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# Less “Sponsorship As Advertising” and More Sponsorship-Linked Marketing As Authentic Engagement

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Sponsorship is an established marketing communications platform that takes many forms. In terms of objectives and measurement, sponsorship has functioned like advertising for decades. The current work argues that the potential of sponsorship to support consumer engagement for both the sponsor and sponsee has been underdeveloped and underresearched. Given this thesis, following an overview of the background and importance of sponsorship, the potential of sponsoring to further brand engagement is examined. A sponsorship engagement model based on authenticity is proposed, adoption of this model is discussed, and relevant research questions are suggested.

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It may seem counterintuitive to suggest in an advertising journal, but researchers and practitioners need to rethink the accepted “sponsorship as advertising” conceptualization that permeates strategy and orient more toward the engagement potential that sponsorship offers. That is to say, sponsorship’s greatest potential is likely not delivered as logos in stadiums, titles of concert series, or sponsor names listed in programs. Sponsorship-linked marketing, while able to build awareness and image in the way that advertising does, holds greater potential than traditional advertising approaches to influence consumer engagement because it connects with an individual’s passion (Meenaghan and O’Sullivan 2001) for something—be it sport, art, entertainment, or charity.

Sponsorship is defined as “a cash or in-kind fee paid to a property ([a property rights holder] typically in sports, arts, entertainment, or causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that property” (IEG Sponsorship Report 2018). It should be noted that the term *sponsorship* is used here rather than *partnership*

to distinguish sponsoring from other forms of partnering, such as cobranding or joint ventures. Sponsoring can take many forms. Table 1 offers a typology of sponsorship categories organized by the sponsored “object” (Gwinner and Eaton 1999). Examples include (1) venues/equipment/things, such as Levi’s Stadium in San Francisco, (2) activities/events/programming, such as the Olympics, with sponsors such as Samsung Electronics, (3) groups/individuals, such as Arsenal Football Club sponsored by Emirates airlines, and (4) organizations/leagues/associations, such as the nonprofit organization Save the Children sponsored by luxury brand Bulgari. Each of these types of partnership affords the sponsor advertising-like communication but also the potential to engage.

Customer engagement has been defined and redefined many times (for a summary of more than 20 definitions, see Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinger 2016). Hollebeek (2011) defines customer engagement as a “motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity in direct [physical] brand interactions” (p. 790). Pansari and Kumar (2017) suggest that when a relationship between a customer and a brand is satisfied and has emotional bonding, then it is engaged. Generally, the orientation is that brand engagement is positive, and specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity are heightened through engagement. Thus, engaged customers might think more about a brand, have feelings of pride, or exhibit supporting behavioral interactions. In application to sponsorship, engagement potential is available to both sponsor and sponsee, and synergistic engagement is often sought. Further, engagement might extend beyond direct interaction with brands to include mediated or online involvement. The relevance of engagement to sponsorship-linked marketing is self-evident.

Addressing engagement in sponsorship specifically, Wakefield (2012) stated: “Engagement refers to the

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TABLE 1  
Typology of Main Sponsorship Categories

| Categories                           | Examples   |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Venues/ equipment/ things            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Levi's Stadium, San Francisco, naming rights (Jessop 2014)</li> <li>• Puma apparel and technical gear sponsor of Porsche Motorsport (Speed Sport 2019)</li> <li>• Rose Parade float sponsorship by delivery service The UPS Store (Wilkens 2019)</li> </ul>                                 |
| Activities/ events/ programming      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Olympics TOP (The Olympic Partner) program sponsor Samsung Electronics (Farek and Bauer 2018)</li> <li>• Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival sponsor American Express credit card services (Alcántara 2018)</li> <li>• Microsoft sponsoring Spotify playlists (Swant 2019)</li> </ul>  |
| Groups/ individuals                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arsenal Football Club sponsorship by Emirates airlines (Carp 2019)</li> <li>• Golfer Jason Dufner's sponsorship by Dude Wipes personal care products (Cunningham 2019)</li> </ul>   |
| Organizations/ leagues/ associations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National Football League partnership with Caesars Entertainment and Casinos (Purdum 2019)</li> <li>• Drone Racing League title sponsorship by Allianz insurance (Heitner 2018)</li> <li>• Save the Children nonprofit sponsored by luxury brand Bulgari (Save the Children 2018)</li> </ul> |

*Note.* References for examples included in Table 1 are listed in the appendix.

frequency of opportunities afforded by the property to interact with the audience directly on site or indirectly through property-controlled media before, during and after the event" (p. 146). In Wakefield's sponsorship engagement process model, engagement is limited to exposure and activation and is oriented toward the opportunity and frequency of interaction, whereas marketing definitions are oriented toward satisfying emotional relationships that result in interactions. In the current article, the marketing definition is adopted, and articulations of the basis, enactment, and outcomes of engagement in sponsorship are developed.

In light of the potential of sponsorship research to change course toward engagement, this work unfolds as follows: First, the importance and background of sponsorship is discussed, as are key works to date. The next section considers the unique aspects of sponsorship engagement through examination of some naturally occurring dichotomies in engagement. Then, a sponsorship engagement model based on authenticity is proposed. The final section examines adoption of authentic sponsorship engagement. Research questions are integrated in this final section.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE TOPIC

In 2017, spending on sponsorship worldwide topped \$65 billion USD (IEG Sponsorship Report 2018), whereas

world advertising spending in the same year reached \$535 billion USD (Statista 2018). These numbers do not, however, tell the whole story on the importance of sponsoring in today's marketing and communications landscape. Sponsorship spending statistics report deal tallies between a sponsor and sponsee, but it is difficult to know what was in the contract. While these contracts may include some forms of communication—for example, in-arena signage, digital brand displays during broadcasts, sponsor logo on entry tickets—they are typically supplemented or leveraged by additional spending on the part of the sponsor. In 2016, sponsors reported that their promotional spending ratio was on average 2.2 to 1 (IEG Sponsorship Report 2016). Thus, additional advertising and promotional spending tied to sponsoring (currently counted in the \$535 billion USD as advertising), if accounted for differently, adds \$143 billion USD to the sponsorship ledger.

It is, however, not the absolute spending on sponsorship that is so important but rather how sponsoring has been instrumental in changing how brands connect with audiences. Sponsorship, influencer marketing, and brand placement all connect brands with content important to audiences and, in this indirect process (Cornwell 2008), seek to build brand awareness, image, brand equity, goodwill, and marketplace behaviors that favor the brand. In sponsorship in particular, sponsoring brands form partnerships with property brands and can (but may not always) communicate in a less commercial way.

## BACKGROUND AND KEY LITERATURE

Ryan and Fahy (2012) chronicle the evolution of sponsorship and identify five distinct approaches to sponsoring: philanthropic, market centered, consumer centered, strategic resource oriented, and the relationship/network approach. In marketing, a similar evolution—from transactional centered to relationship oriented to engagement focused—has been identified (Pansari and Kumar 2017). These evolutionary paths are not incommensurable; both place emphasis on linking relationships, but they do differ in that marketing places more emphasis on the quality of links. Most sponsorship research to date orients to the market-centered and consumer-centered approaches, where sponsorship is seen respectively as a communications tool with awareness as the goal or as integral to consumer understanding with cognitive, affective, and behavioral response as the goal. We have learned a great deal from these approaches; some of these findings are overviewed in the next section.

### Key Findings

In 2015, Kim et al. conducted a meta-analytic review of audience response to sponsorship with the goal of understanding sponsorship effectiveness. Audience response is a central topic in empirical sponsorship research as evidenced by the 154 studies included in their meta-analysis. The work examined sponsor-related variables (e.g., exposure, sponsor motives, leverage), sponsee-related variables (e.g., identification and involvement with the property), and the dyadic variable of fit between the two partners. Central findings from their work emphasized the importance of sponsor motives inferred by audiences, the degree of involvement individuals hold with the property, and fit as important to sponsorship outcomes. These sponsor-related, sponsee-related, and dyadic findings are discussed here in greater detail because they are foundational to arguments that sponsorship research and practice could benefit from an engagement orientation.

Exposure of the sponsor (logos, messages) to audiences is a sponsor-related, advertising-oriented goal and understandably a key determinant in sponsorship effectiveness, as researched by Kim et al. (2015). In contrast, perceived sponsor motive for engaging in sponsorship is a relational characteristic that is fundamental to engagement. Motive attributions are inferences that individuals make about the reasons why sponsors engage (Dean 2002), and they are influential in development of attitudes toward the sponsor and sponsee (Woisetschlager, Backhaus, and Cornwell 2017). Motive attributions are particularly important in the face of increasing perceptions of commercialization.

Another sponsor-related variable is leverage. Leverage is discussed by Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan (2008) as spending on promotion and communication of the sponsorship beyond that of the original deal. Sponsors may, for example, advertise during the broadcast of an event they sponsor and may have the first right of refusal to do so. Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan (2008) reserve the term *activation* as that part of spending that encourages interaction with the sponsor. They show in empirical work that online leverage can be activation, or what we might call engaging, if mindful of the individual's experience while online and not overly commercial.

In terms of sponsee-related variables identified by Kim et al. (2015), the involvement individuals feel with sport, art, or music is important to the potential of sponsorship to support engagement. Involvement by the individual with a sponsored property, for example, sport involvement, has been shown to improve sponsor image (Grohs and Reisinger 2014) and increase viewer attention to sponsor information (Boronczyk, Rumpf, and Breuer 2018). Similarly, identification with a cause (Cornwell and Coote 2005) or sport (Gwinner and Swanson 2003) supports sponsor outcomes, such as positive sponsor attitudes and purchase commitment for the sponsor's products. Involvement and identification are paths to engagement.

The dyadic aspect of fit between the sponsor and sponsee has been defined as “the degree to which the grouping is perceived as well matched or a good fit, without any restriction on the basis used to establish fit” (Speed and Thompson 2000, p. 230). Fit, or congruence, captures how well partners go together based largely on their shared attributes and has been a central construct of interest in sponsorship for decades. Fit is often discussed as functionally based, arising from intrinsic alignment, such as when the sponsor's products are utilized in the event sponsored; or image based, arising from similar representations or perceptions, such as when property and sponsor are both internationally oriented (Prendergast, Poon, and West 2010). Again and again, fit—or the lack of it—has been shown to be important in sponsorship outcomes (e.g., Groza, Cobbs, and Schaefer 2012; Woisetschlager and Michaelis 2012). However, given the broad nature of fit measures, it is difficult to know what the term *fit* captures (Pappu and Cornwell 2014). For example, in a recent study of Premier League shirt sponsorships, Emirates airline, sponsor of the Arsenal Football Club (Table 1), was found to be the “best fitting” shirt sponsor in the league (Carp 2019). Meanwhile, in this same study, of the 10 least liked, most poorly fitting sponsors, five were from the betting industry. A senior researcher from the firm Statista, the group that conducted the survey, explained that the

Emirates–Arsenal fit was related to the match between the partners' brand values.

Further, fit, as a construct in sponsoring, may be losing explanatory value as sponsorship becomes more commonplace. Recent research shows, in terms of attention paid to sponsor communications, congruent and incongruent sponsors do not appear to differ (Dos Santos, Moreno, and Franco 2019). Commonplace acceptance of sponsoring reduces the diagnostic value of items such as the idea that "[t]here is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor" or "[i]t makes sense to me that this company sponsors this event" (Speed and Thompson 2000, p. 231). For example, these items cannot discern between an industry-consistent relationship (e.g., a running shoes brand as a sponsor of a running event) and a well-established sponsorship relationship (e.g., a bank as 10-year sponsor of a running event). The question is, then: If not fit, what communicates partner compatibility and, importantly for the current work, what about a relationship forms the basis for engagement?

Not addressed by Kim et al. (2015), but germane to the current discussion are the long-term effects of sponsoring. Based on a five-country study of the Union of European Football Association Champions League, empirical evidence shows that sponsorship awareness develops over time (Walraven, Bijmolt, and Koning 2014). In fact, we have learned that sponsorship is so successful at establishing linkages between the sponsor and the sponsored that it has carryover effects in which individuals may recall the sponsorship relationship for some time after the relationship has ended (Edeling, Hattula, and Bornemann 2017; McAlister et al. 2012). Carryover effects are relevant if brand engagement (a long-term construct) is goal of sponsorship.

### Key Audiences

Audiences, which could be reached via sponsorship, are as varied as one's imagination. Obvious target audiences from the sponsor's perspective include current and potential customers, employees, channel members, and communities. From the property perspective, fans, patrons, and participants could be target audiences. It is the case, however, that most research has been directed toward understanding consumers for sponsored brands.

Audiences such as employees are underresearched (for an exception, see Hickman, Lawrence, and Ward 2005) and the potential of sponsorship to influence employees is only beginning to be appreciated as complex (Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel 2018). Moreover, research has not focused until recently on audiences with unique characteristics, such as global out-of-market fans

for sport (Mazodier, Henderson, and Beck 2018) or participating athletes (Kelly et al. 2014).

Moreover, audiences have been thought of as just that: assembled spectator, viewers, listeners with which to communicate targeted messages. In contrast to this tendency, audiences for sponsorship have been addressed as part of interorganizational systems (Cousens, Babiak, and Bradish 2006), as comarketing alliances (Farrelly and Quester 2005), and as a networked system of relationships (Cobbs 2011; Olkkonen 2001), but rarely are these views integrated in the overall approach to sponsorship. This likely relates in part to the need for sponsorship measurement, which seeks verifiable benchmarks and which currently relies heavily on sponsorship exposure measures. The current work suggests that a deeper relationship between brands and their audiences can be fostered in sponsorship when advertising-based communication is not the only objective.

### Key Challenge

Measurement of sponsorship outcomes is often missing (Meenaghan 2011); if undertaken, measurement is often misdirected by measuring at a level that is not relevant to the objectives of the firm for the sponsorship (Cornwell and Humphreys 2013). The mainstay of measurement in practice has been advertising equivalence where the amount of exposure time stemming from sponsorship is summed and then equated to the cost of advertising for that amount of time in that program. This exposure measure, while a useful benchmark for decades, is emblematic of the "sponsorship as advertising" model. It has proved to be insufficient yet continues in use in the absence of better alternatives. In practice and in research, measurement of sponsorship outcomes has been a central but elusive topic.

Two criticisms of sponsorship measurement, and indeed sponsorship research generally, are that they have failed to unpack the complex, interconnected nature of sponsoring and they have not yet fully embraced the engagement potential of sponsorship. A good deal of past sponsorship research has considered the outcomes for a sponsorship pair (e.g., Kim et al. 2015) without considering the web of relationships in which this pairing exists. There are, however, notable exceptions. For example, researchers have considered the influence of the list of sponsors for a property (Carrillat, Solomon, and d'Astous 2015; Ruth and Simonin 2006), and the properties held by the sponsor (Chien, Cornwell, and Pappu 2011). Researchers have not, however, addressed the sponsorship ecosystem in earnest.

As for our failure to truly embrace the role of sponsorship in engagement (on this topic see also Meenaghan



and O'Sullivan 2013; Wakefield 2012), we have been overly focused on sponsorship outcomes of recall, recognition, and attitudes (but without capturing starting states for these variables) and limited in our measurement of engagement (Meenaghan, McLoughlin, and McCormack 2013). This is not to say that there have not been practitioners and academics advocating for engagement (e.g., Cahill and Meenaghan 2013; Wakefield 2012) but rather that the rich potential for sponsoring to support engagement for brands has not been a research focus. What then might engagement-centric sponsorship look like?

## ENGAGEMENT IN SPONSORSHIP

This section considers some of the engagement dichotomies found in the literature and examines their relevance in sponsorship. A conceptual need for authentic engagement is then introduced, as is a sponsorship engagement model.

### Engagement Dichotomies in Sponsorship

#### *Transactional/Nontransactional*

Engagement can be transactional or indirect/nontransactional (Pansari and Kumar 2017). For the property, this could be buying a gameday ticket but also keeping the ticket stub as a souvenir. For sponsors, this might mean visiting their restaurant after the game but also writing a positive online review. In a sponsorship context, this could also mean redeeming the coupon on the back of the game ticket stub for a discount at the sponsor's restaurant and telling friends to do the same. Sponsorship should be interested in transactional and nontransactional consumer engagement, as well as the points where they conflict or integrate.

#### *Customer/Other Initiation*

Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) distinguish between customer-initiated and firm-initiated customer engagement. In sponsorship, the sponsor or property might initiate customer/fan engagement. In sponsorship, it also might be the case that an eventgoer, participant, or volunteer initiates engagement. Further, in sponsorship, an event host (e.g., an Olympics host city), an involved association, a league, or a broadcaster might initiate engagement. No doubt, situations for engagement initiation abound in sponsoring and they have always been part of what makes sponsorship a powerful marketing platform. At question is the extent to which interactions have been part of a larger strategy to develop satisfying emotional bonds.

### *Planned Versus Unintended/Unexpected Engagement*

Beckers, Doorn, and Verhoef (2018) note that engagement can have a "dark side" for the brand, in particular when firm-initiated engagement backfires. They cite as an example the McDonald's Twitter campaign that resulted in engaged backlash toward the chain. Sponsorship is replete with positive examples of unexpected engagement, such as when an underdog wins a competition and everyone, including sponsors, takes part in the celebration.

Sponsorship is also particularly vulnerable to unexpected and unintended engagement, such as when individuals utilize the brand–property relationship to leverage behaviors they seek on the part of members to the relationship. For example, audiences regularly criticize or boycott brands that continue sponsorship relationships with what they view as "bad actors," seen, for example, when fast-food and soda brands continue to sponsor sports in the face of growing obesity in many markets (Batty and Gee 2019). While this may be dark engagement for the brand, sponsorship does supply an oft-unwitting stage for social activism.

### *Contextual Contributors: Facilitating/Detracting*

Engagement is discussed as occurring under a specific context (Brodie et al. 2011; Hollebeek 2011), be it business as usual, a state of crisis, or one of elation. The context could be facilitating and might draw attention to the property or to the sponsor in a positive light. Alternatively, events surrounding a sponsorship, such as the protests against oil company British Petroleum that eventually ended its 26-year sponsorship of the Tate art galleries in the United Kingdom (Khomami 2016), may be overwhelmingly negative. Research has shown that negative and positive images coming from sponsored events do influence sponsor perceptions (Cornwell, Lipp, and Purkis 2016). Again, sponsorship provides rich context for spontaneously arising engagement. From grassroots sponsorship of youth sports to sponsorship of the Olympics, dynamic, emotional, and engaging contexts are the essence of sponsoring, but they are more unpredictable than is traditional advertising.

### *Engagement Online/Offline*

Online and offline engagement is not so much a dichotomy in practice or planning but rather a practical contextual distinction. Individuals experiencing a parade, a game, or an exhibition off-site are typically engaging digitally, where as individuals on-site are typically experiencing something live. Although individuals may do both, and organizations must plan for both, online and offline

engagement differ. In fact, much of what is measured as engagement in marketing, advertising, and sponsorship (e.g., Schivinski, Christodoulides, and Dabrowski 2016; Solem and Pedersen 2016; Delia and Armstrong 2015) is brand-related social media interactions (e.g., likes, shares, and comments) and is used as an indicator of engagement.

Online and offline, what has been missing in the development of engagement through sponsoring has been an authentic starting point and an overarching goal for interactions. This is exemplified in early models of sponsoring that focused on association. As an example, Gwinner (1997) considered aspects of event image transfer to brand image in the minds of individuals via association and experience during a sponsorship relationship. While this model was focused on image, it is similar to memory-oriented models of association that have been central in sponsorship theorizing (e.g., Cornwell 2008; Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005). This is not to say that image transfer and sponsor recall processes are not valued but rather that if marketing-defined engagement with a property and/or a sponsor through a partnership is the goal, other models are needed.

### A Framework for Authentic Engagement

The term *authentic engagement* is used here to represent a partnership based on brand and relationship genuineness (compare Morhart et al. 2015) that results in satisfaction and emotional bonding (compare Pansari and Kumar 2017) and is potentially available to both sponsor and sponsee through the sponsoring relationship. The goal is to distinguish authentic engagement from engagement defined as the frequency of interaction afforded by a sponsorship (Wakefield 2012). Thus, authentic engagement as a motivated state of mind may be characterized by interactions (compare Hollebeek 2011) but is more than interaction frequency.

Authenticity is argued here to be a cornerstone for sponsorship engagement based on past research that finds the motives of a sponsoring brand important to individuals (Kim et al. 2015). A sponsoring brand that uses a sponsorship for its own communication goals, without consideration of the property, appears egocentric and suffers in terms of attitude toward the brand (Woisetschlager, Backhaus, and Cornwell 2017). Further, authenticity is foundational to engagement because individuals may be involved with, and identify with, the sponsored property and by extension the sponsorship relationship and the sponsor (Kim et al. 2015; for empirical support, see also Herrmann, Kacha, and Derbaix 2016). What has been missing from past discussions of engagement in sponsorship, despite the contemporaneous calls for authenticity, has been a conceptual anchor for strategy—something more meaningful than setting

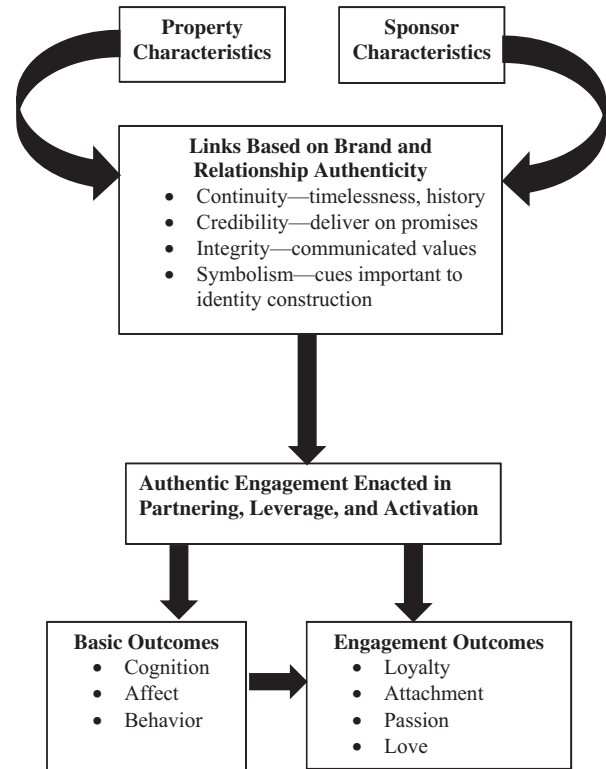


FIGURE 1. Sponsorship engagement based on brand and relationship authenticity.

objectives for interaction—an orienting frame so that particular engagements serve a larger purpose.

Figure 1 offers a conceptual framework for authentic engagement to guide strategy. As an overview, the model begins with the characteristics of potential partners, including their individual brand authenticity. These individual partner characteristics influence the starting state and trajectory of relationship authenticity. Links (i.e., points of conceptual attachment between the sponsor and sponsee) once identified or targeted for developed are enacted by the partnership deal itself and by leveraging and activation of the sponsorship. Authentic engagement then influences both basic outcomes and deeper engagement outcomes. The following sections discuss this process and each of these aspects in more detail.

#### Property Characteristics and Links

Brand authenticity has many definitions but can be characterized by terms such as *genuine*, *natural*, *honest*, and *real*; and the extent of authenticity in any situation is subjectively assessed by the perceiver (for a review, see Napoli et al. 2014). Sponsors and properties come to a sponsorship relationship with a host of characteristics, including some level of brand authenticity. Morhart et al. (2015) developed, from extensive empirical work, a

measure of brand authenticity that includes four dimensions: (1) continuity—as the brand's timelessness, history, and the related ability to transcend trends; (2) credibility—as the brand's ability to deliver on promises; (3) integrity—as the brand's communicated values; and (4) symbolism—as the brand's ability to serve as a resource in identity construction by providing cues that allow people to define who they are and who they are not. As shown in [Figure 1](#), characteristics of the individual partners that might enter into a relationship contribute to the potential for relationship authenticity. Relationship authenticity (Charlton and Cornwell 2019), just as brand authenticity, depends on continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. Partners to the relationship must choose those aspects of authenticity that are shared or could be developed as links.

### *Authentic Engagement Enacted*

Hollebeek (2011) characterized engagement as having specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity. Sponsoring, as a contractual relationship between two or more entities, has unique characteristics that begin with the partnering decision and therefore with cognitive and emotional understanding of the relationship. Woisetschlager, Backhaus, and Cornwell (2017) offer compelling evidence that individuals draw inferences regarding the motives that sponsors hold based on the characteristics of the deals they make. In two large-scale studies of soccer and handball, they found that when the partners are regionally proximate and the contract is long term, individuals make positive inferences about the sponsor's motives. In contrast, high contract prices and distant sponsors were associated with negative, calculative motives. Thus, a first strategic decision in authentic engagement is partnering itself.

More obviously, leverage, as spending additional to a sponsorship contract, and activation as that part of leveraging that is interactive, is where engagement is typically discussed. Sponsorship, like marketing, tends to focus on attitudinal and behavioral activities such word of mouth, social media likes (Beckers, Doorn, and Verhoef 2018), referrals, and purchases. There is no addition here to the myriad ways in which leverage and activation (e.g., advertising, promotion, hospitality, and social media communications) might be enacted so to engage, except for the orienting strategy that it should emphasize existing authentic links or develop new ones. Thus, in [Figure 1](#), authentic engagement is enacted in partnering, leveraging, and activation.

### *Basic and Engagement Outcomes*

Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy (2005) described the outcomes of consumer-focused, sponsorship-linked

marketing as being cognitive (e.g., awareness and image), affective (e.g., liking and preference), and behavioral (e.g., purchase intent and purchase). Save for only the mention of purchase commitment, the outcomes discussed were basic in nature and were framed as outcomes relevant to the sponsoring brand, not the property. In [Figure 1](#), these basic outcomes that arise from sponsorship are argued to arise from authentic engagement as well, and basic outcomes may naturally be antecedent to engagement outcomes. For example, one will learn the name of a sponsoring brand cognitively before developing loyalty to a brand.

Importantly, more complex, deeper, and longer lasting outcomes may be possible through the development of authentic links, and possible engagement outcomes are shown in [Figure 1](#). For example, basic behavior, even repeated purchase behavior, is distinctive from the repeated brand behavior known as brand loyalty (Jacoby and Kyner 1973); because even though both occur over time, loyalty comes with a degree of commitment. Of the engagement outcomes listed in [Figure 1](#), the most researched in sponsoring is loyalty. For example, Mazodier and Merunka (2012) demonstrated empirically that sponsorship exposure has a positive impact on brand loyalty to the sponsor. Further, the researchers found that self-congruity with an event enhances brand loyalty, and this would be in keeping with Morhart et al.'s (2015) symbolic value of authenticity.

Similar to loyalty, the concepts of brand attachment, bonding between the brand and the self (Whan Park et al. 2010), and brand passion, or intense feelings about a brand (Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2013), imply something deeper than basic cognition, affect, and behavior. In sponsoring, these deep, complex, and long-lasting brand engagements are supported through authentic brands that have authentic relationships. In the following section a detailed examination of brand love offers an illustration of the connectivity between authenticity and engagement outcomes. According to Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi (2012, p. 13), love for a brand has seven distinct elements:

1. passion-driven behaviors reflecting strong desire to use it, to invest resources into it, and a history of having done so;
2. self-brand integration, including a brand's ability to express consumers' actual and desired identities, its ability to connect to life's deeper meanings and provide intrinsic rewards, and frequent thoughts about it;
3. positive emotional connection that is broader than just positive feelings, including a sense of positive attachment and having an intuitive feeling of "lightness";



4. anticipated separation distress if the brand were to go away;
5. long-term relationship, which includes predicting extensive future use and a long-term commitment to it;
6. positive attitude valence; and
7. attitudes held with high certainty and confidence.

Returning to the nature of authenticity, and reflecting on the elements of brand love, it is easy to see how brand and relationship authenticity are critical in the development of brand love. Continuity of the brands and/or the partnership supports passion-driven behaviors and the individual's personal history of engagement. For example, NASCAR racing fans are particularly engaged with drivers and teams over time, and they are the most brand loyal to sponsors among all U.S. sports fans (Nielsen Sports 2015). As another example, self-brand integration is supported by authentic symbols that are utilized in identity construction. Sport fans will often wear team logos as well as athletic apparel brands of their favorite teams. Unlike traditional marketing and traditional communication platforms, sponsorship has particular parlance with emotion. Further, research has shown that emotions at a sponsored event can influence outcomes for both the sponsor and sponsee (Cornwell, Jahn, et al. 2018). As in brand love, sponsorship ending has been shown in cultural sponsorships to be distressing to employees (Ryan and Blois 2010) and devastating to fans, such as when it led to the disbanding of a cycling team (Delia 2017). Finally, as mentioned, long-term sponsorship relationships are associated with positive attitudes (Woisetschlager, Backhaus, and Cornwell 2017).

In sum, sponsorship platforms have the capacity to deliver not only the basic outcomes of cognitions, affect, and behaviors (e.g., awareness, recall, purchase, and image change) but also engagement outcomes of loyalty, attachment, passion, and love. These are deeper, more meaningful, and longer lasting, and they are argued to need a base in authentic links. Engagement outcomes are, in turn, associated with engagement behaviors, such as recommending the brand, initiating interactions with the brand, and providing feedback to the brand. The following section examines how authentic engagement might be advanced.

## ADOPTING AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Adopting an authentic engagement strategy in sponsorship would be accompanied by new approaches in practice and new research questions. The following section explores four topics: (1) identifying authentic

links, (2) developing authentic links, (3) enacting authentic engagement, and (4) measuring authentic engagement. In each section research questions are posed.

### Identifying Authentic Links

Launching a new sponsorship with the goal of engagement suggests that practitioners would seek overlapping aspects of brand authenticity. For example, the continuity dimension of authenticity is available to brands that have a sense of history or timelessness. In sponsoring, a sense of history could come from a number of sources. From Table 1, Levi Strauss's sponsorship of the stadium where the San Francisco 49ers NFL team plays is a quintessential example of authenticity through continuity. Not only do the individual brands have a sense of history, in that they are established brands, but their history is shared in the city of San Francisco. One way in which this sponsorship was activated was through the launch of a Levi's 49ers clothing collection that may have deepened the authentic engagement link through symbolism.

Not all brands have a shared history with a property or place, but historical aspects of a brand can be brought forward and developed in authentic engagement. Take, for example, the Corona beer partnership with World Oceans Day, an environmentally oriented event. Corona has consistently utilized images of pristine beaches in advertising its beer brand. In its partnership with World Oceans Day, the creative included bringing in collected plastic waste to "highjack" its own paradise billboard imagery and developing videos to educate about plastic waste (Newsroom 2018). Corona integrated this with its sponsorship of the World Surf League event by changing the name from "Corona Bali Pro" to "Corona Bali Protected" to highlight its environmental message. Keeping an environmental message across sponsorship relationships supports perceptions of continuity, and the educational videos offer the opportunity for consumer engagement with both the brand, Corona, and the event, World Oceans Day.

These examples emphasize continuity or history of the brands. Any aspect of brand authenticity might be a candidate for relationship authenticity. Thus, two questions arise.

**RQ1:** How might authentic sponsorship partner dimensions be identified and evaluated for activation potential?

**RQ2:** Are some dimensions of relationship authenticity more useful in developing perceptions of an authentic partnership and engagement?

### Developing Authentic Links

If sponsor and sponsee brands are already in a partnership, or are thinking of beginning a relationship where authentic overlap is not readily identified, the strategic goal may be to foster authentic engagement. As Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) established in their work on social sponsorships, it is possible to create fit. Because authenticity, like fit, is subjective, it should be possible to develop perceptions of authenticity. Naturally, truly authentic intent and actions should underlie perceptions. Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) showed in their empirical work that fit is created by evoking shared associations and by explaining how the sponsor fits with the social cause. Explaining or articulating a link between partners has also been shown to be useful in supporting brand recall (Cornwell et al. 2006). As an example, Toyota partnered with the International Olympic Committee and the International Paralympic Committee around the concept of “mobility for all” (Klara 2017). The sponsorship was envisioned as integral in crafting a new position based on values not previously articulated by the company and previously not a central message of their partners.

**RQ3:** How can authentic engagement be initiated and fostered?

As another avenue to authentic engagement, the duration of a sponsorship relationship will likely contribute to perceptions of authenticity and, over time, this may result in greater engagement through acceptance of the relationship. Longer partnerships are associated with positive outcomes for partners (Woisetschlager, Backhaus, and Cornwell 2017), but a distinction needs to be made regarding positive perceptions that stem from the length of the contract (e.g., indicating commitment and financial support) and a long-term sponsorship that over time develops a feeling of authenticity from continuity and integrity.

**RQ4:** What is the role of relationship duration in building authentic engagement?

### Enacting Authentic Engagement

As noted in Figure 1, enacting authentic engagement begins with the partnership decision and is followed by leveraging and activation investments. Developing the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities that constitute engagement requires balance if the sponsorship is to be perceived as authentic. Here is where seeking engagement interaction can be counter to authentic engagement. High levels of sponsor interaction can foster perceptions of commercialism that may attenuate authenticity. The reaction to commercialization is a larger social trend as individuals seek authentic experiences (Beverland and

Farrelly 2010), but it is of particular interest in sponsoring when for-profit brands and nonprofit properties are bound in a relationship (Seok Sohn et al. 2012). For example, luxury brand sponsorships in the nonprofit space, such as Bulgari’s sponsorship of the Save the Children charity (Table 1), are particularly vulnerable to perceptions of commercialization.

**RQ5:** Can increased authentic engagement counter perceptions of commercialism?

Sponsoring also has a social component in events and activities that corresponds with the social dimension of engagement suggested by Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012). The value of interaction through activation in forwarding sponsorship objectives has been demonstrated on-site and online (e.g., O’Reilly and Horning 2013; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan 2008). Econsultancy’s 2018 “Digital Intelligence Briefing” declared customer experience the main focus in digital marketing and compelling content a required ingredient in providing that experience. This orientation of business pairs well with the content-rich world of sponsored properties. For example, on Twitch or Facebook’s Pixability, individuals can post direct messages while streaming content.

**RQ6:** How can the socially based interactivity of content become a basis for authentic engagement?

**RQ7:** Are new theories of communication in sponsorship needed to accommodate the interactive nature of these engagement contexts?

Sponsorship has been identified as a path to greater engagement of employees with their employing firm (Farrelly, Greyser, and Rogan 2012). It is suggested here that employee engagement in sponsorship could also foster authentic engagement by other audiences. Employees vested in their employer’s sponsorships have already been shown to exhibit citizenship behaviors that support their employer (Khan, Stanton, and Rahman 2013). Employees engaged with their employer and with their employer’s sponsorship may extend their feelings of company bonding to customers.

**RQ8:** How can employee engagement influence authentic engagement on the part of other audiences for the sponsorship?

### Measuring Authentic Engagement

Several measurement tools are already available to capture the influence of authentic engagement in sponsoring.

For example, two measures of brand authenticity are available (Morhart et al. 2015; Napoli et al. 2014), as is a measure of relationship authenticity based on Morhart et al. (2015; Charlton and Cornwell 2019). There are established measures of customer engagement (Vivek et al. 2014), and there are measures of engagement that capture the extent to which brands are part of an individual's self-concept (Sprott, Czellar, and Spangenberg 2009). Gauging the outcomes of engagement is also supported by available measures for constructs such as brand loyalty (Lassar, Mittal, and Sharma 1995), attachment (Whan Park et al. 2010), passion (Albert, Merunka, and Valette-Florence 2013), and brand love (Batra, Ahuvia, and Bagozzi 2012). Thus, the following questions could be addressed:

**RQ9:** To what extent does brand and relationship authenticity influence engagement with the sponsor and sponsee brands?

**RQ10:** To what extent does authentic engagement influence brand loyalty, attachment, passion, and love?

Customer engagement has been a construct of interest in marketing for decades, and the already-considerable progress on the topic has been advanced further by frequent appearances on the Marketing Science Institute (2018) list of research priorities. Given this emphasis in marketing, there is already understanding of how engagement leads to organizational value. Customer engagement is argued to have four components (Kumar et al. 2010): lifetime value of purchasing, new customer referral value, influencer value with other current and potential customers, and knowledge value in terms of feedback from the customer. Each of these aspects of the engaged consumer results in value for the organization over time. Thus, a final question for sponsorship is offered:

**RQ11:** How can sponsorship support lifetime purchasing for sponsor and property, as well as new customer referral value, influencer value, and knowledge through feedback?

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Brand engagement has been put forth as a value of sponsoring, but the aptness and cost of engagement in any particular context, especially relative to association-based strategies in sponsorship, has not been addressed. All brands may not seek authentic engagement in sponsoring, and likely no brand can afford to utilize engagement strategies in all contexts. Objectives must match with strategies and tactics within a budget.

In summary, sponsorship is at an inflection point brought on in part by its own success. To rethink how sponsorship might be best employed offers great potential

for reinvention. In most markets, brands are no longer satisfied with logo placement as the central value of sponsorship and are no longer willing to accept prepackaged property asset bundles. At the same time, consumers are becoming wary of ubiquitous sponsorships and the commercialization of so many spheres of life. The stage is set for a new type of engagement in sponsoring, and new types of research are needed to foster this potential.

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