

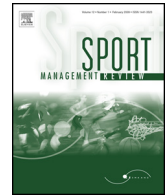


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# Communicating CSR-linked sponsorship: Examining the influence of three different types of message sources

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### ABSTRACT

As the demonstration of corporate goodwill through mega event sponsorship becomes increasingly challenging, sponsors often link their sponsorship to corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. However, finding adequate ways to communicate CSR-linked sponsorship is challenging. This research examines the relative effectiveness of three message sources from which CSR-linked sponsorship information can be communicated to consumers: the sponsor, the sponsored property, and the news media. Drawing on the Persuasion Knowledge Model, this study proposes differences between these message sources regarding their level of persuasion knowledge activation, which affects consumers' CSR perceptions of and attitude toward the sponsoring brand. The results of an experimental study show that CSR-linked sponsorship information from both the sponsor and the sponsored property result in higher persuasion knowledge activation than when this information comes from the news media. The results also reveal that the two serial mediators, persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception, transfer these effects of message source to consumers' attitudes toward the sponsor.

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## 1. Introduction

Sponsors of mega events such as the FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) World Cup and the Olympics increasingly link their sponsorship activities to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives surrounding these events. For example, former FIFA sponsor Sony announced an educational football project for over 14,000 children in Latin America to leverage its sponsorship of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil (Sony, 2014). CSR-linked sponsorship (i.e., the linkage of sponsorship with CSR activities) enables sponsors to demonstrate corporate goodwill and enhance their brand image (Uhrich, Koenigstorfer, & Groeppel-Klein, 2014).

To obtain positive brand effects, relevant stakeholders (e.g., customers) have to be aware of the company's CSR-linked sponsorship activities. Information about such activities can be passed on through a variety of channels. These include channels controlled by the company, such as corporate advertisements, and channels controlled by third-party sources, such

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as media reports. While a growing body of academic research addresses several issues of CSR in sport management (e.g., Godfrey, 2009; Walker & Parent, 2010), little effort has been made to examine how different message sources affect the success of CSR communications (for an exception see Inoue, Mahan, & Kent, 2013). This is particularly true for previous work on CSR-linked sponsorship communication, which ignores message source effects and only examines CSR-linked sponsorship effects per se (Uhrich et al., 2014). This is an important shortcoming because research shows that different message sources have specific characteristics, which are important determinants of message acceptance (e.g., Priester & Petty, 2003). Importantly, CSR communications via company-controlled message sources (vs. message sources beyond the company's control) can lead to less favorable brand perceptions (e.g., Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). This effect is due to the fact that information from the company is usually regarded as more biased than information from independent message sources. However, the differentiation of unbiased third-party sources and biased company-controlled message sources does not fully cover the specific circumstances of linking sponsorship to CSR. In CSR-linked sponsorship, another potential message source has to be considered (i.e., the sponsored property). The FIFA website, for instance, includes several reports about social initiatives of its major sponsors (FIFA, 2014). The sponsored property as a message source has an ambiguous role because it is neither entirely independent of nor entirely dependent on the sponsor. Extant knowledge on the effects of independent vs. dependent message sources is therefore insufficient to explain the role of the sponsored property as a message source.

Against this background, the goal of this study is to examine the effects of three different types of message sources (i.e., sponsor, sponsored property, news media) on the efficacy of CSR-linked sponsorship. This extends previous research both in general business (e.g., Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006) and sport management (Inoue et al., 2013) that has primarily focused on the dichotomy between clearly unbiased and clearly biased message sources. Following a persuasion knowledge perspective (Friestad & Wright, 1994), we show that message source indirectly affects customers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand via two serial mediators: persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception of the sponsoring brand.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the following section, we briefly summarize previous work on CSR in the field of sport management and position our study within the current state of research. Next, we characterize the three message sources examined in our study and develop hypotheses regarding their influence on perceptions of the sponsoring brand. Then, we present an experimental study that tested our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss our findings and provide avenues for future research.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypothesis development

### 2.1. CSR research in the sport management literature

In recent years, several CSR-related research studies have appeared in the sport management literature (e.g., Dowling, Robinson, & Washington, 2013; Inoue & Kent, 2012b; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell & Clark, 2003; Walker & Heere, 2011). The majority of this research addresses the development of CSR in sport organizations such as teams, leagues or governing bodies. Many of these studies focus on definitions (e.g., Sheth & Babiak, 2010; Walker & Parent, 2010) or different manifestations of CSR in sport (e.g., Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Walker, Kent, & Vincent, 2010). Other studies examine the influence of CSR in sport on both society (e.g., Inoue & Kent, 2012a, 2012b) and the sport organizations themselves (e.g., Inoue et al., 2013; Walker & Kent, 2009). Relatively few studies examine how companies can engage in CSR through the medium of sport (Dowling et al., 2013; Levermore, 2010; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). This is surprising as sport is a suitable vehicle for companies to develop social initiatives that enhance their social and economic development (Levermore, 2010). Along these lines, Irwin et al. (2003) as well as Irwin, Lachowetz, and Clark (2010) showed that sponsors can benefit from cause-related sponsorship (e.g., through a positive impact on customers impression of the sponsor). Irwin et al. (2003, p. 132) define cause-related sponsorship as the linkage of "a sports event, corporate sponsor, and benefitting charity in a single event". In cause-related sponsorship, sponsors affiliate with a sport event that supports charitable causes (e.g., FedEx St. Jude Classic professional golf tournament, cf. Irwin et al., 2010). Cause-related sponsorship must be distinguished from CSR-linked sponsorship, which refers to situations where sponsors link their sponsorship to a cause that is not directly associated with or supported by the sponsored event.

The present research focuses on linking CSR to commercial sponsorship in the context of sport and examines the relative effectiveness of different message sources in communicating this linkage. CSR-linked sponsorship may help sponsors benefit from the sponsorship and at the same time take advantage of CSR activities in a sport context, which bear unique features such as passion and opportunities for stakeholder management (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009).

### 2.2. Message sources in CSR-linked sponsorship communication

Sponsors often use company-controlled channels such as corporate websites, annual reports, newsletters, or advertisements to communicate CSR-linked sponsorship. Such channels are fully under the sponsor's control; that is, the sponsor is the message source and can directly influence the communication content (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). However, using company-controlled channels can have negative side effects such as customer skepticism (Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005) and lower degrees of communication credibility (Du et al., 2010). This can be explained by the sponsor's self-serving interest in the success of the communication, which drives perceptions of message source bias.

Research on testimonials in advertising shows that a testimonial's believability and trustworthiness declines when customers perceive her behavior as self-interested (Sparkman, 1982). In addition, Artz and Tybout (1999) demonstrate that high levels of self-interest of a message source cause negative thoughts relating to both the source and the communication content.

To avoid the disadvantages of company-controlled channels, sponsors can involve external partners in passing on information about their CSR-linked sponsorship. External message sources are not (entirely) controlled by the sponsor and thus tend to be perceived as less biased and as having higher degrees of communication credibility (Du et al., 2010). One example of an unbiased message source is the news media, which is independent of the sponsor (Wang & Nelson, 2006). The sponsor can try to initiate news media coverage by publishing press releases or calling in press conferences. Research into CSR communications demonstrates the advantages of third-party message sources over company-controlled channels regarding outcomes such as attributions of sincere motives (Kim, 2011), attitude toward the brand (Swaen & Vanhamme, 2005), overall company evaluations (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006), and brand equity (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). In a team sport context, Inoue et al. (2013) examine the influence of message source (team's self-report vs. nonprofit organization supported by the team) on consumers' attitudes toward teams that engage in CSR activities. Contrary to their expectations, the analysis failed to reveal a significant effect of message source. The authors speculate that message source may not matter when the socially responsible company is a professional sport team, possibly because sport teams are more credible compared to other companies. Hence, sport teams that pass on information about their own CSR-activities may not evoke the same level of skepticism as non-sporting companies when they communicate their social initiatives. In addition, the supported organization's interrelationship with the team may have also caused the missing effect of message source. The study participants potentially developed doubts about the organization's status as an independent third-party source, which may have resulted in equal perceptions of message source bias regarding the two types of message sources. A third potential reason for the unexpected findings may be found in the design of Inoue et al.'s (2013) study. Alongside the type of message source, the study manipulated two additional factors—the amount of money for the cause and donation proximity—but did not analyze interaction effects between the three factors. This may have suppressed a potential main effect of message source.

A common characteristic of previous studies is the examination of only two types of message sources; that is, the company and independent third-party sources. In the case of CSR-linked sponsorship, the sponsored property is another potential message source that has to be considered. Regarding the level of message source bias, the sponsored property is ambiguously positioned between the clearly biased sponsor and an independent message source such as the media. While the sponsored property is formally independent from the sponsor, it is affiliated with the sponsor through a sponsorship contract (Meenaghan, 1983). Consequently, the sponsored property is, at least to some extent, financially dependent on the sponsor and should therefore have an inherent interest that the sponsor achieves its communication goals. Table 1 summarizes key attributes of the three message sources considered in the present study.

To date, no study has examined the role of the sponsored property as a message source in CSR communications. The present study addresses this gap by comparing the effects of three message sources—the sponsor, news media, and the sponsored property—on perceptions of the sponsoring brand.

### 2.3. Effects of different message sources on persuasion knowledge activation

Persuasion knowledge embraces personal theories of customers about the persuasion attempts of market actors and is grounded in the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994). The PKM explains why and how customers react to marketing persuasion attempts. Following the ideas of the PKM, customers hold knowledge of various persuasion attempts of market actors. They develop this knowledge when they are exposed to and recognize persuasion attempts (e.g., advertisements, direct company communications). Subsequently, they are able to use their persuasion knowledge to realize and manage further persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Customers use their persuasion knowledge in situations where they recognize the potential for a persuasion attempt. This is the case when persuasion motives of a market actor are accessible. For example, customers typically strongly associate persuasion motives with salespeople or with corporate advertising messages. The accessibility of persuasion motives, in turn, may be increased by customers' knowledge about the market actor's previous behavior and persuasion tactics (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000, 2008).

Based on these theoretical arguments, the present study proposes that persuasion motives are more accessible when CSR-linked sponsorship information comes from the sponsor than when such information is passed on through the sponsored property or the news media. Information from the news media should not be interpreted as a persuasion attempt because of

**Table 1**  
Attributes of different message sources in CSR-linked sponsorship communication.

	News media	Sponsored property	Sponsor
Degree of independence	High	Medium	Low
Degree of sponsor controllability	Low	Medium	High
Message source bias	Low	Medium	High
Persuasion knowledge activation	Low	Medium	High

the independent and unbiased nature of this message source (Wang & Nelson, 2006), resulting in the lowest level of persuasion knowledge activation. The sponsored property should hold an intermediate position between the sponsor and the news media (see Table 1). Formally stated:

**H1.** Different message sources in CSR-linked sponsorship communication vary in the level of persuasion knowledge activation: Communication by the sponsor results in the highest level, communication through the sponsored property in an intermediate level, and communication through news media in the lowest level of persuasion knowledge activation.

#### 2.4. Indirect effects of message source on attitude toward the sponsoring brand

Through its influence on persuasion knowledge activation, message source should also affect customers' perceptions and evaluations of the sponsoring brand. In the case of CSR-linked sponsorship, key variables of interest include customers' CSR perception of the sponsoring brand—defined as the brand's "status and activities with respect to its perceived societal obligations" (Brown & Dacin, 1997, p. 68)—as well as brand attitude.

Previous research across different contexts provides evidence that the activation of persuasion knowledge mediates effects emanating from the persuader on downstream variables such as attitudes (Campbell, 1995; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Williams, Fitzsimons, & Block, 2004). The activation of persuasion knowledge has generally negative consequences (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004; for a review, see Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). Customers usually adopt coping strategies to protect themselves from persuasion attempts. For example, such coping strategies include devaluations of the persuader to compensate for a possible biased evaluation (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). In CSR-linked sponsorship communication, the devaluation should relate to customers' CSR perception of the sponsoring brand. The activation of persuasion knowledge raises suspicion in customers' minds, which leads to negative effects (Fein, 1996; Fein & Hilton, 1994). In support of this view, Menon and Kahn (2003) show that greater elaboration of companies' CSR activities decreases customers' CSR perceptions because the elaboration causes persuasion knowledge activation. Since the type of message source affects the activation of customers' persuasion knowledge and this in turn decreases CSR perception, persuasion knowledge activation should act as a mediator in the processing of CSR-linked sponsorship information.

Furthermore, CSR perception should positively affect customers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand because consumers' perceptions that a brand is acting socially responsibly increase approach tendencies toward the brand (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Lacey, Close, & Finney, 2010). Based on this line of reasoning, we hypothesize a mediation chain explaining the influence of message source on brand attitude. High levels of message source bias (vs. lower levels of message source bias) directly increase the activation of customer's persuasion knowledge, which negatively influences customers' CSR perception. CSR perception, in turn, positively influences brand attitude. H2 is therefore stated as follows:

**H2.** Higher levels of message source bias (vs. lower levels of bias) in CSR-linked sponsorship communication have a negative indirect effect on brand attitude via the activation of persuasion knowledge and CSR perception acting as serial mediators.

Fig. 1 illustrates our research framework.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Experimental design

The hypotheses were tested in a scenario-based experimental study with a one factorial (message source: sponsor, sponsored property, news media) between-participants design. The 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil served as the context of the study. Participants in all experimental groups read short reports about the sponsorship activities of a brand and its support of a social project that is linked to the sponsorship. The reports were identical in all three experimental conditions except for an adjustment of the personal pronoun in the sponsor condition.

To manipulate message source, participants received information about the origin of the short reports before reading them. In the sponsor condition, participants were informed that the report stemmed from the sponsor's website and that the sponsor had published it (sponsored property condition: from the property's website, news media condition: newspaper article). There were no other differences between the groups to rule out any possible effects from different layouts or pictures. The short reports and the experimental stimuli are included in the Appendix A.

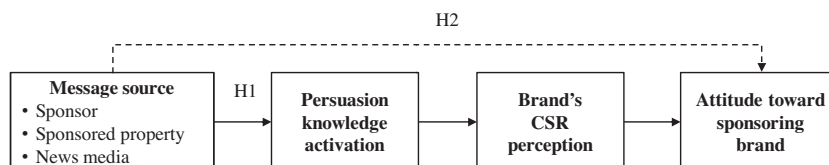


Fig. 1. Research framework of the study. Note. Solid line = direct effect; dotted line = indirect effect.

### 3.2. Social project and brand selection pretests

As previous research shows that customers perceive social causes to vary in importance (Russell & Russell, 2010), a first pretest aimed to select an appropriate social project for the study; one that represents an urgent need for the development of Brazil's society. To assess how members of the study population perceive the urgency to support different social projects, 19 undergraduate students (mean age: 22.9 ( $\pm 1.70$ ) years, 52.6% males) from the same population as the participants in the main study were asked to indicate the need for support of five real-world CSR projects in Brazil (single item, five-point scale anchored at 1 = *not important* and 5 = *very important*; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). The five projects related to different domains such as environmental protection, education, and health promotion. With the exception of one social project category, the average necessity scores were almost equally high (for the necessity scores of all social projects see Table B.2 in the Appendix A). Finally, we decided to use the educational promotion of children, a social project that is used by several current FIFA sponsors (FIFA, 2014; Hyundai, 2014).

Brand choice was based on a separate pretest. To rule out any confounding effects of prior brand attitude or brand familiarity, we decided to use a fictitious brand. In addition, to limit effects of previous experiences with specific industries, we aimed to select an industry with which participants had little familiarity. To this end, participants were asked to indicate their familiarity with six different industries on three five-point semantic differential items (e.g., *uninformed/informed*,  $\alpha = .76$  to  $.93$ ; Oliver & Bearden, 1985). As the average familiarity score for the lamp industry ( $M = 2.29$  ( $\pm 0.89$ )) was the lowest, we selected this field for our study (for familiarity scores of all product categories, see Table B.3 in the Appendix A). Based on this choice, we created a brand labeled *Primo Lux*, which was described as one of the world's largest producers of light-emitting diodes.

### 3.3. Confound check

A separate group of 51 students (mean age: 24.86 ( $\pm 3.28$ ) years, 58.8% males) from the same population as the participants in the main study were used to check the correct processing of the statements about the origin of the short reports. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three versions of the experimental stimuli. Next, participants were asked to indicate who published the short report. Ninety point two percent of the participants correctly indicated the type of message source. There were no misallocations regarding the sponsor as message source. Only two participants did not correctly perceive the sponsored property as the message source, while three participants did not correctly perceive the news media as the message source. Overall, the stimulus material was deemed appropriate for the study.

### 3.4. Main study

A total of 97 undergraduate students from a German university completed the main study as an in-class paper-and-pencil exercise. They were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental groups. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to examine their perceptions of short reports. Subsequently, participants read the short report and the statement about its origin, which served as the experimental manipulation. After reading the short report, participants were asked to evaluate the structure and the comprehensibility of the text. This procedure was chosen to maintain the cover story of the study. The last part of the survey booklet included measures of the dependent and mediator variables, the manipulation check variables, and the demographics in the stated order.

The dependent variable attitude toward the sponsoring brand was measured using three seven-point semantic differential items (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). In addition, participants rated the sponsoring brand on five items reflecting their CSR perception of the brand (Menon & Kahn, 2003). The activation of participants' persuasion knowledge was measured using two items adapted from Campbell and Kirmani (2000) and Williams et al. (2004). Further, to perform an additional manipulation check, we directly assessed participants' perceptions of message source bias with two additional items ("The message source is biased." and "The message source is untrustworthy."), which were aggregated to an index. Unless otherwise stated, all measures used seven-point rating scales (anchored at 1 = *completely disagree* and 7 = *completely agree*). A complete overview of all constructs and items used in the study is presented in the Appendix A (Table B.1).

After completion of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed. As part of the debriefing, participants were informed that both the sponsoring brand and its involvement in sponsorship and CSR activities were fictitious.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Manipulation check

The manipulation check of the main study follows the procedure described in Section 3.3. Regarding the matching task, 74.2% of the participants matched the message source correctly. The majority of incorrect assignments concerned the news media and sponsored property condition, which were incorrectly perceived as company-owned communication channels. Following previous studies in the field, we eliminated all participants who incorrectly assigned the message source from the



dataset (see Campbell, Mohr, & Verlegh, 2013). This leads to a final sample size of 72 (mean age: 22.06 ( $\pm 3.61$ ) years, 55.6% females).

The remaining sample was analyzed regarding the perception of message source bias. ANOVA results showed significant differences between the three sources ( $F(2, 69) = 7.54, p = .001, \eta^2 = .18$ ). Planned contrasts revealed significant differences between the news media and the sponsor condition ( $M_{\text{news media}} = 3.26 (\pm 1.10); M_{\text{sponsor}} = 4.70 (\pm 1.17), p < .001$ ), as well as the news media and the sponsored property condition ( $M_{\text{news media}} = 3.26 (\pm 1.10); M_{\text{sponsored property}} = 4.12 (\pm 1.56), p = .02$ ). However, there were no significant differences between the sponsor and sponsored property condition ( $p = .15$ ). Thus, the participants did not perceive differences between the message sources sponsor and sponsored property regarding the level of message source bias. Although the manipulation check results failed to reveal the expected three-part division of message source bias, we decided to proceed with the stimulus material because the differences between the news media condition and the other two conditions still allowed us to assess how different levels of perceived message source bias influence the dependent variables.

#### 4.2. Persuasion knowledge activation

A one-factorial ANOVA with the type of message source as the independent variable and activation of persuasion knowledge as the dependent variable was used to test H1. All means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. The results show a significant effect of message source on the activation of persuasion knowledge ( $F(2, 69) = 6.47, p = .003, \eta^2 = .16$ ). As detailed in Table 2, persuasion knowledge activation means differed across the three experimental groups in the expected direction. In support of H1, planned contrasts showed that persuasion knowledge activation is significantly lower in the news media condition compared to both the sponsor condition ( $p = .002$ ) and the sponsored property condition ( $p = .004$ ). However, there is no significant difference between the sponsor and the sponsored property condition ( $p = .85$ ). Thus, the findings provide only partial support for H1.

#### 4.3. Indirect effects of message source on attitude toward the sponsor

H2 proposes that message source indirectly affects customers' attitude toward the sponsoring brand via the activation of persuasion knowledge and customers' CSR perception of the sponsoring brand. Thus, H2 suggests testing a serial multiple mediation model. To this end, we estimated a path model using the AMOS software package and followed Hayes' (2013, model 6) guidelines. The analysis followed a regression based approach for testing mediation and calculated a bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval (CI) for the size of the indirect effect. A significant indirect effect is indicated by a confidence interval not including zero. The use of a regression based approach for testing mediation models is particularly appropriate when using small sample sizes (Hayes, 2013). In addition, several previous studies have used this procedure to examine mediation effects in experimental studies (e.g., Burton, Cook, Howlett, & Newman, 2015; Kan, Lichtenstein, Grant, & Janiszewski, 2014).

To conduct the analysis, we constructed two dummy variables that represent the three levels of the experimental factor. Consistent with our propositions, the analysis of H1 showed that the news media condition produced the lowest level of persuasion knowledge activation. The dummy coding therefore designated this condition as the reference group, relative to which the other conditions were tested. The path model included one dummy representing the sponsor condition (dummy coding: news media = 0, sponsored property = 0, sponsor = 1) and one dummy representing the sponsored property condition (dummy coding: news media = 0, sponsored property = 1, sponsor = 0) as the independent variables, persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception as serial mediators as well as brand attitude as the dependent variable. This model shows the effects of both the sponsor condition and the sponsored property condition relative to the news media condition. Since the analysis of H1 showed no differences in persuasion knowledge activation between the sponsor and the sponsored property conditions, we refrained from testing a second model with a different dummy coding, which would have been necessary to test the effects of the sponsor condition relative to the sponsored property condition.

Consistent with the ANOVA results, the findings (see Table 3) reveal that both the sponsor condition ( $B = 1.39, p = .001$ ) and the sponsored property condition ( $B = 1.31, p = .001$ ) were positively and significantly related to persuasion knowledge activation. In addition, persuasion knowledge activation is negatively and significantly related to CSR perception ( $B = -.20, p = .006$ ). The analysis also shows a significant and positive relationship between CSR perception and brand attitude ( $B = .52, p < .001$ ). To test H2, we examined the indirect effects of the two dummy variables on brand attitude through the serial mediators persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception (model  $R^2 = .22$ ). The results provide support for H2. The indirect effect of the dummy representing the sponsor condition is negative and significant because a bias corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect ( $B = -.15, p = .004$ ) was entirely below zero (95% CI with 10,000 bootstrap

Table 2  
Activation of persuasion knowledge across experimental groups.

Message source	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sponsor	25	5.06	1.64
Sponsored property	24	4.98	1.47
News media	23	3.67	1.31

**Table 3**  
Results of the mediation analysis.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Direct effects</i>			
Sponsor <sup>1</sup> → Persuasion knowledge activation	1.39	.42	.001
Sponsored property <sup>1</sup> → Persuasion knowledge activation	1.31	.40	.001
Persuasion knowledge activation → CSR perception	-.20	.07	.006
CSR perception → Brand attitude	.52	.11	<.001
Sponsor <sup>1</sup> → Brand attitude	-.15	.23	.46
Sponsored property <sup>1</sup> → Brand attitude	-.42	.35	.23
<i>Indirect effects of sponsor<sup>1</sup> and sponsored property<sup>1</sup> on brand attitude (via persuasion knowledge activation and CSR perception)</i>			
Sponsor <sup>1</sup> → Brand attitude	-.15	.09	.004
Sponsored property <sup>1</sup> → Brand attitude	-.14	.09	.004

Notes: <sup>1</sup>Relative to news media condition; *B* = unstandardized path coefficient; *SE* = bootstrap standard error.

samples: lower limit (LL) = -.34, upper limit (UL) = -.04). As predicted, the indirect effect of the dummy representing the sponsored property condition is also negative and significant ( $B = -.14, p = .004$ ; CI: LL = -.32, UL = -.04). The direct effects of both the sponsor condition and the sponsored property condition on brand attitude were non-significant, suggesting an indirect-only mediation (Zhao, Lynch, & Chen, 2010).

## 5. Discussion and implications

CSR-linked sponsorship is a commonly occurring strategy sponsors use to leverage their sponsorships of mega events and demonstrate corporate goodwill. Initial research results demonstrate the effectiveness of CSR-linked sponsorship (Uhrich et al., 2014). However, due to the practical relevance of this topic, Uhrich et al. (2014) call for further research in this field. Our study attempts to address this call by examining the effect of the message source through which CSR-linked sponsorship activities are communicated. In this regard, the study is a direct response to Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker (2011, p. 645) who state that research on message source effects in the context of CSR initiatives is relatively rare and “has not kept pace” with the consideration of its importance in the marketing and sponsorship literature.

Extending previous studies in related research areas, this study identifies three important message sources to communicate a brand's CSR-linked sponsorship engagement. In addition to an independent message source (i.e., news media) and a dependent message source (i.e., sponsor's website), this research examines the sponsored property as a relevant message source that takes up an intermediate position with regard to dependence on the sponsor.

Drawing on the Persuasion Knowledge Model, the study reveals the influence of the message source in CSR-linked sponsorship. The news media as an independent third party activates the least persuasion knowledge, resulting in positive effects on the perception of the sponsoring brand relative to more dependent message sources. Hence, sponsors should try to receive media coverage concerning their CSR-linked sponsorship activities. In addition, sponsors should communicate their CSR initiatives to stakeholders with no obvious connection to them. These stakeholders might adopt and spread the information without appearing overly biased.

In contrast to our expectations, we found no differences between the sponsor and the sponsored property regarding persuasion knowledge activation. This finding may be due to the fact that these two types of message sources did not differ in terms of perceived message source bias in this study. A possible explanation for this effect may reside in the fact that customers perceive mega events as over commercialized (Lee, Sandler, & Shani, 1997) and therefore believe that sponsors have power over the event organizers. This assumption is in line with the results of Inoue et al.'s (2013) study that found no differences in brand attitudes between customers who learned about a sport team's CSR initiative through the team's communication channels and customers who heard about the initiative through a report by the supported nonprofit organization. In this particular case, it is likely that study participants' believed that the sport team has at least some influence on the supported nonprofit organization. Another potential explanation for the missing differences between the sponsor and the sponsored property regarding persuasion knowledge activation may be found in the results of a study conducted by Walker, Heere, Parent, and Drane (2010). The authors show that customers who perceive CSR activities initiated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as strategic-driven (vs. values-driven or stakeholder-driven) have negative behavioral intentions toward the Olympics. Customers may therefore also be skeptical about CSR-linked sponsorship information passed on from the sponsored property. These findings indicate that mega event sponsors should not only make sure that external message sources cover their activities but also that these sources are perceived as independent and unbiased.

While CSR-linked sponsorship messages passed on through the sponsored property did not result in lower persuasion knowledge activation compared to the sponsor's own communications, it may still be beneficial to communicate such messages through the sponsored property. For example, the wide media coverage of the sponsored property might increase awareness levels for the CSR initiative compared to CSR messages without a link to sport sponsorship.

The results of our study also highlight that the choice of the message source affects customers' attitude toward the sponsor via an indirect path. We provide insight into the theoretical mechanisms underlying this effect by showing that a

biased message source (vs. a less biased message source) exerts its influence on attitude toward the sponsor through two serial mediators; that is, the activation of customers' persuasion knowledge and customers' CSR perception of the sponsoring brand. This finding underlines the importance of taking into account customers' perceptions of marketing activities and has important implications for sponsors' communication activities. Sponsors should try to minimize the activation of consumers' persuasion knowledge when communicating the linkage between a sponsorship and a CSR initiative. In addition to message source selection, sponsors should also carefully consider the content of their messages. Critical aspects, such as the use of emotional or factual message appeals (Liu & Stout, 1987) or the level of detail presented in the message (Pomeroy, Johnson, & Noble, 2013) could influence customers' persuasion knowledge activation and thereby the communication success of CSR-linked sponsorship communication.

In sum, our findings extend the literature on CSR in sport management by shedding light on how the effects of communicating CSR-linked sponsorship vary across different message sources. Former studies in the field of sport management either examined the extent to which sport teams use a specific channel to disseminate CSR content (e.g., via e-newsletters; Walker, Kent, et al., 2010) or examined the effect of two different message sources that can be influenced to some extent by the CSR initiator on customers' CSR perceptions of the sport team (Inoue et al., 2013). Our study takes a step forward by examining the influence of three types of message sources that differ in terms of message source bias as well as reflects the specifics of CSR-linked sponsorship communication. In addition, the examination of the theoretical mechanism that underlies the influence of message sources on the perception of the sponsoring brand contributes to theory development of CSR research in sport management. Finally, our study takes a company-centered approach by focusing on how sponsoring brands can engage in CSR through the medium of sport. By this, we further add insights to an under-represented field of sport management literature because the majority of previous studies in this field discuss the development of CSR in sport organizations or examine the influence of CSR in sport on both society and the sport organizations themselves.

## 6. Limitations and future research

This research has some limitations that offer fertile ground for future studies. First, a major limitation is the small sample size of our study, which reduces statistical power. This limitation offers another potential explanation for the failure to provide full support for the first hypothesis that complements the conceptual arguments presented above. Second, the generalizability of our results is limited due to the choice of students as participants in the experiment. Although we deem this approach suitable because of the experimental and theory testing nature of our study, it is suggested that future studies replicate our research with a more heterogeneous sample, for example real-life sponsorship recipients.

The results of our study are also limited because we only focused on one specific sponsor. First, it has to be noticed that country-of-origin effects (e.g., Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2006; Verlegh & Steenkamp, 1999) could affect the results of our study. We used a fictitious Dutch company that study participants possibly perceived differently than a domestic company. Second, previous studies show that low sponsor-cause congruence could lead to inferior brand perceptions because customers tend to attribute cause-exploiting motives to the company (e.g., Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). This effect may be increased by a biased message source that makes the perception of self-serving company motives even more salient for customers. To rule out such confounding effects, our study held the sponsor-cause congruence constant across the experimental groups. However, future studies could examine the interaction effects of message source and brand-cause fit on the activation of customers' persuasion knowledge and brand evaluations.

In addition, the choice of one specific mega event limits the generalizability of our results. We focused on CSR-linked sponsorship in a sport mega event setting. International federations such as the IOC or the FIFA are prone to be viewed as corrupt (Maennig, 2005; Pielke, 2013) and events organized by such organizations as over commercialized (Lee et al., 1997), which may affect the perception of the sponsored property as message source similar to the sponsor. Hence, our results are limited to such mega events and further studies could examine if message source effects in less commercialized settings differ from our results. Customers' skepticism toward messages passed on through sponsored properties might be lower in less commercialized settings, leading to increased credibility of CSR-linked sponsorship programs.

Another avenue for future research is the examination of message sources that were not considered in our study. For example, the supported social cause may also communicate sponsor's activities. As customers' are less skeptical about information from social entities (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006), the coverage of CSR-linked sponsorship may be perceived as less self-interested and thereby have positive effects on the perception of the sponsoring brand. By contrast, drawing on Inoue et al.'s (2013) results, it is also possible that communicating CSR-linked sponsorship activities via the supported social cause exerts no positive influence on the perception of the sponsoring brand relative to a self-report by the sponsor. Thus, future studies could analyze the influence of the supported social cause as message source on the perception of CSR-linked sponsorship activities to challenge Inoue et al.'s (2013) speculation that message source may only be irrelevant when the socially responsible company is a professional sport team.

In addition, this study's participants learned about the sponsor's activities through only one piece of information. In a market environment, customers learn about companies' activities in different ways and through different channels because companies often use integrated marketing communication approaches. Thus, future studies should examine how the simultaneous use of different message sources affect the success of CSR-linked sponsorship communication.



Finally, our study focused on one specific company-controlled message channel (i.e., the company's website). Initial evidence suggests that different company-controlled channels have very specific effects on perceptions of the brand. For example, corporate websites are assumed to be "more discrete communication channels" than corporate advertising (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 206) and are more trusted than advertising (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). In addition, a backfire effect could occur if companies exploit the potential of a sponsorship too much (Carrillat & d'Astous, 2012). In addition to corporate websites and advertisements, sponsors can also use customer magazines or social media to inform about their CSR-linked sponsorship activities. Hence, the examination of the effects of different company-controlled message channels on the success of CSR-linked sponsorship could be another interesting avenue for future research.

## Appendix A. Stimuli used in the experimental study

### Short report on the company's CSR-linked sponsorship

#### Enlightenment now reaches soccer

09/21/2012. The LED industry is booming, with an annual growth in sales that other fields can only dream of. It is not only TVs and machine lamps that are provided using LED. For one of the world's largest producers of LED, a new area of activity has now arisen. The Dutch company *Primo Lux* has signed an exclusive sponsorship contract for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil and thereby becomes an official partner of the world soccer association. The company views its sponsorship activity as a new platform for its entrance in the South American market. "Brazil is booming and we are glad to support this economic advancement with our technologies" says CEO Robert van Heijningen. [...]

#### Aid to children, aid to Brazil

In addition to its sponsorship activities, *Primo Lux* is also in the public eye because of its aid project for children "Educate Everyone!". Through this project, *Primo Lux* supports more than 20 large schools in Brazil's capital, Brasília, as well as in Rio de Janeiro, and sponsors around 10,000 school children. As a FIFA sponsor, *Primo Lux* takes up a role as a forerunner with its concurrent social engagement on site. Hence, the company can be an inspiring example for other FIFA sponsors.

### Statements concerning the origin of the short report

#### Message source = sponsor

In what follows, you are going to read a short report from the official website of the Dutch company *Primo Lux*, which was published by the company on September 21, 2012.

#### Message source = sponsored property

In what follows, you are going to read a short report from the official website of the FIFA, which was published by the world soccer association on September 21, 2012.

#### Message source = news media

In what follows, you are going to read a short report from a nationwide, independent German newspaper, which was published on September 21, 2012.

## Appendix B. Additional tables

Table B.1

Factors and items used in the experimental study.

Factors and items	Cronbach's $\alpha$	M	SD
<b>Brand attitude</b>	<b>.91</b>	<b>5.15</b>	<b>1.21</b>
1. Negative (1) – positive (7)			
2. Unfavorable (1) – favorable (7)			
3. Bad (1) – good (7)			
<b>CSR perception</b>	<b>.85</b>	<b>4.30</b>	<b>1.10</b>
1. <i>Primo Lux</i> is genuinely concerned about consumer welfare.			
2. <i>Primo Lux</i> believes in philanthropy and gives generously to worthy causes.			
3. <i>Primo Lux</i> is likely to follow employee-friendly rules and policies.			
4. <i>Primo Lux</i> is highly involved in community activities.			
5. <i>Primo Lux</i> is highly concerned about environmental issues.			
<b>Activation of persuasion knowledge</b>	<b>.83</b>	<b>4.31</b>	<b>1.65</b>
1. While I read the text I thought it was pretty obvious that the author of the short report was attempting to persuade me.			
2. The purpose of the message source was to change me thinking with the text.			
<b>Message source bias</b>	<b>.86</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>1.40</b>
1. The message source is biased.			
2. The message source is untrustworthy.			

Table B.2

Necessity scores of all social projects of the social project selection test.

	Drinking water supply	Environment protection	Educational promotion	International understanding	Health promotion
<i>M</i>	4.68	4.21	4.74	3.26	4.79
<i>SD</i>	0.58	0.98	0.45	1.20	0.42

Notes. Five-point semantic differential (1 = highly unimportant and 5 = highly important), *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

Table B.3

Familiarity scores of all product categories of the brand selection test.

	Sports gear	Financial products	Lamp industry	Automobile	Photography	Alcoholic beverages
<i>M</i>	3.49	2.46	2.29	3.23	3.33	3.72
<i>SD</i>	0.88	1.04	0.89	0.73	0.90	0.80

Notes. Five-point semantic differential index (1 = low familiarity and 5 = high familiarity), *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation.

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