the sponsor and its sponsee (Fleck, Korchia, & Le Roy, 2012). This leads to the spreading activation of positive affect among brands and, consequently, more favorable brand evaluations (Jagre, Watson, & Watson, 2001).

In contrast, low-congruence sponsorship associations are inconsistent with expectations, leading to negative consumer responses (Fleck, Korchia, & Le Roy, 2012; Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). Although (mild) incongruence resolution may improve consumer responses toward sponsorship (Mazodier & Quester, 2014), highly incongruent information is hard to reconcile, which leads to frustration and negative affective responses (Clemente et al., 2014; Mandler, 1980; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989) as well as poorer brand recognition (Cornwell & Humphreys, 2013).

Interference Effects in Sponsorship Competitive Clutter

While research has looked at interference effects (i.e., how the presence of other brands impacts consumers' responses to a communication initiative) on the evaluation of brands in an advertising clutter context (Burke & Srull, 1988; Keller, 1991), such effects have yet to be examined in a competitive sponsorship clutter. When contrasting these two cases (i.e., advertising and sponsorship), it is important to note that the cognitive effort necessary for encoding advertising information (e.g., when reading newspaper ads or watching TV) is much greater than that required for processing sponsorship stimuli (brand names and on-field logos). In the context of advertising clutter, being exposed to competing brand communications increases processing intensity, which leads to confusion regarding which brand is associated to which claim (Kelting & Rice, 2013; Kumar & Krishnan, 2004), a situation which contrasts with on-

field sponsorship where information is rather processed peripherally (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005; Fleck & Quester, 2007). Since sponsorship brand logos represent a subtle form of communication stimuli (van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2007), the exposure to additional brand logos in competitive sponsorship clutter is unlikely to increase consumer's processing intensity (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). Consequently, while previous research in advertising has relied on a cognitive processing explanation to explain the effects of clutter on consumers' evaluations, this may not be appropriate in the context of sponsorship clutter.

Attitude toward the Sponsor and the Sponsorship Program.

In a competitive sponsorship clutter situation, consumers are simultaneously exposed to competitor brands in a common setting (i.e., the event). Because competitor brands typically share a large number of similarities (Kumar et al., 2014), the presence of several competitor sponsors is likely to increase the overall congruence of the setting (i.e., competitors-sponsee congruence).

In a congruent single-sponsor setting (e.g., Nike sponsoring a sport event, with no competitors on the fields), the association between the sponsor and its sponsee is perceived as exclusive and unique (Meenaghan, 1996). In a cluttered environment however, the high level of competitors-sponsee congruence should reduce the salience of the sponsor-sponsee association, and therefore its perceived congruence, which in turn should negatively impact consumer's evaluations. Thus, while in a single-sponsor setting the level of perceived sponsor-sponsee congruence generally has a positive impact on attitude toward the sponsor (e.g., Speed & Thompson, 2000) and the sponsorship program (e.g., Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), in a competitive sponsorship clutter it is expected to have a detrimental effect on consumers' affective responses.

6

In the case of an incongruent sponsor-sponsee association, the association between the sponsor and its sponsee should appear as making more sense because of the high level of competitors-sponsor congruence. Indeed, while in advertising clutter incongruence resolution may demand too much cognitive effort to be successful (Torn & Dahlen, 2008), in a sponsorship clutter setting the exposure to competitors' logos may contribute to ease consumers' processing efforts. Incongruence resolution has been shown to generate positive affect (Mazodier & Quester, 2014) as consumers feel a sense of satisfaction and arousal through this process (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). The first research hypothesis is based on the above rationale:

H1: When a sponsor is congruent (*incongruent*) with the sponsored event, the concurrent presence of competitor sponsors has a negative (*positive*) effect on (a) attitude toward the sponsor and (b) attitude toward the sponsorship program.

In addition, it is expected that the level of competitors-sponsee congruence may serve as an anchor in the perception of the sponsor-sponsee congruence (Noseworthy, Finlay, & Islam, 2010). Indeed, in a cluttered environment, the similarities between the event and the competitor brands should facilitate information processing as they would serve as a frame of reference for the formation of consumer's evaluations (Lee & Lee, 2007). Thus, the effects of clutter on consumer evaluations are likely to be serially mediated by competitors-sponsee congruence and sponsor-sponsee congruence. Thus:

H2: The moderated effects of the concurrent presence of competitor sponsors on consumer attitudes (a) toward the sponsor and (b) toward its sponsorship program are serially mediated by competitors-sponsee congruence and sponsor-sponsee congruence.

The Role of Articulation.

A considerable body of research has been conducted on the strategies that may be used to cut through advertising clutter. Brand familiarity (Kent & Allen, 1994), ad repetition (Burke & Srull, 1988), product knowledge (Lee & Lee, 2011), product attributes (Lee & Lee, 2007), and distinctiveness in executional elements of the ad (Kumar et al., 2014) have been identified as significant moderators of the effects of competitive interference. In a sponsorship environment, articulation may play this role.

Articulation refers to various communication initiatives (e.g., advertising) designed to put forward the association between the sponsor and its sponsee (Cornwell et al., 2006; Weeks, Cornwell, & Humphreys, 2006). In a situation of competitive sponsorship clutter, articulation from the event sponsor should alleviate interference by singling out the sponsor-sponsee association. Because articulation aims at explaining the link between the sponsor and the sponsee (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002), it should increase the perceived level of sponsor-sponsee congruence. Consequently, the sponsor-sponsee schema should be more likely to act as a frame of reference in forming judgments, which should positively impact the evaluation of the sponsor and its sponsorship program. Hence, it is predicted that articulation has a positive impact on consumers' evaluations through an increase in the perceived level of sponsor-sponsee congruence. Thus:

H3: The positive effects of articulation on consumer attitudes (a) toward the sponsor and (b) toward its sponsorship program are mediated by sponsor-sponsee congruence.

METHOD

Design and Experimental Procedure

A 2 (congruence between the sponsor(s) and the sponsee: no/yes) × 2 (clutter: no/yes) × 3 (sponsorship-linked communication: ad with articulation/ad with no articulation/no ad) completely randomized factorial experimental design was used to test the research hypotheses. The Golf Canadian Open was chosen as the sport event since golf usually involves concurrent congruent or incongruent sponsors at both the event and the golfers' levels. In order to create a competitive sponsorship clutter, five brands were included as sponsors, one brand at the event level and four competitor brands at the golfers' level. Congruent sponsors were *Adidas* (event), and *Fila*, *Reebok*, *Puma*, and *Asics* (golfers), which are major players in the highly competitive sportswear's market (Tong & Hawley, 2009). Incongruent sponsors were *MTV* (event), and *Much*, *MusiMax*, *MusiquePlus*, and *Galaxie* (golfers), which compete against each other in the music programming market in Canada (Pegley, 2008). Previous research on sponsorship has used sportswear brands with a sport event for a congruent setting (e.g., Mazodier & Merunka, 2012) and music brands for an incongruent setting (e.g., Törn, 2012).

The experiment was conducted online where participants were exposed to a fictitious five-page promotional leaflet for the 2014 Golf Canadian Open that contained text and pictures of the event and the golfers. The stimuli in clutter conditions comprised the logos and names of the golfers' sponsors printed on the players' clothes and caps, whereas the logo and name of the event sponsor were visible on the golf course. In the no clutter conditions, the event sponsor had the same level of visibility, but the players' clothes and caps did not display any brand.

In addition, in conditions with articulation, the second page of the leaflet contained an ad from the event sponsor that articulated the sponsorship program by highlighting the uniqueness of the sponsor-event relationship. In the congruent conditions, it stated: "*Adidas* is proud to share its passion for golf with the 2014 Canadian Open. With 50 years of innovation in the service of

achievement, *Adidas* offers clothes and equipment for golf at the leading edge of technology",

whereas in the incongruent conditions, it stated: "*MTV* is proud to put its energy in the 2014

Canadian Open. Sharing the same desire to always go beyond our limits and to move the crowd,

MTV offers an audacious, unique and vibrant programming". In order to isolate the effect of

articulation from simple exposure to the brand through traditional advertising, conditions with an

ad were included, which featured simply real-life advertising slogans ("*Adidas*, impossible is

nothing", "*MTV*, the music never stops").

Sample and Measures

Four hundred and twenty-four participants from a Canadian province were recruited with the

help of a market research company. Nine individuals were dropped from the analysis due to

excessive incomplete data, leaving a final sample of 415 (209 women and 206 men). The age of

the respondents varied between 18 and 66 years with a mean of 43. Twenty-seven percent had

some primary or high school, 41% some college or professional studies, and 32% had a

university diploma; 17% had an annual household income of less than CAD20,000 and 46% of

more than CAD50,000. Overall, the participants' socio-demographic distribution was very

similar to the latest census data of the province.

Each individual was randomly assigned to one of the twelve experimental conditions. After

reading the leaflet, the participants completed a questionnaire including several measures (seven-

point scale items, unless otherwise mentioned). First, brand memory was assessed with two

measures presented sequentially: unprompted awareness, then prompted awareness (Meenaghan

& O'Sullivan, 2013) where the participants were asked to identify the brands they had noticed

from a list of 11 brands. This list included the event sponsor, the four sponsor competitors, and

six plausible sponsors of the event that were competitors of the real sponsors (i.e., from the same

product category and of similar level of market prominence) (Pham & Johar, 2001). Three items pertaining to the perceived quality of the leaflet and the ad appeared after (*bad/good quality*, *unpleasant/pleasant*, *uninteresting/interesting*). A measure of attitude toward the event sponsor followed, comprising three items based on Speed and Thompson (2000) with anchors: *that I do/do not like*, *for which I have a negative/positive opinion*, and *which is inferior/superior to other brands*. Three items from Speed and Thompson (2000) were selected to measure sponsor-sponsee congruence: "there is a logical connection between (brand) and the Canadian Open tournament, the image of (brand) and the image of the Canadian Open tournament are similar, it makes sense to me that (brand) sponsors the Canadian Open tournament" (*totally disagree/totally agree*). These items were used as a global measure of perceived congruence (e.g., Mazodier & Quester, 2014) in order to capture the overall logic that the associations between sponsees and sponsor make in consumers' mind (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Attitude toward the sponsorship program was measured using three items based on Olson (2010): "My feeling toward the sponsorship is *unfavorable/favorable, bad/good, negative/positive*". The perceived congruence of each competitor brand with the event was assessed with the same items as those presented above. Finally, a one-item measure of familiarity with each sponsoring brands (*familiar/not familiar*) was used. The questionnaire ended with socio-demographic questions.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

The measures of perceived quality of the leaflet and the ad exhibited good reliability, and factor analyses led to a single factor explaining a large proportion of the total variance (leaflet: 89%, α = .939; ad: 90%, α = .949). This was also the case for brand attitude (*Adidas*: 91%, α = .951; *MTV*: 74%, α = .830; *Asics*: 90%, α = .945; *Fila*: 88%, α = .931; *Puma*: 90%, α = .948; *Reebok*:

87%, α = .924; *Galaxie*: 89%, α = .941; *Much*: 91%, α = .950; *MusiquePlus*: 91%, α = .954;

MusiMax: 91%, α = .955), attitude toward the sponsorship (*Adidas*: 87%, α = .891; *MTV*: 92%, α

= .961), and event-sponsor congruence (*Adidas*: 90%, α = .949; *MTV*: 90%, α = .945; *Asics*:

95%, α = .969; *Fila*: 94%, α = .976; *Puma*: 90%, α = .974; *Reebok*: 95%, α = .947; *Galaxie*:

96%, α = .984; *Much*: 97%, α = .985; *MusiquePlus*: 96%, α = .984; *MusiMax*: 96%, α = .980).

The mean of the items was used to operationalize these concepts.

The results of two ANOVAs using as dependent variable the mean of the items assessing the

perceived quality of the stimuli and as independent variables clutter, congruence, and articulation

as well as their 2 and 3-way interactions, confirmed that there was no difference across the

conditions (all Fs < 1). In order to check the effectiveness of the congruence manipulations,

comparisons were restricted to the conditions with no ad or articulation, so that the results would

not be affected by the manipulation of communication. The congruence mean was higher for

congruent brands and lower for incongruent brands than the scale's middle point (i.e., 4), and the

differences in congruence were statistically significant for both the event sponsors (M_{Cong} = 4.83

vs. M_{Incong} = 3.49, Δ = 1.34, t = 7.00, 134 *df*, p < .001) and their competitors (M_{Cong} = 4.66 vs.

M_{Incong} = 3.67, Δ = 1.01, t = 2.66, 134 *df*, p < .01). Also, the congruence between the event

sponsor and its competitors was not significantly different for both congruent conditions ($M_{Sponsor}$

= 4.83 vs. $M_{Competitors}$ = 4.66, Δ = .17, t = .99, 66 *df*, p > .05) and incongruent conditions ($M_{Sponsor}$

= 3.49 vs. $M_{Competitors}$ = 3.67, Δ = .18, t = 1.15, 66 *df*, p > .05). These results indicate that event

sponsors' congruence was successfully manipulated.

Familiarity did not significantly differ between congruent *versus* incongruent event sponsors

(M_{Cong} = 5.42 vs. M_{Incong} = 5.27, Δ = .15, t = 1.11, 413 *df*, p > .05), and between congruent *versus*

incongruent competitors (M_{Cong} = 4.24 vs. M_{Incong} = 4.34, Δ = .10, t = -0.73, 413 *df*, p > .05). For

12

both congruent and incongruent conditions, the familiarity of the event sponsor was higher than that of its competitors (congruent: $M_{Sponsor} = 5.42$ vs. $M_{Competitors} = 4.24$, $\Delta = 1.18$, $t = 13.76$, 211 df, $p < .001$; incongruent: $M_{Sponsor} = 5.27$ vs. $M_{Competitors} = 4.34$, $\Delta = 1.12$, $t = 8.55$, 202 df, $p < .001$), which reflects current managerial practice, as the top performing sporting properties are principally sponsored by the most prominent brands in their category (Wakefield and Bennett 2010). Yet, in order to hold these differences constant, sponsors' familiarity scores (event sponsor and competitors), which is a proxy of market prominence (Pham and Johar 2001), were used as covariates in the analyses aimed at testing the hypotheses. The use of these covariates allows to ascertain the robustness of the findings through the estimation of the effects of sponsorship clutter while statistically controlling for the sponsors' familiarity and prominence.

Test of Hypotheses

The two dependent variables (attitude toward the sponsor, and attitude toward the sponsorship program) were entered into a $2 \times 2 \times 3$ MANCOVA with clutter, congruence, and articulation, as well as their 2 and 3-way interactions, as the independent variables, and sponsors' familiarity as covariates. A significant multivariate interaction between congruence and clutter was obtained (Wilk's $\lambda = .90$, $F (2,397) = 21.16$, $p < .001$) as well as a significant multivariate main effect of articulation (Wilk's $\lambda = .78$, $F (4,794) = 25.65$, $p < .001$). The 3-way interaction was not significant (Wilk's $\lambda = .98$, $F (4,794) = 1.78$, $p > .05$) (see the MANCOVA results in Tables 1 and 2).

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Interaction between Clutter and Congruence.

Consistent with hypotheses 1a and 1b, there was a statistically significant interaction between congruence and clutter on consumers' attitude toward the sponsor (F (1,398) = 41.94, p < .001) and attitude toward the sponsorship (F (1,398) = 17.16, p > .001). In congruent conditions, consumers' attitude was significantly less positive in a cluttered than in a non-cluttered setting as regards the sponsor ($M_{ConClut}$ = 5.12 vs. $M_{ConNoClut}$ = 5.78, Δ = .66, t = 4.30, 210 df, p < .001) and the sponsorship program ($M_{ConClut}$ = 4.93 vs. $M_{ConNoClut}$ = 5.29, Δ = .36, t = 2.42, 210 df, p < .05). In incongruent conditions however, it was more positive in clutter conditions for both the sponsor ($M_{InconClut}$ = 5.42 vs. $M_{InconNoClut}$ = 4.78, Δ = .64, t = -4.10, 201 df, p < .001) and the sponsorship program ($M_{InconClut}$ = 5.10 vs. $M_{InconNoClut}$ = 4.55, Δ = .55, t = -3.33, 201 df, p = .001) (Figure 1). Altogether, these results support hypotheses 1a and 1b.

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Mediation and Moderation Effects.

It was predicted that the observed effects of clutter on consumer evaluation would be explained by the positive impact of competitors-sponsee congruence on sponsor-sponsee congruence and the moderating effects of congruence (hypotheses 2a and 2b). Mediation analyses were conducted following the protocols of Hayes (2013). Specifically, PROCESS Multiple Mediation Model 6 was used, with the bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates from 5000 bootstrap resamples. No clutter was coded '0' and clutter '1'. Competitors-sponsee congruence was operationalized with the mean level of congruence between each competitor and the event.

Figure 2, panel (a) depicts the two-mediator models in which clutter (X) is modeled as affecting sponsor attitude (Y1) through two indirect pathways. One pathway runs from X to Y1 through M1 (competitors-sponsee congruence) only (β = .034 with a 95% confidence interval between

.003 and .087); a second pathway runs through both M1 and M2 (sponsor-sponsee congruence) sequentially, with M1 affecting M2 (β = .026, CI = [.002;.064]). In addition to the expected serial mediation of M1 and M2, a mediating effect of competitors-sponsee congruence on attitude toward the sponsor was observed.

On the other hand, as shown in panel (b) of Figure 2, the mediation results shown that clutter (X) affects attitude toward the sponsorship (Y2) through only one pathway, with a serial mediation of competitors-sponsee congruence (M1) and sponsor-sponsee congruence (M2) (β = .027, CI = [.002;.068]), but no significant path from (M1) to (Y2) (β = .013, CI = [-.006;.053]) All mediation results are reported in Table 3.

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In addition, a moderation effect of congruence was predicted on this serial mediation. PROCESS does not offer the possibility to test a moderated serial mediation. To test for this process, structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS was used. SEM allows for the simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect hypothesized paths (Hoyle, 1995). The model was estimated using the maximum likelihood estimation method. Indirect effects were tested using 5000 bootstrap samples to mitigate biased standard errors and achieve a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). The fit indices show that the model has a very good overall fit: χ^2/df = 2.309, CFI = .973, IFI= .973, TLI = .965, and RMSEA =.040.

Multigroup analyses were performed in order to examine the moderating effect of congruence on the serially mediated effect of clutter on consumers' attitude. The indirect effects of clutter on attitude toward the sponsor as well as toward the sponsorship through competitors-sponsee congruence and sponsor-sponsee congruence was positive in an incongruent environment

15

(sponsor: $\beta = .291$, CI = [.155;.499]; sponsorship: $\beta = .321$, CI = [.169;.510]) but negative in a congruent environment (sponsor: $\beta = -.305$, CI = [-.546;-.085]; sponsorship: $\beta = -.517$, CI = [-.800;-.286]). This indicates a moderation effect by congruence of the serial mediation of competitors-sponsee congruence and sponsor-sponsee congruence. Overall, these results bring empirical support to hypotheses 2a and 2b.

These analyses are particularly enlightening with respect to the underlying processes driving the effects of clutter in a sponsorship setting. They are consistent with the assumption that competitive sponsorship clutter impacts competitors-sponsee congruence, which in turn affects the perceived level of congruence of the sponsor-sponsee association. They suggest that the impact of clutter is driven by a change in perceived sponsor-sponsee congruence and not by an impact on memory for the sponsor. This is further confirmed by a MANCOVA using as dependent variables unprompted memory and prompted memory for the sponsor, as independent variables, congruence, clutter, articulation, as well as their 2 and 3-way interactions, and familiarity with the sponsors as covariates. As expected, the main effects of clutter and its interactions were not statistically significant (clutter: Wilk's $\lambda = .98$, $F(2,397) = 2.85$, $p > .05$; congruence × clutter: Wilk's $\lambda = .99$, $F(2,397) = 1.09$, $p > .05$).

Articulation.

The results of a MANCOVA using attitude toward the sponsor and attitude toward the sponsorship as dependent variables indicated that the interaction between articulation and clutter was not significant (Wilk's $\lambda = .98$, $F(4,794) = 1.19$, $p > .05$), implying that there were no differential effects of articulation in cluttered *versus* non-cluttered environments. Univariate ANCOVAs yielded a statistically significant main effect of articulation for both attitude toward

the sponsor (F (2,398) = 19.46, $p < .001$) and attitude toward the sponsorship (F (2,398) = 53.65, $p > .001$).

The results reveal that attitude toward the sponsor and attitude toward the sponsorship program were more favorable in the presence of articulation than when there was only an ad (sponsor: M_{Art} = 5.68 vs. M_{Ad} = 5.33, Δ = .35, t = 2.75, 277 df, $p < .01$; sponsorship: M_{Art} = 5.63 vs. M_{Ad} = 4.96, Δ = .67, t = 5.43, 277 df, $p < .001$). In addition, the simple ad condition led to more favorable evaluations than no communication from the sponsor (sponsor: M_{Ad} = 5.33 vs. M_{NoCom} = 4.78, Δ = .55, t = 4.05, 276 df, $p < .001$; sponsorship: M_{Ad} = 4.96 vs. M_{NoCom} = 4.27, Δ = .69, t = 5.79, 276 df, $p < .001$). These results confirm that sponsorship-linked communications have a positive impact on consumers' attitudinal responses. In addition, they show that in a competitive sponsorship clutter context, consumer attitudes toward the sponsor and its sponsorship program are more favorable when the sponsor-sponsee association is articulated than when it is not, above and beyond the effects resulting from mere brand exposure through a regular ad.

To test the potential mediating effect of sponsor-sponsee congruence in the context of the relationship between articulation and consumers' attitudes, the MEDIATE macro associated with the PROCESS software was used as it accommodates multicategorical independent variables. A bootstrapping estimation method with bias-corrected confidence estimates from 5000 bootstrap resamples was employed for this purpose (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The three levels of sponsor communication were rank-ordered with respect to their capacity to single out the association between the sponsor and its sponsee (no communication, advertising, articulation), and were coded '1', '2' and '3' respectively.

Separate analyses were conducted for each outcome, that is, attitude toward the sponsor (H3a), and attitude toward the sponsorship (H3b). The hierarchical regression analyses revealed a

mediation effect of sponsor-sponsee congruence on the relation between articulation and attitude toward the sponsor ($\beta = .212$, CI = [.152;.286]) and toward the sponsorship ($\beta = .182$, CI = [.127;.250]) (Table 4). Conversely, no significant mediating effect of competitors-sponsee congruence was observed with respect to the relationship between articulation and attitude toward the sponsor ($\beta = .011$, CI = [-.020;.052]) and toward the sponsorship ($\beta = .007$, CI = [-.013;.034]). These results suggest that articulation, which explains the sponsor-sponsee association, has a positive effect on sponsor-sponsee congruence, which in turn positively impacts attitude toward the sponsor and the sponsorship program, bringing empirical support to hypotheses 3a and 3b.

PLACE TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

A MANCOVA using as dependent variables unprompted memory and prompted memory for the sponsor, as independent variables, congruence, clutter, articulation, as well as their 2 and 3-way interactions, and sponsors' familiarity as covariates yielded a statistically significant main effect of articulation (Wilk's $\lambda = .89$, $F (4,794) = 11.56$, $p < .001$). Univariate ANOVAs revealed a statistically significant main effect of articulation for memory (unprompted: $F (2,403) = 14.52$, $p > .001$; prompted: $F (2,403) = 22.15$, $p > .001$). Memory for the sponsor was significantly better with articulation than without (unprompted: $M_{Art} = .59$ vs. $M_{NoArt} = .35$, $\Delta = .24$, $t = 4.65$, 413 df, $p < .001$; prompted: $M_{Art} = .82$ vs. $M_{NoArt} = .58$, $\Delta = .24$, $t = 5.18$, 413 df, $p < .001$). Also, memory was better when the ad contained an articulation than when it did not (unprompted: $M_{Art} = .59$ vs. $M_{Ad} = .44$, $\Delta = .15$, $t = 2.48$, 277 df, $p < .05$; prompted: $M_{Art} = .82$ vs. $M_{Ad} = .68$, $\Delta = .14$, $t = 2.77$, 277 df, $p < .01$). Finally, an ad led to better memory than no ad (unprompted: $M_{Ad} = .44$ vs. $M_{NoAd} = .26$, $\Delta = .18$, $t = 3.15$, 276 df, $p < .01$; prompted: $M_{Ad} = .68$ vs. $M_{NoAd} = .46$, $\Delta = .18$, $t = 3.78$, 276 df, $p < .001$). The use of communication (articulation or ad) resulted in higher

unprompted and prompted awareness of the sponsor than no communication, a result that is consistent with the presumption that richer information has an impact on brand memory, as illustrated in advertising clutter (Keller 1991) as well as in research on sponsorship-linked communications (Cornwell et al. 2006).

DISCUSSION

In contrast with previous research which has centered almost exclusively on single-sponsor situations, this study has examined for the first time the effects of the concurrent presence of competitor sponsors during a sports event on consumers' attitudinal responses. The objective was to assess the processes through which consumers' evaluation of the event sponsor and the sponsorship program is affected when they are concurrently exposed to competing sponsorship stimuli.

Overall, this study makes a number of contributions to the sponsorship and advertising literatures. First, while previous research in advertising has shown that brand evaluation is negatively impacted by memory interference (e.g., Jewell & Unnava, 2003; Keller, 1991), the results of this study reveal that in a situation of competitive sponsorship clutter, consumers' attitudes toward the sponsor and the sponsorship program follow from a change in the level of perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sponsee (i.e., sponsor-sponsee congruence) as well as between the sponsor's competitors and the sponsee (i.e., competitors-sponsee congruence). More precisely, the experimental results show that the presence of competitors modifies the frame of reference through which consumers process information by increasing the level of competitors-sponsee congruence. That is, in a congruent setting, competitors' stimuli activate competing schemas that impede the perceived congruence of the sponsor-sponsee association due to a highly congruent competitors-sponsee environment. In an incongruent

setting on the other hand, the congruence of competitors' schema stimulates incongruence resolution, which leads to more favorable evaluative responses. Hence, when the sponsors are congruent with the event, consumer evaluations are significantly less favorable in a cluttered than in a single-sponsor environment, but this pattern is reversed when they are incongruent. Ruth and Simonin (2006) showed an effect of the roster size on how consumers evaluate a sponsor. They illustrated how the presence of other sponsors provides additional judgment reference points in the formation of an attitude toward the sponsor. The present study extends their research by spelling out the nature of this impact in a context where competitors are not sponsors of the event, but are associated with different properties (i.e., sponsoring the players *versus* the event). In addition, it clarifies how the presence of other brands impacts consumers' evaluations in opposite directions depending on the level of perceived sponsor-sponsee congruence.

Second, this research is the first to provide evidence that the presence of competitors' brand logos in a sponsorship context does not result in memory interference. These findings confirm that, in contrast with advertising stimuli, brand logos in sponsorship clutter are processed peripherally (Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). This was confirmed by the absence of clutter effects on brand memory. Because contemporary marketing environments increasingly take the form of the display of competitive peripheral stimuli (brand names and logos) (Stafford & Grimes, 2012), this result provides a first insight into the mechanisms underlying the impact of such marketing communications in cluttered environments.

Finally, this study examined for the first time how articulation as a communication strategy may positively impact consumers' evaluations in a competitive environment. Previous research has documented the impacts of articulation in single-sponsorship (e.g., Olson & Thjømøe, 2011) or

in non-competitive clutter (e.g., Cornwell et al., 1996) situations and has not considered its potential effects in competitive environments. As such, the current study extends the growing body of research on articulation by isolating the role of articulation in a context of competitive clutter. The results suggest that articulating commonalities between the sponsor and the event facilitates consumer information processing at the brand association level (Crimmins & Horn, 1996). While previous research has generally examined the impact of articulation on sponsor identification (e.g. Cornwell et al., 2006), the results of this research suggest that it is also possible to improve consumers' attitudes by articulating the relationship between the sponsor and the event. This research is indeed the first to provide evidence of the effects of articulation on attitude through a positive impact on congruence.

Managerial Implications

These results on the effects of sponsorship clutter are of interest to sponsorship managers. When faced with competitive exposure, managers of sponsoring brands can implement defensive strategies. For instance, to counter ambush marketing and reduce interference, they may opt for the disclosing of ambushers (Mazodier, Quester, & Chandon, 2012) or, alternatively, try to convince the event's organizers to adopt stricter rules governing the commercial environment. However, the findings of this research suggest that such measures may be ineffective in preventing competitive interferences in a cluttered sponsorship environment because they fail to address the impact of the presence of competitor sponsoring brands on the playing field. Consequently, these measures are not likely to reduce the clutter effects coming from brands simultaneously sponsoring different properties (event, teams, and players) on-field.

The results of this study indicate that sponsors that are congruent with the event are vulnerable to their competitors' association with athletes or teams which are part of this event. They illustrate

that current ambush marketing tools, such as the implementing decree of Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter, are not effective against such common parasitic marketing initiatives. These findings must be considered in the broad context of the multiplication and transformation of ambush marketing, both on-field and via social media (McKelvey & Grady, 2017). Since legal actions to prevent the presence of competitors on-field may not be possible, how can right holders fight against such practices?

Although the use of advertising with no articulation may suffice in singling out the sponsor-sponsee association, the results of this study suggest that the articulation of the sponsor-sponsee association may have even more favorable effects on attitudinal responses by underscoring and reinforcing the unique association of the sponsor with the event. As a result, this should contribute to attenuate the detrimental effects of sponsorship clutter and increase their perceived congruence with the event.

Another relevant issue for sponsorship managers concerns the decision to sponsor an event or not as a function of the athletes who are likely to participate and the sponsoring brands they might be associated with. This issue is especially important as the associations between a brand and a team or an athlete may last several years or decades, as illustrated by the Major League Baseball sponsored by *Anheuser-Busch* since 1980, and Gatorade since 1990. The results of this study suggest that while an incongruent sponsor should look for events where the main athletes are sponsored by competitors, a congruent sponsor should avoid such events.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As this study is the first to explore the competitive sponsorship clutter phenomenon, interesting research opportunities are emerging. Future research endeavors should continue to focus on the

specificities of competitive sponsorship strategies and their effects on consumers' evaluations. As regards the effects of sponsorship clutter on memory, a delayed memory test may confirm the absence of an impact of sponsorship stimuli (*versus* advertising) on sponsor memory. In addition, in this research, the presence of competitor sponsors was found to positively affect consumer evaluative responses in an incongruent competitive context. An open question is whether these findings can be equally applied to different levels of incongruence, from slight to very strong. Also, in this study the number of competitor sponsors was held constant. It seems reasonable to think that negative sponsorship clutter effects would be stronger as the number of competitors increases in the case of congruent sponsorships, and that the positive effects in conditions of low event-sponsor congruence would be attenuated. By manipulating the number of sponsors, it would be possible to verify if these predictions are confirmed and investigate, at the same time, what constitutes a saturated cluttered environment, where the presence of extra competitor sponsors does not provide additional impact on consumers' evaluations. Future research should also investigate the level of similarity and brand linkages between the event sponsor and the athletes' sponsors. This would help to develop a deeper understanding of the key influences associated with sponsorship effects in situations of competitive clutter.

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TABLE 1
MANCOVA Results
Effects on Attitude Toward the Sponsor and Attitude Toward the Sponsorship

Source of variation	df	Error	Wilks' λ	F
Intercept	2	397	.435	257.340***
Congruence (A)	2	397	.987	2.643
Clutter (B)	2	397	.993	1.324
Articulation (C)	4	794	.784	25.650***
A × B × C	4	794	.982	1.782
A × B	2	397	.904	21.162***
B × C	4	794	.988	1.196
A × C	4	794	.979	2.151
Event Sponsor Familiarity	2	397	.956	9.150***
Competitor 1 Familiarity	2	397	.990	1.909
Competitor 2 Familiarity	2	397	.994	1.172
Competitor 3 Familiarity	2	397	.999	.227
Competitor 4 Familiarity	2	397	.998	.471

Univariate Results

Source of variation	df	Attitude toward the sponsor		Attitude toward the sponsorship program	
		Mean squares	*F statistic*	*Mean squares*	*F statistic*
Intercept	1	369.35	369.61***	406.12	427.55***
Congruence (A)	1	5.29	5.29*	1.48	1.55
Clutter (B)	1	1.04	1.04	0.23	0.24
Articulation (C)	2	19.45	19.46***	50.96	59.65***
A × B	1	41.91	41.94***	16.30	17.16***
B × C	2	0.66	0.66	0.57	0.60
A × C	2	0.39	0.39	1.68	1.77
A × B × C	2	2.44	2.44	0.02	0.02
Event Sponsor Familiarity	1	17.37	17.39***	9.18	9.67**
Competitor 1 Familiarity	1	2.82	2.82	0.01	0.01
Competitor 2 Familiarity	1	0.59	0.59	2.22	2.34
Competitor 3 Familiarity	1	0.07	0.07	0.12	0.13
Competitor 4 Familiarity	1	0.03	0.03	0.46	0.48
Error	398	0.99		0.95	

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

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Dependent Variables

	Congruent Sponsor (Adidas)					
	Clutter			No Clutter		
Dependent variables	Articulation (n= 38)	Advertisement (n= 35)	No communication (n= 36)	Articulation (n= 39)	Advertisement (n= 33)	No communication (n= 31)
Attitude Toward the Sponsor	5.62 (.173)	5.21 (.180)	4.50 (.178)	5.93 (.171)	5.78 (.186)	5.60 (.191)
Attitude Toward the Sponsorship	5.59 (.162)	4.94 (.169)	4.21 (.167)	6.06 (.160)	5.19 (.174)	4.43 (.180)

	Incongruent Sponsor (MTV)					
	Clutter			No Clutter		
Dependent variables	Articulation (n= 32)	Advertisement (n= 36)	No communication (n= 26)	Articulation (n= 28)	Advertisement (n= 38)	No communication (n= 43)
Attitude Toward the Sponsor	5.70 (.188)	5.53 (.178)	4.92 (.209)	5.38 (.201)	4.85 (.173)	4.34 (.163)
Attitude Toward the Sponsorship	5.53 (.177)	5.10 (.167)	4.57 (.196)	5.21 (.189)	4.64 (.162)	4.03 (.153)

TABLE 3

Effects of Clutter on Attitude when Controlling for Competitors-Sponsee

Congruence and Sponsor-Sponsee Congruence

|	Model 1: X: Clutter M1: Competitors-Sponsee Congruence M2: Sponsor-Sponsee Congruence Y1: Attitude Toward the Sponsor			Model 2: X: Clutter M1: Competitors-Sponsee Congruence M2: Sponsor-Sponsee Congruence Y2: Attitude Toward the Sponsorship		
Path estimates						
	Coeff.		SE	Coeff.		SE
a1	0.2904*		.1406	0.2904*		.1406
a2	0.2343***		.0465	0.2343***		.0465
b1	0.1175**		.0355	0.0443		.0354
b2	0.3951***		.0365	0.4094***		.0364
C	-0.0341		.0991	0.0947		.0987
Indirect effects (c')						
	Effect	Lower	Upper	Effect	Lower	Upper
M1	0.0341	0.0032	0.0876	0.0129	-0.0056	0.0535
M1 & M2	0.0269	0.0027	0.0645	0.0278	0.0029	0.0688

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

TABLE 4

Effects of Articulation on Attitude when Controlling for Sponsor-Sponsee

Congruence

	Model 1: X: Articulation M: Sponsor-Sponsee Congruence Y1: Attitude Toward the Sponsor			Model 2: X: Articulation M: Sponsor-Sponsee Congruence Y2: Attitude Toward the Sponsorship		
Path estimates						
	Coeff.		SE	Coeff.		SE
a	0.5615***		.0796	0.5615***		.0796
b	0.3792***		.0374	0.3250***		.0346
c	0.4484***		.0675	0.6790***		.0616
Indirect effects						
	Effect	Lower	Upper	Effect	Lower	Upper
c'	0.2129	0.1522	0.2869	0.1825	0.1277	0.2505

Note: ***$p < .001$

FIGURE 1
Clutter x Congruence Interactions on Consumer Response

Attitude toward the Sponsor
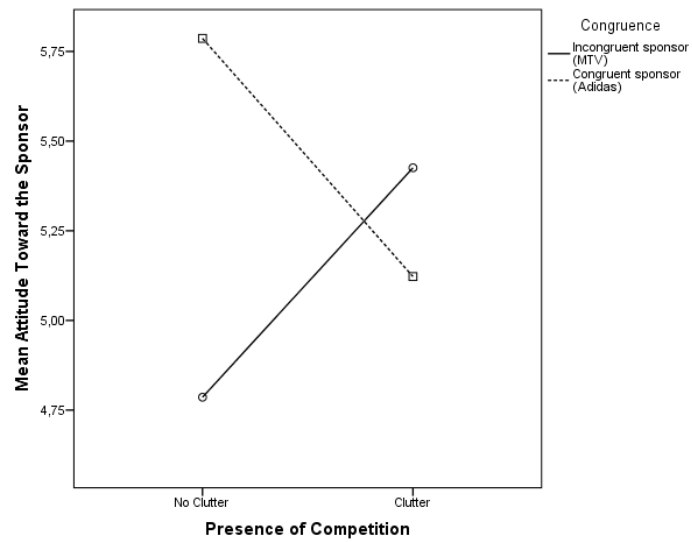
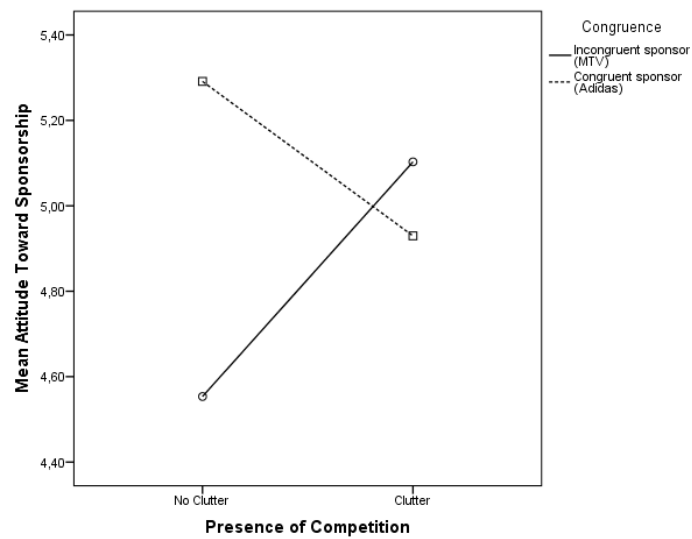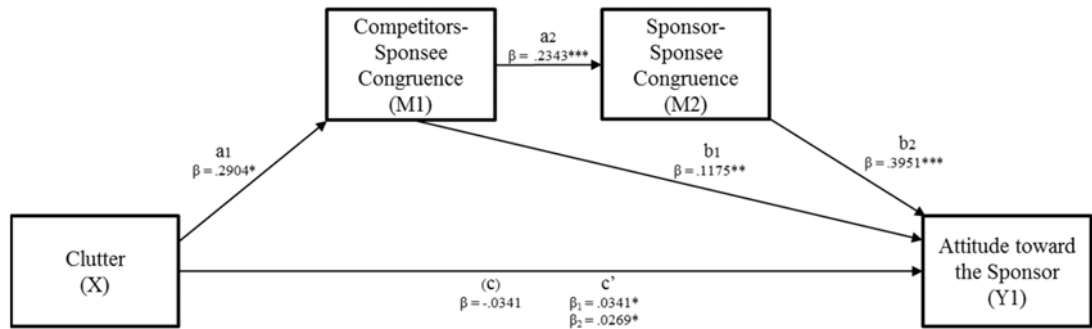**Attitude toward the Sponsorship Program**

FIGURE 2

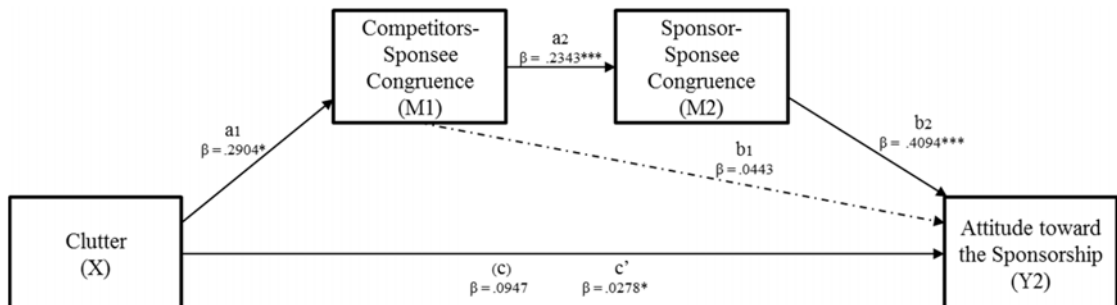**Panel (a): Multiple-Step Indirect Effect of Clutter on Attitude toward the Sponsor**

Panel (b): Multiple-Step Indirect Effect of Clutter on Attitude toward the

Sponsorship

Note: ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05