

The Alcohol–Sport Nexus and How Consumers Are Affected Through Sponsorship

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Alcohol-linked sponsorship of sport represents a significant and growing investment as a popular strategy for brand communication. The current study confirms a relationship between exposure and hazardous consumption and provides insight into this relationship by examining the mediators responsible. Specifically, brand-image transfer (i.e., the mirroring of positive image attributes from the sponsored event to the sponsoring brand) and implied endorsement (i.e., the consumer assumes that the team or athlete favors the sponsor by virtue of the sponsorship relationship) were tested as mechanisms that explain these effects. The study involved a cross-sectional online survey across 8 sports that examined this relationship between exposure to alcohol-brand sport sponsorship and associated alcohol consumption in young Australian sport consumers ($N = 2,033$). Findings support a link between alcohol-sponsorship exposure in sport and alcohol consumption, mediated by image transfer and implied endorsement. Implications for sponsors, sports, and regulators concerned with consumer protection and national health are discussed.

Keywords: advertising, consumer welfare, consumption, sports marketing

Sport sponsorship is a major marketing communications tool, with one source reporting a total of \$62.8 billion spent globally on sport sponsorship in 2017 (Statista, 2018). Alcohol has a strong financial and cultural connection as a sponsoring product category in many sports. For instance, Anheuser-Busch recently re-signed a \$1.2-billion 6-year sponsorship deal with the National Football League (NFL; Crupi, 2014) and is also the top sponsor for the National Basketball Association (NBA; IEG Sponsorship Reports, 2014). In 2016, Anheuser-Busch spent \$350 million on sport sponsorships and became the second-highest contributor in sporting sponsorships in the United States (Badenhausen, 2018). Sponsorship represents a powerful opportunity to reach consumers and is defined as an

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exchange between sponsor and event property whereby the event property receives compensation and the sponsor obtains the right to associate itself with the event (Becker-Olsen & Simmons, 2002; Cornwell, Weeks, & Roy, 2005). Hence, sponsorship requires a contractual relationship that secures rights in addition to leveraging those rights through relevant activations, mainly through advertising. As a communication vehicle, sponsorship has been demonstrated to be effective in achieving desirable marketing outcomes including awareness, preference, sales, loyalty, and even an increase in stock value (Cornwell, Pruitt, & Clark, 2005).

Alcohol advertising in traditional media has declined in recent years (White et al., 2015) and, unlike sponsorship as a promotional tool, is increasingly restricted by regulation. The introduction of the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill in Australia (Parliament of Australia, 2007) marked the start of a public-policy discussion involving the potential banning of alcohol sponsorship in sports. Despite this shift in cultural attitudes, major sporting bodies have resisted change (Chambers et al., 2017; O'Brien, Lynott, & Miller, 2013). Nevertheless, several countries have already banned or restricted alcohol sponsorship in sports. For example, France has had a complete ban on alcohol advertising and sponsorship since 1991; in addition, Norway, Denmark, Russia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Turkey, Jordan, Mauritius, Algeria, Qatar, and Indonesia have strong restrictions on alcohol advertising in sporting events (Australian Medical Association, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2013). However, to add to the complexity, regulations often vary according to alcohol type, with some countries exhibiting differing regulations pertaining to distilled alcohol, heavy and light beer, and wine (Crompton, 1993, 2004; Nelson, 2010). In short, the regulations for alcohol advertising associated with sport are complex and easily evaded (such as for unregulated weak beer in Nordic countries) and generally facilitate substitution to unregulated media. Moreover, as noted by Nelson, in many jurisdictions, exceptions persist in relation to sporting events and enforcement is difficult.

As a result of these restrictions, alcohol was banned from sale (except in stadium and fan zones) during the world football tournaments in Russia in 2018 and is also banned in the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022. As an interesting note, alcohol brands launched new “nonalcoholic” brands during the recent Russian FIFA World Cup, presumably to prepare consumers for the alcohol-free Qatar World Cup. The familiar branding nevertheless serves as a strong cue and reminder of alcoholic brands, especially for the global audience that has largely unrestricted access to alcoholic products. The complexity of policy development in this area is exacerbated by a range of motivations across jurisdictions, including health, social, or religious concerns. Antitobacco policy implemented in the early 1970s in the United States, and now globally, is a strong proxy for policy guidance on limiting the engrained nexus between alcohol and sport (Crompton, 1993). While the banning of tobacco sponsorship and advertising did not result in long-term detriment to the commercialization of sports, the current sporting landscape can be contrasted, with its significantly greater reliance on commercial sponsorship for sustainability (Kelly, Ireland, Alpert, & Mangan, 2014). Studies examining the effects of tobacco-advertising bans in sport demonstrate a shift in promotional expenditure to alternative, unregulated media rather than a decline in expenditure (Cornwell, 1997; Lindsay et al., 2013), providing a useful case study for alcohol policy.

One role of sport is to ensure active participation from communities and promote societal health as a consequence (Khan et al., 2012); it is therefore paradoxical that sport and alcohol are a strong and long-standing nexus permeating sport (Palmer, 2011, 2014). Cornwell (2008) emphasized the inconsistency of using sport to promote harmful products. In a survey, Tobin, Fitzgerald, Livingstone, Thomson, and Harper (2012) found evidence supporting a severing of this alcohol-sport nexus in community sport settings. Specifically, their results suggest that a reduction in community sport clubs' alcohol sales would result in an increase in participation among population groups currently identified as least engaged with community sport. The interdependency between some sports and alcohol is often strong, with some sports and sporting events relying on particular categories of alcohol for funding (e.g., Budweiser and the NFL, Johnny Walker and cricket). Through advertising cues, the alcohol industry tries to gain higher visibility, preference, and conversion to sales (Chambers et al., 2017).

Thus, some have argued that alcohol sponsorship at sporting events promotes positive images of alcohol consumption and obscures the negative consequences (Williams, 2007). Previous research has suggested that alcohol marketing in the sport industry has correlated with increasing consumption among athletes (Kelly et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2013; Zhou, Heim, & Levy, 2016). The majority of the research on the effects of alcohol sponsorship has tended to focus on adolescents (Smith & Foxcroft, 2009; Zhou et al.), given their supposed vulnerability and propensity for binge and dangerous consumption. While considerable research attention has been applied to the link between alcohol advertising and consumption, there has been limited examination of sponsorship as a comparatively unregulated platform permeating sport. However, despite increasing research interest to date, the extent to which alcohol-linked sponsorship affects attitudes and behavior, and the processes through which such occur, remains ambiguous.

The aim of this research is to determine the impact of alcohol-sponsorship exposure in sport on young consumers' alcohol consumption and to test the potential mediating role of two theoretically derived mechanisms by which this link might operate. Given the complexity and ambit of existing alcohol-advertising regulations, a range of popular sports sponsored by beer, wine, and distilled liquor was included in the research. Hence, alcohol-sponsorship exposure covered all categories of possible alcohol sponsorship. This research responds to calls from the latest review studies such as Brown's (2016) for additional evidence of the relationship between exposure and consumption and builds understanding of this relationship by examining mediators responsible. Specifically, brand-image transfer (i.e., the positive image attributes transferred from the sponsored event to the sponsoring brand) and implied endorsement (i.e., an assumption by consumers that the team or athlete favors the sponsoring brand) are tested as mechanisms that explain these effects.

Exposure to sponsorship-linked marketing is theorized to initiate a causal chain of processes that terminate with consumption outcomes (several of these processes are listed in the review by Pracejus, 2004). Specifically, increased exposure is held to produce greater transfer of brand images between parties in the arrangement (image transfer), as well as generate a heightened sense that the sponsored activity endorses the quality of the sponsoring brand (implied endorsement). These two processes, in turn, are partly responsible for increased

consumption. The theoretically causal nature of these relationships is key to distinguishing their role as mediators rather than moderators. Because producing image transfer and implied endorsement is the very means by which sponsorship can exert its effects, the proposition of modeling them as mediators is plausible and theoretically justified. Therefore, we hypothesized that these processes act directly to produce the effect of exposure on consumption rather than merely moderating that effect.

The key plans of this research are outlined as follows:

- To empirically test the plausibility of a relationship of alcohol-sponsorship exposure with consumption and brand attitude in a sample of young sport consumers
- To test important mediators of these relationships: image transfer and implied endorsement

To date, limited broad-scope field research has explored the relationship, with extant research narrow in ambit, focusing on single-sport contexts and events. In the current study, exposure across eight sports was examined through a large-scale, national survey of young consumers of sport, thus providing strong generalization for findings at a national level across different sports. In addition, test image transfer and implied endorsement were theorized as possible intermediary variables influencing the relationship between exposure to alcohol sponsorship and consumption, as well as brand attitude. The following sections provide an overview of the policy debate concerning alcohol sponsorship of sport and the nexus between exposure through sport viewing and consumption.

The Alcohol–Sport Nexus

Policy Issues

In Australia, alcohol, unlike tobacco products, has not been subjected to a high level of legislative control in advertising or banned from sponsoring sporting events and teams (Richards, 2015; although it is acknowledged that some nations prohibit alcohol sponsorship of sport, such as France and Norway). Due to overwhelming evidence that attests to the harmful effects of smoking, it is hardly surprising that tobacco sponsorship of sports is banned. It can be argued that sports sponsorship was at least partly launched by alcohol brands to overcome growing constraints placed on traditional marketing (Patty & Magnay, 2008). Thus, sport sponsorship is the “loophole” in the net of restrictions on alcohol marketing, to which much of their marketing efforts and expenditures have gravitated. However, alcohol sponsorship in sports has received increasing regulatory attention and ongoing policy debate surrounding the impacts of alcohol sponsorship in sports (e.g., Dunleavy, 2014; Johnson & Carroll, 2013; National Preventative Health Taskforce, 2009; Parliament of Australia, 2007). The debate continues: The Australian Greens Party calls alcohol sponsorship of sport the “dark side” of Australian sport and claims it is fueling a “dangerous and unhealthy” culture of drinking (Baker, 2014). More recently, the Foundation of Alcohol Research and Education in Australia led a high-profile campaign supporting the banning of

alcohol sponsorship in sport. The Hyundai A-League (Australia's national soccer competition) has only recently permitted clubs to have alcohol sponsors, overturning a previous ban (Schetzer, 2014). The Victoria Bitter (VB) beer logo appeared on screen over 500 times in the Cricket World Cup final between New Zealand and Australia (O'Brien & Chikritzhs, 2017). A recent systematic review by Brown (2016) of the link between alcohol-sponsorship exposure and alcohol consumption highlighted a need for further research to evaluate the impacts of banning alcohol sponsorship. It is the intent of the current research to address this issue by providing empirical evidence of the relationship and how it operates so that policy seeking to limit alcohol advertising and sponsorship in sport is well supported and effectively targeted.

Alcohol-Sponsorship Exposure and Consumption

Sponsorship differs from advertising in its unregulated nature, communication, placement, and processing. Therefore, it warrants research attention independently of advertising as a growing marketing communications tool. In the case of alcohol sponsorship of sport, one key sponsorship objective is to transfer a positive image from the sport to the sometimes unsavory image of the product (alcohol). From a marketing perspective, it is presumably effective to neutralize the negative associations that drinking can be bad for health by associating alcohol with the icons of sport, on the premise that such icons convey positive notions of health and fitness. Kelly, Ireland, Mangan, and Williamson (2016) found evidence of image transfer from negative to positive brand images in a sponsorship relationship. The strategy of neutralizing negatives (and even reversing them to positives) is well known in marketing (e.g., Keller's [1993] "points of parity" and "points of difference" to neutralize negative associations to parity or even turn them into positive differentiation points). Parker and Fink (2010) found that highly identified fans informed of negative sponsor behavior have more positive attitudes toward the team sponsor than fans with lower levels of identification. This suggests that fandom and involvement with sport may influence greater acceptance of harmful or unhealthy sponsoring brands, including alcohol. Likewise, fans at live sporting events sponsored by alcohol have been found to perceive the role of alcohol as part of the entertainment and hospitality package for the event (Gee, Jackson, & Sam, 2016).

The World Health Organization (2014) has emphasized the vulnerability of young people to alcohol advertising as a crucial issue. Evidence continues to accrue that young people's total consumption of alcohol, irrespective of brand preferences, tends to be influenced by sponsorship, the media, and social media (Ellickson, Collins, Hambarsoomians, & McCaffrey, 2005; Gordon, Hastings, & Moodie, 2010). Several content analyses have demonstrated the widespread extent of alcohol sponsorship linked to exposure in sport (Chambers et al., 2017; Fielder, Donovan, & Ouschan, 2009; Jones, Hall, & Munro, 2008; Kelly, Ireland, Alpert, & Mangan, 2015). Recently, a systematic review across seven studies with over 12,000 participants from nations around the world found that there is a positive association between exposure to alcohol-brand sport sponsorship and alcohol consumption (Brown, 2016). All of the studies included in this review report positive associations between exposure to alcohol sport sponsorship and increased

levels of consumption. This includes risky drinking among both adult sportspeople and schoolchildren, corroborating the findings of previous reviews that reported positive associations between exposure to alcohol marketing and alcohol consumption among young people (Anderson, Bruijn, Angus, Gordon, & Hastings, 2009; Jernigan, 2010; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009). Brown (2016) calls for more research into the effectiveness of restrictions on alcohol sport sponsorship and harmful alcohol consumption and specifically emphasizes a need for further studies to provide evidence for evaluation of alcohol marketing exposure and subsequent drinking behavior.

Sponsorship-exposure impact has been explained by the mere-exposure hypothesis, which has been long cited in the literature as a possible mechanism responsible for consumer attitudes and behavior (Bennett, 1999; Zajonc, 1980). The mere-exposure hypothesis suggests that repeated exposure to a stimulus will produce a positive affective response, which applies to a wide range of stimuli (Bornstein, 1989; Cornwell et al., 2005). Existing research has suggested that exposure to and processing of marketing communications are the basis for higher-order effects including preference and purchase intention (Cornwell et al.). Crompton (2004) emphasized image enhancement as critical to assessing exposure's impact on sales and argued that sales linked to sponsorship are best measured by "strength of link," reflecting the extent to which a brand has borrowed an event's image.

Several sponsorship studies demonstrate a link between exposure and consumer behavior. Exposure, especially through repeating communications typically characterized by sponsorship activation, generates feelings of familiarity. This results in positive feelings toward the message or organization (Donovan & Marlatt, 1993). Bennett (1999) reported finding mere-exposure effects in a field study of U.K. soccer supporters who had just viewed a match where sponsorship information was present. Olson and Mathias Thjømøe (2003) compared attitudinal influences of varying levels of brand information processing by using two experimental groups that differed in the number of exposures they received to specific types of brand information. Findings supported the mere-exposure effect in that participants appeared to form favorable evaluations simply as a result of exposure to brands.

Studies examining consumption effects of alcohol-sponsorship exposure have typically adopted a cross-sectional survey method to focus on sportspeople and consumers. Extensive research attention has been directed at college athletes using survey methods (e.g., Kelly et al., 2015; O'Brien et al., 2013). Consumption in this line of research has been measured using a range of measures including acute (Greenfield, 2000), binge (Rehm, Gmel, Sempos, & Trevisan, 2003; Rehm, Sempos, & Trevisan, 2003), and hazardous consumption. The latter is typically assessed using screening instruments such as the 4-item Cut down, Annoyed, Guilty, Eye-opener questionnaire (CAGE; Ewing, 1984) and the World Health Organization's Alcohol Use Disorders Test (World Health Organization, 1992). Overall, these studies have found small but significant effects of alcohol-sponsorship exposure through sports and emphasized a need to further examine processing mechanisms explaining this effect. Theories that might be relevant to explain the process are outlined in Cornwell et al.'s review (2005). Pracejus (2004) adds image transfer, balance theory, attribution theory, and social-identity theory

in providing a theoretical basis for understanding the relationship between alcohol-sponsorship exposure in sport and alcohol consumption.

Hypothesis Development

The preceding discussion establishes a link between exposure to sponsorship and both preference and consumption of sponsoring brands. The mechanisms through which this association is formed are of interest, and therefore, image transfer and implied endorsement are considered as two of these possible mediators.

Image Transfer

Image transfer in the case of event sponsorship means that because the brand becomes linked with the event, some of the associations with the event may become indirectly associated with the brand. The transfer process was originally proposed by McCracken (1989) and has become a standard part of the branding theory of leveraging secondary associations to build brand equity (e.g., Keller, 1993). The sport is the secondary association, and image transfers to the sponsor brand. Under the associative-network theory of memory, a link becomes established in memory between the secondary entity (the sport) and the sponsor brand. The link leads to some degree of association transfer between the two entities. Preliminary evidence supports the notion that the image transfer takes place as a result of the sponsorship exposure (e.g., Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Meenaghan & Shipley, 1999). Gwinner and Eaton operationalized image transfer as the absolute value of the sum of the differences between sponsor brand and sponsor entity on the set of image associations. Examples of image associations in their article include “active,” “youthful,” and “exciting.” They used 10 image associations and measured both the sport and the sponsoring brand on those associations. The smaller the sum of the absolute differences, the greater the image transfer, because the image associations converge between the sport and the sponsoring brand. Conversely, the larger the sum of the absolute differences, the lesser the image transfer, because the image associations are less similar. The absolute value of each difference was used, as the magnitude of the difference was key rather than the direction, and negatively and positively signed differences could misleadingly cancel out when summed together. Note that because the images of different sports vary, Gwinner and Eaton used a different set of 10 image associations per sport, such as golf being “calm” and “mature,” whereas auto racing is “dangerous” and “aggressive” (based on data collected in the United States). While their study found support for image transfer, it was restricted in being a laboratory experiment with a student sample in which participants were presented with sponsorship information and then asked to do the image ratings. In sum, evidence has yet to be presented specifying whether image transfer, as defined and operationalized by Gwinner and Eaton, mediates the effect of exposure to alcohol brands on consumption of alcohol in a large-scale field survey and in an Australian sport context. For this study, we hypothesized (H2) that a significant mediating effect would be present such that increased exposure would be associated with closer images of the sport and brand (image transfer) and, subsequently, greater consumption.

Implied Endorsement

The implied endorsement process is more straightforward. Confidence in quality from the implied endorsement moves from the positively viewed event or celebrity to the product when the two are paired in a sponsorship capacity, even when endorsement is not explicit (Pracejus, 2004). Presumably, when the sponsorship entity of the sport or team is highly regarded, consumers assume that the sport or team would not associate with a brand they disapprove of. While Pracejus notes that implied endorsement has not been defined in detail or empirically tested previously, the current study considers that this could be an important process in the context here. This is because a favorite sport or team might be strongly appealing and salient to the consumer, thus making an implied endorsement effect more prominent in this context. Implied endorsement is defined as an assumption held by consumers that a sponsored team or sport also endorses or approves of the sponsoring brand. The relationship between the variables is shown in Figure 1.

Fit Between Sponsor and Sponsee

Moreover, fit, as well as similarity between the sponsored sport and sponsoring brand, positively predicts image transfer, consumer attitudes, and awareness of the sponsorship (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014). Fit, otherwise referred to as congruence or synergy, is used as a heuristic by consumers to recall sponsors (e.g., Johar & Pham, 1999). It may be a thematic, or image-based, fit (e.g., Red Bull sponsorship of extreme events) or functional fit (e.g., adidas' sponsorship of the FIFA World Cup; Grohs, Wagner, & Vsetecka, 2004). Fit is therefore incorporated as a covariate in this study, given its established impact on the sponsorship relationship.

Following from this discussion, we hypothesized that

H1: A significant positive relationship would exist between the degree of exposure to alcohol-sponsored sport and alcohol brand attitude and consumption, such that greater exposure would be associated with more positive attitudes and greater consumption.

H2: These positive relationships would be partly mediated by image transfer.

H3: These positive relationships would be partly mediated by implied endorsement.

Method

Study Overview

We conducted a field survey to empirically test the relationship between exposure to alcohol-linked sponsorship in sport and consumption. The survey focused on the less-researched theories of image transfer and implied endorsement. Image transfer has long been regarded as a key explanation/driver of how sponsorship works, but it has been underresearched empirically since the pioneering experiment by Gwinner and Eaton (1999). Implied endorsement has yet to be tested in a field survey and therefore merits investigation. This study focused on young consumers

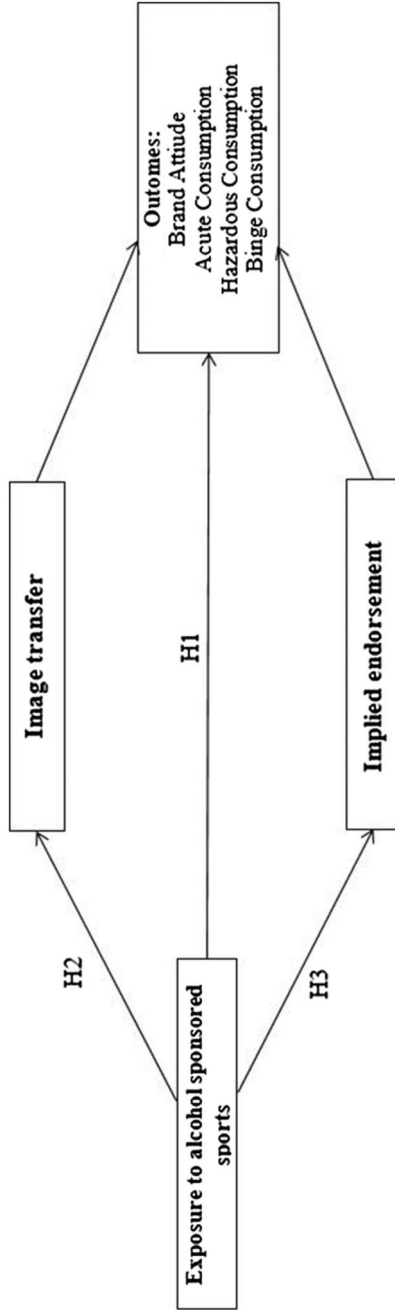


Figure 1 — Hypothesized relationships between the study variables.

18–30 years of age, given their reported vulnerability to binge and hazardous drinking, as well as their increased likelihood of participation in sports. Australians age 18–30 are likely to drink at levels that are risky or carry a high risk of harm in the short term ([Drug and Alcohol Research Training Australia, 2018](#)) and are also most likely to participate in sports ([Australian Government, 2016](#)). Gaining empirical insight into the relationship of alcohol sponsorship of sport with consumption and attitudes in this young demographic, presumably vulnerable to a high degree of alcohol-sponsorship-linked advertising in sport, is therefore critical.

Participants

A total of 2,070 questionnaires were obtained for the study via an online Australian consumer panel maintained by the commercial market-research firm Qualtrics. Respondents were recruited through an advertisement administered by Qualtrics seeking participation in an online survey from a Qualtrics panel of Australian consumers over 18 years of age and offering payment of \$8 for survey completion. The final sample removed 37 cases that did not have exposure to one of the eight major sports, leaving a final sample of 2,033. Of these, 1,678 participants indicated primary exposure to an alcohol-sponsored sport and 355 indicated primary exposure to a sport not sponsored by an alcohol brand. Participants in the study (age, $M = 24.90$ years, $SD = 6.07$; 51% male, 49% female) completed the survey during November of 2014. The timing of the survey was designed to avoid peak seasons of the sports surveyed, to limit bias in exposure from the recency effect. The survey was conducted with approval from the ethics committee of a state-based university in accordance with the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council's research ethics guidelines. Participation for the study was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and participants were able to withdraw from the study without a penalty at any time during the process.

Measures

Demographics. Participants reported their age, gender, amount of time residing in Australia (more or less than 5 years), income bracket, ethnicity, relationship status, and postal code.

Exposure to Sport. Participants were screened for age and exposure to one of the eight sports. Therefore, assessment of exposure initially screened out any participants without any exposure to the eight major Australian sports and, second, quantified the degree of exposure to the sport that they indicated they had had the greatest exposure to. After age and gender questions, participants were asked, "Which of these sports would you have the most exposure to (for example, viewing games)?" The eight sports included were the most popular sports in Australia: Australian Open tennis, Australian Rules Football (AFL), cricket, Melbourne Cup horse racing, rugby league, rugby union, A-League soccer, and surfing. At the time of this survey, the sports AFL, cricket, rugby league, rugby union, and soccer had multiple alcohol sponsors with agreements at varying sponsorship levels. For example, these included the broadcasting level (e.g., naming of specific broadcasts such as Bundaberg Rum Friday night football), team level (on player uniforms), competition level (VB Summer of Cricket Series), and venue level. Surfing had

less alcohol sponsorship, with a single sponsoring alcohol brand associated with this sport at the time of the survey.

The response “I have no exposure whatsoever to any of these” was also available. A total of 37 respondents were removed from the analysis on this basis, leaving 2,017 respondents to complete the survey. Questionnaire-branching technology that matched the specific sport and its alcohol sponsor was used for the remaining questions (e.g., respondent’s image-transfer questions reference sport-specific sponsors). Sports used in the survey were sponsored by a primary alcohol sponsor. The use of real alcohol–sport sponsorship pairings in the survey ensured that the items relating to sport image and sponsorship brand image were relevant and plausible to respondents.

After participants who were not consumers of one of the major Australian sports were screened out, the exposure independent variable was quantified using two descriptive items. The first asked participants, “On a typical week during the playing season, how many games or matches of these sports do you watch on TV or online? (Not including live matches you attend),” to which participants responded using a scale from 1 to 15 or more. The second item asked, “On a typical week during the playing season, how many games or matches of these sports do you attend to watch live at the event? (Not including matches you watch on TV or online),” to which participants responded using the same response scale. These responses were combined, and the resulting scores were standardized. Therefore, there was only one response per individual relating to the sport to which he or she had the highest self-reported exposure.

Image Transfer. Image transfer was operationalized and measured following the method of Gwinner and Eaton (1999). First, 100 relevant image attributes that could describe both sports and brands relevant to the current study were generated based on attributes used by Gwinner and Eaton and supplemented by a list generated by a panel of three marketing experts, including two marketing academics and one marketing practitioner. This set was reduced to 28 attributes (e.g., “action,” “mateship” [friendship], “loyalty,” “young”) through pilot testing with 30 postgraduate students recruited from a large university (60% male, mean age 22 years) rating the appropriateness of the 100 adjectives in describing the sports and brands under study. Participants recorded the degree to which they believed the final 28 terms were “useful” for describing each of the particular sports and brands on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very useless*) to 7 (*very useful*). The respective ratings for sport and sponsoring brand were then subtracted from each other to produce an absolute value that indicated the extent to which the attributes between the sport and brand diverged or did not overlap, reflecting image discrepancy. Image transfer was greatest when the sum of the absolute differences was small, because the respective image associations were similar for the sport and the sponsor brand. Respondents rated the associations of the sport they had the greatest exposure to and its main sponsoring alcohol brand because it was likely to be more meaningful. This is preferable to having all respondents rate the same sport and its alcohol sponsor, because there is a potential risk of unreliable ratings of a sport and a less plausible link to results by alcohol sponsorship (due to the possible lack of exposure). This is also preferable to respondents’ rating both sport and alcohol-sponsorship brands in general, as the images of different sports and

different alcohol brands will vary. The validity of this measure is supported by the several iterations of pilot testing of items, as well as its successful use in prior research (e.g., Gwinner & Eaton; [Appendix](#)).

Implied Endorsement. Implied endorsement was assessed using four items: “If a [insert sport] team or event agrees to be sponsored by a brand, on some level, they would approve of that brand,” “[Insert sport] teams support the brands or companies that sponsor them,” “[Insert sport] teams and events would not accept sponsorship from companies they don’t like,” and “[insert sport] competitors represent ambassadors for the alcohol brands sponsoring them.” These items were derived from responses in qualitative interviews undertaken prior to the study and faced valid content assessment by a panel of three experts and a convenience sample of 10 pilot consumers. Specifically, 15 personal interviews of approximately 20 min in duration were conducted with young consumers of sport, over 18 years old, with the aim of understanding how consumers process sport sponsorship. The concept of implied endorsement, or presumed approval and support of sponsoring brands by sponsored athletes or teams, emerged as a strong theme from these semistructured interviews, in response to the questions “How do you think sponsorship of sport works?” and “Why do you think brands sponsor sport?”, participants recorded their level of agreement with each implied endorsement item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha indicated good internal consistency, $= .81$. The validity of this scale was supported by its systematic derivation approach. Target consumers described the processes by which sport sponsorship might affect them, and statements reflecting implied endorsement were collated to create this scale.

Brand Attitude. Attitude toward the major sponsoring brand of each participant’s chosen sport was assessed with four semantic-differential items. Participants were asked about their overall impression of the brand name, with 7-point semantic-differential response scales: *unfavorable/favorable*, *good/bad*, *negative/positive*, and *pleasant/unpleasant*. These items referenced the specific principal sponsoring brand. For alcohol-sponsored sports it was the relevant alcohol brand and for nonalcohol-sponsored sports it was the alternative category sponsor. Cronbach’s alpha indicated good internal consistency, $= .90$. The construct validity of using these types of semantic differentials to assess attitude is well established (e.g., [Bagozzi, 1981](#); [Spears & Singh, 2004](#)).

Alcohol Consumption. Alcohol consumption was assessed across a number of dimensions to ensure comprehensive coverage over long and short time periods. Before they completed the various alcohol-consumption measures, participants were presented with a visual depiction of examples of standard drinks. General consumption, rather than consumption only undertaken in a sports setting, was measured on the basis that sponsorship exposure in the sport setting may cue drinking behavior beyond the immediate environment. The decision of which alcohol-consumption items to include was based on recommendations by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (2003). To assess acute and binge consumption, retrospective diary-type questions were used. These questions had been established in prior examinations of their concurrent and predictive validity (e.g., [Koenig, Jacob, & Haber, 2009](#); [Russell, Welte, & Barnes, 1991](#)).

Using the quantity-frequency (QF) method, participants were asked to about acute consumption—how many alcoholic beverages they had consumed on a typical drinking day in the last 12 months. The responses ranged from 1 (*just 1 drink*) to 7 (*18 or more drinks*). The QF method is an estimation formula because it asks people to report their “average” consumption pattern—how much they *typically* consumed on a given drinking day. The QF method has been widely used to measure alcohol consumption and has been established as reliable (Greenfield, 2000).

Binge drinking represents the type of consumption pattern that has the most harmful health impacts (Rehm, Gmel, et al., 2003; Rehm, Sempos, & Trevisan, 2003). The definition provided by the NIH’s National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism indicated that binge drinking typically occurs after four drinks for women and five drinks for men within a 2-hr period. In accordance with this definition of binge drinking, this item asked participants how often in the last 12 months they had had more than four (medium-high risk level for males and females) alcoholic beverages within a 2-hr period. Possible responses ranged from 0 (*never*) to 9 (*every day*).

The CAGE questionnaire serves as a 4-item brief measure for quickly detecting alcohol misuse or hazardous consumption (i.e., dependence and abuse) and is widely used as a measure of hazardous consumption (Roffman, Silverman, & Stern, 2010). Items include “Have you ever felt the need to cut down on your drinking?” “Have you ever felt annoyed by criticism of your drinking?” “Have you ever felt guilt about your drinking?” and “Have you ever felt the need to drink a morning eye-opener?” and were responded to on a scale of 0 (*No, never*) to 5 (*Yes, all the time*). To facilitate the assessment of small gradations in the extent of statement applicability to the participant, this response format was altered from the yes/no format employed by Ewing (1984). Responses to this question were combined to create a composite CAGE score for each individual, with higher scores indicating more hazardous consumption. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale demonstrated adequate converging reliability ($= .72$). The CAGE measure has also demonstrated adequate converging validity and sensitivity across a number of samples (see Dhalla & Kopec, 2007, for a review).

Sponsor–Sport Fit. Fit of the sponsorship relationship was controlled as an established mechanism of sponsorship recall and appeal, as outlined previously. Fit was measured on a 7-point semantic-differential scale through three items adopted from prior research (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014), including “I feel that the partnership between [insert sport] and [insert sponsor] is low fit/high fit; incongruent/congruent, and poorly matched/well matched.”

Results

H1

Before proceeding to assess the mediation hypotheses (H2 and H3), H1 was tested by calculating the zero-order correlations between mere exposure and the outcomes of brand attitude and alcohol-consumption indicators. These correlations are presented in Table 1. These analyses are partitioned according to participants’

Table 1 Correlations for the Sport-Exposure and Consumption Indicators

	1	2	3	4	5
Alcohol sponsors (n = 1,678)					
1. exposure	—	.150	.122	.121	.153 ^a
2. acute consumption		—	.346	.513	.169
3. hazardous consumption			—	.514	.116
4. binge consumption				—	.193
5. brand attitude ^a					—
Nonalcohol sponsors (n = 355)					
1. exposure	—	.074 ^{ns}	-.222	-.268	.150 ^a
2. acute consumption		—	.172	.308	.054 ^{ns}
3. hazardous consumption			—	.704	-.049 ^{ns}
4. binge consumption				—	-.085 ^{ns}
5. brand attitude ^a					—

Note. Unless indicated by ^{ns} ($P > .05$), all correlations are significant at $P < .001$.

^aBrand attitude was measured with reference to the major sponsor of the sport. For alcohol-sponsored sports, this was an alcohol company, and for nonalcohol-sponsored sports this was a nonalcohol company (ie, Kia and Lexus car brands for Australian Open tennis and the Melbourne Cup horseracing carnival).

reporting principle exposure to sports with alcohol-brand sponsorship (AFL, cricket, rugby league, rugby union, soccer, and surfing) and those reporting exposure to sports associated with nonalcohol-brand sponsors (the Melbourne Cup horse racing event and the Australian Open in tennis).

For participants primarily exposed to sports featuring alcohol sponsorship, the results were consistent with the hypothesized prediction, such that the degree of exposure was positively associated with brand attitude and all consumption indicators. The magnitude of these associations was small, representing 1.5–2.3% of overlapping variance. In contrast, for participants primarily exposed to sports not featuring alcohol sponsorship, exposure was unrelated to acute consumption and was inversely related to hazardous- and binge-consumption indicators. Exposure was still positively correlated with brand attitude, although the reference brands for these participants were nonalcohol sponsoring brands. The significant associations for participants exposed to sports not featuring alcohol sponsorship were small to medium in size, representing 2.3–7.2% of overlapping variance.

Model Specification

Next, we measured the effects of alcohol-sponsorship exposure (independent variable) on brand attitude and consumption indicators of acute drinking, hazardous consumption, and binge drinking (dependent variables) and tested the extent to which these effects were mediated by image transfer and implied endorsement. The image-transfer measure was conceptualized as image discrepancy in the sense that, operationally, the scores produced by the measure represent the inverse of image

transfer. That is, the larger number means less image transference and more image discrepancy. Higher scores on this scale represented greater image discrepancy. Thus, inverse relationships are consistent with H2. These mediation models were estimated using only participants who had exposure to alcohol sponsorship.

Image transfer was hypothesized to play a mediating role in the relationship between sport sponsorship exposure and brand attitude, as well as alcohol consumption. The mediation model was assessed using a nonparametric bootstrapped approach to the cross-products of the coefficients, as recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). The statistical output for these analyses is displayed in Table 2. Consistent with H2, image discrepancy significantly mediated the effects of exposure on brand attitude and all three of the alcohol-consumption indicators (see Table 2). Image discrepancy significantly inversely predicted brand attitude and acute, hazardous, and binge consumption and also accounted partially for the relationship between exposure and these outcomes. The support for H2 and H3 is derived from the significance of the values reported in the column titled Mediation Effects. The values in these cells aligned in each row with one of the three consumption measures or brand attitude, indicating the extent that the relationship between exposure and that consumption outcome is mediated. When this point estimate is significant, it suggests there is some mediation between exposure and the consumption outcome in that row occurring via the mechanism being tested (image discrepancy in Table 2[a] and implied endorsement in Table 2[b]).

Table 2 Statistical Output for Testing Mediating Effects

DV	Coefficients			Mediation Effects ^d	
	IV – DV(–M) ^a	M – DV ^b	IV – DV ^c	Point estimate ^d	Bootstrap 95% CI
(a) Mediating effect of image discrepancy					
acute consumption	.098***	–.021**	.102***	–.004*	–.007 to –.001
hazardous consumption	.055***	–.033***	.062***	–.006*	–.011 to –.003
binge consumption	.113***	–.048***	.122***	–.009***	–.018 to –.004
brand attitude	.132***	–.112***	.111***	–.022***	–.036 to –.008
(b) Mediating effect of implied endorsement					
acute consumption	.098***	–.052***	.100***	–.002	–.007 to .001
hazardous consumption	.055***	.088**	.052***	–.004*	.001–.008
binge consumption	.113***	.179**	.105***	.007*	.003–.015
brand attitude	.097***	–.346***	.111***	.014***	.006–.024

Note. DV = dependent variable; IV = independent variable; M = mediator; CI = confidence interval.

^aEstimates the relationship between exposure and each consumption indicator after removing the effect of the mediator. ^bEstimates the relationship between the mediator and each consumption indicator after removing the effect of exposure. ^cEstimates the total relationship between IV and each consumption indicator without removing the effect of the mediator. ^dEstimates the path through the mediator, i.e., the effect of the IV on the consumption indicator that is carried through the mediator.

* $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$.

The mediation analysis for implied endorsement (see Table 2[b]) as the mediator identified partial support for H3. Specifically, for brand attitude and binge and hazardous indicators, the mediations were positive and significant, but there was no mediation effect for acute consumption. The statistically significant result for three of the four outcomes partially supported the hypothesized mediating effect of implied endorsement.

Discussion

This research aimed to develop an understanding of the nature and impacts of the alcohol–sports nexus established so prolifically through sponsorship in sport. A survey of young Australians exposed to sport was undertaken, given the policy concern in relation to binge and hazardous drinking among young consumers. The aim was to conduct a conclusive examination that could determine the extent of the impact of alcohol sponsorship of sport on brand attitudes and consumption, as well as to examine the role of image transfer and implied endorsement in partial mechanisms of this relationship. As predicted (H1), a weak but consistent correlation of sponsorship exposure with brand attitudes and acute, binge, and hazardous alcohol-consumption indicators was found. In addition, consistent with predictions (H2 and H3), this relationship was in part driven by positive image transfer between the sport and alcohol brand and implied endorsement of the brand as a result of the sponsorship pairing. The negative associations between exposure and consumption outcomes for nonalcohol-sponsored sports seem counterintuitive since (irrespective of sponsorship brand) sport viewing and alcohol consumption are both popular and often-combined leisure activities for young Australians. However, in the absence of any theoretical foundation, there were no hypotheses regarding these relationships. It is possible that for the young cohort of participants, those with higher exposure to nonalcohol-sponsored sports might be those who also happen to be more active in these sports and therefore might be *less* inclined to drink alcohol for performance-based reasons.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the discussion of whether, and how, alcohol-linked sponsorship of sport, as a popular and growing marketing communications strategy, may affect alcohol-consumption behavior. The field survey of 18- to 30-year-olds who watch one of the alcohol-sponsored sports included in the study revealed a small, positive effect of alcohol sponsorship on alcohol consumption, which was mediated by the image-transfer process and the effect of implied endorsement. This research suggests that the extent to which spectators are exposed to sport has implications for their alcohol-consumption patterns, corroborating Brown's review (2016). Despite this (and in light of the current effect sizes), banning alcohol sponsorship during sports may be unwarranted and likely ineffective in producing any more than a small effect on consumption. At a minimum, it might constitute a short-term disruption and, at maximum, a risk to the existence of sports so reliant on alcohol-linked funding (Kelly et al., 2014).

The impact of bans has resulted largely in a transfer of sponsorship budget from regulated to unregulated domains. In the context of sports' assets, sponsorship activation has increased across social media and is now infiltrating e-sports, both unregulated media targeting young consumers (Event Marketer, 2018). Thus, the mounting evidence for the impacts of sponsorship-linked exposure is a signal to sports to consider managing the alcohol-sport nexus so as to dilute or entirely diminish exposure to young and vulnerable consumers. Analyses found a significant result for image transfer across three alcohol-consumption-dependent variables (acute, binge, and hazardous consumption). The test also found a significant result for implied endorsement across two of the alcohol-consumption-dependent variables (binge and hazardous consumption). The image-transfer result was derived from assessing the degree of overlap in descriptive attributes associated with respondents' most-watched sport (i.e., highest degree of exposure).

This assessment extends the original Gwinner and Eaton (1999) sponsorship image-transfer study by adopting a broader image-congruence assessment procedure and by testing the image transfer under real-world (rather than lab) conditions, through a field survey in which participants respond to sport-alcohol brand pairings to which they have actually been exposed. These results contribute independent evidence that alcohol-brand sport sponsorship does relate to alcohol-brand attitudes and consumption among young consumers exposed to sport. The results also provide evidence for theoretically proposed processes by which the effect on consumption is elicited. These same findings could relate to sport sponsorship by other "sin" products such as gambling (e.g., Lamont, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2011) and junk food; thus, the extension of the current study to these policy-relevant sponsor brands is also recommended.

Limitations and Future Research

While the results of this study provide much-needed evidence for potential effects of alcohol-linked sponsorship and the mechanisms by which these occur, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the nature of the study's survey design only allowed for the uncovering of associations, rather than causal relationships between exposure and consumption. Further research is thus warranted, using longitudinal surveys or experimental designs to derive evidence of causal relationships. Second, the current study was limited to six alcohol-sponsored sports and to young consumers age 18–30 years, and further replication across other sports, brands, and different consumer demographics is needed to generalize findings. Underage and middle-aged sport consumers would be of particular interest given their widespread exposure to sports, health problems associated with alcohol consumption, and mounting policy concerns about the impact of alcohol-brand sport sponsorship on children and teenagers. In addition, many of the known predictors of alcohol consumption were not controlled for in the estimation of the parameters reported. Finally, this research did not include a comparison of consumption outcomes with those of a control group that was not exposed to alcohol-sponsored sports. This meant that the study could not reveal the effects of general exposure through the mass media apart from that associated with sport.

Given the ubiquitous nature of mass media and sports, a controlled study would pose significant feasibility problems. The cross-sectional nature of the survey also meant that it was difficult to control exposure proximity to sports that were in season at the time compared with those that were less salient. However, the familiarity with the sport that qualified the respondents presumably limited this effect by ensuring a threshold level of sponsorship exposure forged through watching the sport. The weak effect size of the association found between alcohol-sponsorship exposure in sport and consumption is a limitation. One possible explanation for this result is the existence of alternative latent mediating variables in this relationship, given that the current study only measured the influence of two such mediators. Future research might consider measuring the strength of the brand image, in addition to brand-image transfers, as suggested by Crompton (2004). In addition, examination of social influence in terms of peers, specific communities, and degree of fandom is warranted, with prior studies supporting links between fan identification and positive sponsorship outcomes (e.g., Parker & Fink, 2010). The contextual impact on the relationship between exposure and consumption is also of interest. While the current study focused on professional-sport exposure, few studies have examined sponsorship-linked alcohol consumption and relevant mediators on this relationship in a community-sport context (Thompson, Previte, Kelly, & Kelly, 2017).

Conclusion

Sport sponsorship is a marketing communications tool widely adopted by brands to reach target audiences in a meaningful and engaging environment. As a communication strategy, it represents a significant investment and resonates in terms of marketing objectives of brand awareness, preference, and sales. The growth of sponsorship by unhealthy products such as alcohol, junk food, and gambling and resulting affiliation and interdependency with sports is a public policy concern. This research provides evidence of an association between sponsorship exposure and positive marketing impacts and also underpins drivers of this relationship.

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Appendix: Items Used in the Survey

Image-Transfer Attributes

1. How useful are the following terms for describing [insert sport]?
2. How useful are the following terms for describing [insert sponsoring brand]?

Response Scale: 1 = very useless; 2 = useless; 3 = somewhat useless; 4 = undecided; 5 = somewhat useful; 6 = useful; 7 = very useful.

- Action
- Aggressive
- Australian
- Community spirited
- Competitive
- Dangerous
- Elite
- Emotional
- Energetic
- Exciting
- Mateship
- Fun
- Integrity
- Healthy
- Heroic
- Iconic
- Intense
- Local
- Loyalty
- Prestigious
- Relaxing
- Social
- Spirited
- Successful
- Tough
- Traditional
- Working-class
- Young

Implied Endorsement

1. If a [insert sport] team or event agrees to be sponsored by a brand, on some level, they would approve of that brand.
2. [Insert sport] teams support the brands or companies that sponsor them.
3. [Insert sport] teams and events would not accept sponsorship from companies they don't like.
4. [Insert sport] competitors represent ambassadors for the alcohol brands sponsoring them.

Response Scale: 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Brand Attitude

What is your overall impression of [insert brand]?

Unfavorable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Favorable
Good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Bad
Negative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Positive
Pleasant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Unpleasant

Alcohol Consumption

During the last 12 months, how often did you have any kind of drink containing alcohol?

Response Scale: 1 = never; 2 = several times in the last year; 3 = once a month; 4 = several times a month; 5 = once a week; 6 = several times a week; 7 = every day.

During the last 12 months, how many alcoholic drinks did you have on a typical day when you were drinking?

Response Scale: 1 = just 1 drink; 2 = 2 drinks; 3 = 3–4 drinks; 4 = 5–8 drinks; 5 = 8–15 drinks; 6 = 15–18 drinks; 7 = 18 or more drinks.

CAGE

1. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning or to get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?

Response Scale: 1 = no never; 2 = yes but rarely; 3 = yes, sometimes; 4 = yes, often; 5 = yes, all the time.