Abstract

Although there have been significant changes in marketing thinking during the 1990s, in that various relational approaches have attracted enormous interest among academic marketing researchers, current research on sponsorship seems to be “stuck” in the more traditional, marketing-mix management- and mass communicative effects-based discourse. This paper aims at presenting a theoretical overview of how current sponsorship research could be developed further by applying the basic ideas and concepts provided by the interaction/network approach to the study of sponsorship-related phenomena. Adopting interaction/network perspective means that, instead of measuring the mass-communicative effects on various audiences, the focus is on understanding the development of sponsorship relationships and networks, as well as on interpersonal communication processes going on between the sponsorship parties.

Keywords: sponsorship, interaction, interpersonal communication, relationships, networks

Introduction

The phenomenon of sponsorship has broadened substantially and is no longer the relatively limited set of activities it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the beginning of a new millenium, it has become an increasingly popular medium of corporate communication, especially among companies operating in consumer markets. Recently, it is also attracting considerable interest among industrial marketers in highly varied businesses (Meenaghan, 1998). However, despite the popularity of commercial sponsorship in various contexts (e.g. sports, the arts, the public sector, and the media), academic research interest in this closely marketing-related field seems to be rather scant (Olkkonen, 1999). Most existing studies on sponsorship have a theoretically and methodologically narrow perspective (cf. Meenaghan, 1991; Meerabeau et al., 1991, Farrelly et al.,1997; Thwaites et al., 1998), especially in the light of the simultaneuos “paradigm shift”, or shift of conceptual emphasis, in marketing in general towards more relationally oriented approaches (e.g. Grönroos, 1994; Gummesson, 1994; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

On the basis of a theoretical analysis of a large amount of sponsorship literature (Olkkonen, 1999), we argue that the bulk of existing sponsorship research is very...
“managerially” and even “normatively” oriented, with a strong emphasis on the sponsoring company’s viewpoint. Current discourse on sponsorship seems to concentrate heavily on three main issues which, naturally, may also overlap.²

These are (Olkkonen, 1999, cf. Cornwell, 1997):

1. Definition-related issues, i.e. making explicit definitions and typologies of sponsorship (e.g. Meenaghan, 1983; Sleight, 1989).
2. Marketing communications-related issues, mainly the measurement of the effects and effectiveness of sponsorship from the viewpoint of traditional mass communication. (e.g. Elander and Koenders, 1995; Otter and Hayes, 1995; Rajaretanam, 1995)
3. Managerial issues, i.e. companies’ objectives and motives for using sponsorship as a part of their marketing plans and programmes (e.g. Meenaghan, 1983; Sleight, 1989; Crowley, 1991).

Furthermore, existing research is dominated by a very traditional structuralist/functionalist methodological perspective aiming at nomothetic, quantitative measurement of the main empirical properties of sponsorship-related phenomena. The bulk of sponsorship literature is also characteristically normative, even “manual-type”, including many seemingly practical details of the best practices of sponsorship management.

In other words, most approaches to sponsorship address the practical managerial “task-list” problems and do not pay much attention to core theoretical and methodological issues. Current sponsorship research, being preoccupied with many unconnected and often narrowly defined “trivial-type” problems, has in fact lead to “shallow pragmatism and conceptual malnutrition” (cf. Arndt, 1985, 13). All in all, much of current sponsorship research is empirically driven and shows a serious lack of theory development. One of the main arguments in this paper is that current research is lacking theoretical frameworks and research designs that would allow a dynamic, action-oriented understanding of this field of interest (for action-oriented research, see Pihlanto, 1994).

Thus, in addition to following the current, dominating trajectory of aligning marketing-mix (and traditional marketing-communications) management with sponsorship - for example by borrowing ideas more extensively from literature on mass communication theory³, advertising research, and consumer behavior (e.g. Cornwell, 1997) - novel, broader perspectives are also needed in order to paint a more in-depth picture of sponsorship as a social phenomenon. As we argue throughout this paper, these alternative perspectives should be primarily built on the study of various relational aspects of sponsorship. Furthermore, instead of focusing on the more traditional mass-communication issues in sponsorship, we argue for a more profound understanding of

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² To some extent sponsorship research has also included research on “ambush” or counter-strategies of sponsorship (e.g. Meenaghan, 1994), consumers’ attitudes towards sponsorship (e.g. Thwaites et al., 1998), legal and ethical issues (Wise and Miles, 1997; Bruhn and Mehlinger, 1995) and on functional responsibilities in a company (Witcher et al., 1991; Marshall and Cook, 1992, cf. also Cornwell, 1997).

³ Instead of studying the effects of sponsorship visibility on some target group, effects-related research could also be conducted on more “sociological” level, for example by researching the effects of sponsorship on society at large. Effects measurement could be supplemented by interpretive studies on the meanings people give to mass communicative sponsorship “messages” (cf e.g. Puro, 1996) in McLoughlin, Damien. and C. Horan (eds.), Proceedings of The 15th Annual IMP Conference, University College. Dublin 1999.
the role of interpersonal communication in building sponsorship relationships. As so often stated, social interaction and, thus, interpersonal communication can be identified as a key constructing element in the development of all human relationships (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966, in the context of interorganizational relationships, e.g. Möller and Wilson, 1995, 7).

In order to develop the above arguments, the purpose of this paper is to offer a critical discussion on what we perceive as the most interesting avenues for the development of sponsorship research from the perspective of relationality and interpersonal communication. Firstly, we are aiming at a theoretical sketch of how current sponsorship research could be developed further by applying the basic ideas and concepts provided by the interaction and network approach (e.g. Håkansson, 1982; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995; Ford, 1997) to the study of sponsorship-related phenomena. The following section describes a theoretical avenue based on two (naturally overlapping) relational approaches, dyadic and network-based, so that multiple facets of sponsorship can be addressed more profoundly in future research. Secondly, communication aspects of this perspective are brought into the discussion with an emphasis of conceptualizing interpersonal communication within sponsorship relationships and networks. Finally, some methodological implications of this research endeavour are presented.

The Interaction/network approach to Sponsorship

Following the theoretical and methodological “revolutions” in marketing in recent years (e.g. from transaction to relationship marketing, and from quantitative/structural/functionalist to qualitative/interpretative methods), one might argue that the academic field of marketing research is more dispersed than ever (cf. Brown, 1997; Möller, 1994). Numerous different paradigms or schools of thought, partly overlapping, partly clearly distinct, co-exist in business schools all around the world. This is also true of the more recent relational trend (or “relational paradigm”) in marketing, of which the Nordic School of Services and Relationship Marketing, the Emory School, the "consumer relationship" school and the IMP interaction/network approach, among others, are part (e.g. Möller and Halinen-Kaila, 1998; cf. Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Thus, the focus in marketing research seems to shift from products and firms as a unit of analysis to people, organizations and the social processes that bind actors together in ongoing relationships (Webster, 1992; cf. Grönroos, 1994). However, as stated in the introductory section of this paper, current sponsorship research seems to be imprisoned in an ancient theoretical and methodological paradigm that does not reflect the current state of development of the marketing discipline to which it is most often connected.

Perhaps there is nothing wrong in studying sponsorship from the marketing-mix point of view, or from the prevailing effects-measurement perspective. However, in our opinion, there is a serious lack of understanding of how relationships between sponsors and the sponsored develop and of the theoretical and managerial implications of such an understanding. After all, it is the relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored that provides the actual content of the mass-communicative messages of sponsorship.
In order to succeed in communicating these relationships to various audiences, companies may build some of their advertising around them. In other words, mass communicative messages are generated by the linkage between the sponsoring company (and/or its brands) and the sponsored. One of the sponsoring company’s aims is to achieve favourable publicity for the company (and/or its brands) among relevant target groups by mass communicating its relationships in activities (e.g. sports, arts) which are not directly linked to its normal business (cf. Sleight, 1989). Consequently, just as the relationship (or association) between the sponsor and the sponsored is a key element in the mass-communicative messages generated by sponsorship, it is also, in our opinion, important to understand the dynamics of sponsorship relationships per se by analyzing their content and dynamics, by going “inside” them.

Therefore, we are suggesting that sponsorship discourse be broadened by adopting theoretical (and also methodological) perspectives from the (rather heterogeneous) IMP group related interaction/network approach (for reviews on the position of the approach within inter-firm research, see e.g. Oliver and Ebers, 1998; Araujo and Easton, 1996). Researching sponsorship relationships and networks consisting of actors from different fields of business, sports and arts would be an interesting extension of interaction/network approach which this far has primarily centered on “ordinary” buyer-seller relationships and “traditional” industrial (production) networks.

Although the interaction and network perspectives may be considered separate theoretical approaches in marketing research (Möller, 1994; Tikkanen, 1996), they are very close to each other. The interaction approach concentrates mainly on dyadic relationships and interactive behaviour through which a relationship is established, developed, maintained and terminated. The network approach goes beyond dyadic relationships to incorporate networks of relationships. (Easton, 1992; Johanson and Mattsson, 1994). The interaction and network approaches may overlap in the sense that in dyad research, also the connected network of the relationship under scrutiny also has to be considered (cf. dyad-network –type of embeddedness; Halinen-Kaila and Törnroos 1998; also Anderson et al. 1997). However, despite addressing different units of analysis both approaches stress that exchange takes place through interaction between individual actor-organizations (e.g. Möller, 1994). Furthermore, a dyad as a “quasi-organization” with its inner context can be considered a basic “building block” of more comprehensive industrial networks (e.g. Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 1998).

Sponsor-sponsored dyad research – an interaction approach to sponsorship

Although sponsorship as a business and social phenomenon often involves a relationship between a sponsoring and a recipient organization, there have been practically no attempts to conduct research that would have aimed at understanding various structures and processes related to the formation and development of different kinds of relations (whether individual-individual, individual-organization, or organization-organization) in varied sponsorship contexts, i.e. between the sponsor and the sponsored (cf. Erickson and Kushner, 1999).

As stated above, existing sponsorship research has largely adopted the viewpoint of the sponsoring company. Adopting an interaction perspective in a sponsorship context – in other words, taking the sponsor-sponsored relationship as the basic unit of analysis - is thus especially relevant for researching long-term sponsorship relationships between

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organizations\(^4\). For instance, existing literature and models describing relationship dynamics (see e.g. Halinen, 1996) provide the tools to construct frameworks to help us to better understand the development of interorganizational relationships between the sponsor and the sponsored. Naturally, considering the specific, often non-intensive nature of such relationships, we need to determine the concepts that we consider the most appropriate for describing the content of these relationships.

The major emphasis in interaction-oriented sponsorship research should be on understanding the historical development of a sponsor-sponsored dyad through a description of the complex interaction phenomena (e.g. acts, events, episodes and projects) inherent in a sponsor-sponsored relationship on organizational, departmental and personal levels. For example, the following should be addressed in applying concepts derived from the interaction approach to sponsorship research (Alajoutsijärvi and Eriksson, 1998; Möller and Wilson, 1995; 1988; Håkansson and Snehota, 1995):

- Contextual factors which define the environment and situation in which interaction behaviour takes place (e.g. characteristics of sponsor and sponsored organizations, characteristics of individuals acting in these organizations, general characteristics of the connected network).
- Process characteristics of the sponsor-sponsored relationship which include types of episodes (exchange), periods of intensity (e.g. high, medium or low or a “sleeping” relationship), adaptation processes (strategic/operational) and co-ordination processes (e.g. relationship management, conflict resolution).
- Structural characteristics which include continuity (e.g. the time-span of a relationship), complexity (e.g. number of interacting individuals), symmetry (e.g. power related issues, resources and capabilities, activeness of the sponsorship parties, operational bonds) and informality (traditions and culture in sponsorship activities involving the atmosphere, loyalty, future orientation, invisible rules and practices and behavioural modes, and the degree of formalization such as in contracts, and personal bonds).

A comparison of sponsor-sponsored relationships and "ordinary" buyer-seller relationships in interorganizational markets clearly shows certain considerable differences in contextual factors, and in process and structural characteristics. It should also be borne in mind that there are many kinds of sponsor-sponsored relationships, as well as, of buyer-seller relationships, and that these relationships all have their unique features, depending on the type of the industry under scrutiny and the type and roles of the interacting parties, for example. However, in our opinion, certain features of sponsor-sponsored relationships can also be described a priori on a general level.

Most importantly, while interorganizational buyer-seller relationships most often occur between business enterprises, sponsorship relationships involve interaction between various kinds of organizations: public and private, profit and non-profit. Sponsors are usually companies or public-sector organizations acting in various kinds of "markets" while the sponsored can take different forms according to the type of organization.

\(^4\) It could be argued that in most sponsorship contexts, the sponsored actually forms a more or less formal organization. Naturally, a musician and his/her support group may form a less formal and identifiable organizational texture than, say, the football club Manchester United. However, we argue that most sponsor-sponsored relationships actually exhibit many features of a typical interorganizational relationship studied extensively e.g. within the IMP group.

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(permanent organizations, project/contemporary organizations, or even individuals) and societal field, for example sports and the arts (cf. footnote 3).

As far as the process characteristics of sponsor-sponsored relationships are concerned, the main types of exchange episodes relate to negotiating individual sponsorship contracts, and to the various kinds of exchanges involved (e.g. social, informational, legal and, of course, economic). Economic aspects of sponsorship relationships relate to the exchange of money and/or products/services/know-how provided by the sponsor against mainly intangible resources provided by the sponsored (e.g. exposure, image-linked benefits, hospitality opportunities, possibilities to develop connected business relationships) (cf. Bruhn, 1987).

Sponsor-sponsored relationships involve naturally high exchange intensity when the parties are negotiating the sponsorship contracts. The relationship intensity can be expected to be medium or even low during the contract period, depending on the type and nature of the exchanges. Adaptation and co-ordination processes are also likely to be discernible at some point of time, for example in the form of developing contract-related activities performed by the sponsored so that the sponsor can exploit its sponsorship investment as effectively as possible.

As far as the structural characteristics of sponsorship relationships are concerned, issues such as continuity, complexity, symmetry and informality naturally have to be taken into account. While some sponsorship relationships may be short-term, or even one-off, (Bruhn, 1987) long-term relationships that may have a history of several decades also exist. According to Meenaghan (1998), it is likely that long-term sponsorship arrangements will become more common in the future.

There are various degrees of complexity involved, e.g. as far as activities related to the sponsorship arrangement, the different types of resources exchanged, and the number and roles of the interacting parties are concerned. Obviously, the economically-significant, global sponsorship arrangements between large organizations are probably the most complex in nature. As for the sponsor-sponsored relationship, the power balance between the parties can be expected to be asymmetric. Sponsorship activities do not usually belong to the core activities of the sponsoring company’s business. On the other hand, resources received by the sponsored may be crucial. Informality in sponsorship relationships might be expected to depend on aspects such as the nature and core areas of operation of the sponsorship parties, the roles of the individuals involved, and the economic (and other) significance of the sponsorship arrangements.

**Researching sponsorship networks.**

Sponsoring organizations usually have several sponsorship partners, just as the sponsored have relationships with several sponsoring organizations, not to mention other types of organizations (e.g. consultancies, advertising agencies, media organizations) that may be involved. Thus, it seems reasonable to approach sponsorship from the thus-far neglected network perspective\(^5\). As stated earlier, the focus of the

\(^5\) Cf. Farrelly et al.’s (1998) approach where they relate the principles of relationship marketing to the sports industry as a whole, and present a graphical representation of its multiple players and the relationships that bind them. According to Farrelly et al., this kind of industry map can be used in developing marketing strategies by any player in the industry. Furthermore, Erickson and Kushner (1999) have applied network theory in the context of public events.

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network approach has been either on a larger industrial network, or on the focal net of
an individual organization. In the latter case, the main unit of analysis is the focal net,
the main function of which is to capture all the network features of relevance to the
operations of the focal firm and the study in question. This focal net always involves
both direct and indirect relationships, and its boundaries are perceived according to the
views held within the focal firm (e.g. Tikkanen, 1997). Yet another possibility to study
networks is to focus on the embeddedness of a focal dyad in the connected networks of
the interacting parties (Anderson et al. 1994; Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi, 1998).

Researching on sponsorship from the network perspective would probably be best
approached from the viewpoint of the focal sponsorship-related net of an individual
organization (either a sponsor or a sponsored), or, alternatively, the embeddedness of a
sponsor-sponsored dyad in the relevant connected networks of the interacting
organizations. A study approaching sponsorship from both of these perspectives could,
for instance, then concentrate on identifying and describing the types of actors and actor
bonds, the activities and activity links, and the resources and resource ties, within the
relevant focal sponsorship net or nets (cf. Håkansson and Johanson, 1992; Håkansson
and Snehota, 1995).

A deep analysis of the dynamics of the network (concerning actors, activities and
resources, and bonds, links and ties between them) during a specific time period will
increase our understanding of the critical aspects of sponsorship from a more holistic
perspective. This, in turn, would enable more concrete theoretical conclusions to be
drawn, and more grounded managerial implications to be considered (see Olkkonen,
1999).

Communication aspects of the interaction/network approach to sponsorship

In the context of the social organization within which communication takes place,
current research on sponsorship can be clearly located in the field of mass
communication. As pointed out earlier, the mass communicative elements are
emphasized strongly in current sponsorship discourse. On the basis of marketing
management - and communications-related rhetoric, it can be argued that current
sponsorship research draws heavily on the stimulus – organism – response (S-O-R) type
of thinking in which the seller’s marketing activities (S) (using sponsorship as a mass
communicational tool) influence buyer response (R) (positive attitudes towards the
sponsor or its brand), depending on the different characteristics of the buyer (O). Thus,
sponsorship is usually presented as one element in a society-wide process of sending a
set of stimuli to a market (different target groups) with the intention of evoking a
desired set of responses within that market (see e.g. Delozier, 1976; Fill, 1995;
McQuail, 1994). Consequently, much of current sponsorship research also stresses a
very traditional view of communication which holds that information is directed at
prospective audiences through the sponsorship process, rather like a bullet is propelled
from a gun (e.g. Fill, 1995)\(^6\).

\(^6\) Concentrating on the traditional one-way view of communication seems to be prevalent in most current
sponsorship research. However, it is obvious that members of the target audience influence each other.
The traditional one-way communication process is therefore enriched by interpretations of and
interactions between audience members in interpersonal networks.

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However, the interaction/network approach, i.e. researching the development of a sponsor-sponsored dyad, or of interorganizational sponsorship networks, means that complex interaction phenomena related to sponsorship need to be addressed on organizational, departmental, group and personal levels (cf. Möller and Wilson, 1995; 1988). Although actors at different levels of aggregation may be identified, individuals are inevitably the basic interactants in all possible collective actor configurations. However, in most interaction models, the discussion is limited to the organization level. It is quite surprising how little attention is actually given to the social processes of human interpersonal communication and verbal action in interaction and network research (cf. Alajoutsijärvi and Eriksson, 1998). Consequently, we think aspects of interpersonal communication must be taken into consideration extensively in researching sponsorship from an interaction/network perspective.

Quite obviously, relational issues cannot be separated from communicational occurrences. According to Duck (1976; 1998), relationships are a substantial part of structuring, evaluating and understanding messages in interpersonal settings. For example, sponsorship relationships (dyads) or sets of relationships (networks) are assumed to evolve as a result of interpersonal communication which occurs situationally in communicative and cognitive processes between interactants within various collective actor structures.

When it comes to long-term sponsorship relationships, one can draw a parallel between the concepts “communication” and “social exchange episodes” which are intertwined with other types of exchange episodes (economic, legal, information), and also with ongoing adaptations and coordination processes. Interlinked exchange episodes of various types, together with adaptations and coordination, form the interaction process between the sponsorship parties (cf. Håkansson, 1982). Consequently, interpersonal communication is a substantial part of the interaction process and can therefore be regarded as a (if not the) key processual element of relationships/networks. In other words, relationships/networks are essentially formed by interpersonal communication processes which, in turn, are affected by their contextual and structural properties. On the other hand, communication processes may cause changes in the contextual and structural characteristics of the relationship or the network (cf. Giddens, 1984). Relationships and networks, therefore, cannot be understood without having knowledge of the communication processes occurring within them, and communication processes can be understood only if the situational factors (contextual and structural characteristics) are considered (cf. Sydow and Windeler, 1998).

Consequently, aspects of interpersonal communication are important in attempting to understand issues such as long-term bonding, various forms of adaptation and the development of trust and mutuality in sponsorship relationships and networks. As stated above, communication is addressed to some extent in interaction/network studies (cf. social-exchange episodes, interaction processes). However, the theoretical connection between interaction/network studies and the broad and diverse field of interpersonal communication research has remained quite weak. For example, although interaction/network researchers embrace the idea of voluntarism on the part of managers, they have not incorporated individual intentions/interpretations into their analyses to any notable degree (Möller, 1994).
Thus, the role of communication between individuals could be brought forward more explicitly also in research on sponsorship relationships and networks. This could be done by drawing more extensively from many areas of interpersonal communication research, including social psychology and speech communication (see e.g. Puro, 1996; Duck and Perlman, 1985). The theories of interpersonal communication are epistemologically very different. According to Puro (1996) some of them rely on empiricism (e.g. the uncertainty reduction theory, see Berger and Calabrese 1975), some stress practical values (e.g. communication apprehension theory, see McCroskey 1970) and some are interpretive (e.g. constructivism, see Delia 1974). In our research context, the important question is how sponsorship relationships/networks start, develop and decline as a result of “strings of interaction” (Duck and Perlman. 1985), and of the changing beliefs the interactants form about them. Therefore, we argue that interpretive/phenomenological approach to interpersonal communication in particular may open ways to new “local” theories of sponsorship relationships and networks.

Theoretical and methodological implications related to the interaction/network approach to sponsorship

In this paper, we have approached sponsorship-related phenomena from an interaction and network perspective. There were no limitations placed on the type of sponsorship relationship, for example. We believe the basic ideas and concepts borrowed from the interaction/network approach can well be utilized in various sponsorship contexts, such as the arts, sports, science, education and the media.

It was concluded that sponsorship (and other) relationships under scrutiny cannot be examined in a vacuum: events and activities can only be understood in their social, cultural and historical contexts. Following Berger and Luckmann (1966), we see all broader managerial phenomena, including sponsorship, as socially constructed from processes of negotiation in particular contexts between individuals and collectives. Such interactive processes result in the collective enactment of reality, and in the enactment of knowledge of reality, i.e. what is believed to be “real” (also Weick, 1969).

Sponsorship relationships (and networks) involve at least five different “levels of aggregation” on which relevant actors can be found, ranging from the influential individuals through formal intraorganizational bodies and whole formal organizations to formal or informal collectives (cf. the Möller and Wilson buyer-seller interaction model, 1995; 1988). It should also be noted that the four higher levels, ranging from informal groups or company departments to large multinational corporations or informal alliances, pose a slight theoretical and methodological problem in terms of the identification of relevant actors e.g. within a sponsorship net.

The fact that individuals are inevitably the basic interactants in all collective actor configurations is thus somewhat paradoxical. Regardless of whether a relevant actor is identified in an informal group, a company department or a whole organization, it is the individual actor-interactants within them who, through every-day social interaction, construct the reality or realities encountered in various sponsorship situations (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Moreover, there is an inherent duality between the individual-level interaction process on the one hand, and the social structures forming a collective actor on the other. As Giddens (1984, 16-34) puts it in the context of his widely-referenced structuration theory, analysing the structuration of social systems.
(such as collective actors in the relevant context of sponsorship relationship) means studying the modes in which such systems are produced and reproduced in interaction. Social structures are to be seen as both a medium and an outcome of the practices they recursively organize. Thus, the empirical identification of relevant actor-structures in a sponsorship context might not be as easy as it appears, at least at first sight (cf. Sydow and Windeler, 1998).

Primarily due to the complex nature of sponsorship-related phenomena and the importance of understanding the relevant intra-and interorganizational contexts of sponsorship arrangements highlighted in this paper, we think there should be rather heavy reliance on the contextual aspect in future sponsorship research. In Pettigrew's often-cited terms (e.g. 1987; 1997), a researcher, then, has to construct his or her understanding along the three dimensions of context, content and process. Of course, many different, phenomenologically- and/or hermeneutically-oriented interpretative methods might be applied in the pursuit of this understanding. However, when the aim is to gain understanding of sponsorship relationships and networks by applying phenomenological methods, for example, actions and interpersonal communication should be approached in terms of interactant consciousness (cf. Puro, 1996; Delia, 1987; Neuliep and Hazleton, 1986). In practice, this will lead to a situation in which several different versions of the actions, events and interpersonal encounters and their roles in the development of sponsorship relationships and networks are possible. Not only do different interactants create different interpretations, but the same individual can interpret and reinterpret his/her actions from different points of view. This means that we cannot find any ultimate explanations for what genuinely happens in dynamic sponsorship relationships and networks. There is no ultimate scientific explanation that would comprehensively cover the phenomena involved.

Because approaching real-life sponsorship from the perspective of human consciousness, the existence of a number of adequate parallel explanations for the dynamics of sponsorship relationships and networks has to be accepted. These explanations may change over time, i.e. there may exist a variety of explanations for various events, which may all be correct in their own terms (cf. Puro, 1996). Consequently, in phenomenological/hermeneutical studies, explanations are not based on linear cause-effect chains of independent and dependent variables. Instead, in an attempt to understand the development of sponsor-sponsored relationships or sponsorship networks, the emphasis is on the recognition of complex, ambiguous and circular "causalities" (cf. Alajoutsijärvi, 1996).

Considering the viewpoints presented above, it could be argued that conducting a field study to gain in-depth understanding of the development of sponsorship relationships and networks is quite demanding. The interaction/network approach to sponsorship means moving from the current perspective of its mass-communicative effects and overt acts of organizations (behaviours) to the "lower level" of interpersonal communication processes occurring in the relevant relationships and networks. As an alternative to traditional, empirical attempts to predict or to construct linear cause-effect explanations, we think that the phenomenological or hermeneutic perspectives shed new light on constructing contextual, "local" theories of sponsorship relationships and networks. As has so often been stated in the context of interpretative studies, it is not the chosen method per se that is important, but rather the depth of understanding the researcher is able to achieve on the basis of a field study.

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