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Sponsoring the National Football Team

Abstract

Purpose: A key concern in sports sponsorship decisions is knowing under what conditions sponsorship can effectively act as a brand building tool. This study had two aims of which the first was to list attributes to use when examining congruency in the sponsorship of national football teams. The second aim was to test whether being a client of the sponsor brand and being involved with the sponsee moderates the relationship between image congruence and sponsorship response.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected on four sponsors of the Portuguese national team, just before the twentieth Fédération Internationale de Football Association World Cup. Analyses were conducted on a representative national sample of fans. The research design encompassed a two-step approach. First, qualitative analysis identified the main attributes that fans associate with the national team. In the second quantitative phase, moderated regression analysis was used to test the proposed model.

Findings: This research confirmed sponsor-sponsee congruence in seven attributes (i.e. national symbol, strength, strong emotions, happiness, optimism, connection and positive feelings) enhances positive brand image and fans' involvement with the national team moderates this relationship. Positive sponsorship outcomes tend to be higher for sponsors when fans are currently clients of the sponsor brand.

Originality/value: This paper adds to previous research by employing mixed methods to study sponsor-sponsee congruence regarding national teams and by testing whether fans being clients of sponsors and being involved with sponsees moderate sponsor-sponsee congruence.

Keywords: image congruence, sports sponsorship, World Cup, involvement with the sponsee, brand image

1. Introduction

Sponsorship has become a desirable way to communicate and leverage positive brand associations (Pouromid and Iranzadeh, 2012; Sasmita and Suki, 2015). Cornwell (1995: 15) defines sponsorship-linked marketing as 'the orchestration and implementation of marketing activities for building and communicating an association to a sponsorship'. Identifying conditions that enhance sponsorship success is a task that has inevitably become more important in an increasingly mediated society, in which measuring the return on communication investment is one of companies' major concerns (Cho *et al*., 2011; Mondello and Kamke, 2014). According to Speed and Thompson (2000), sponsor-event fit and consumer attitudes towards sponsors are central in eliciting advantageous responses from sponsorship associations.

Sports sponsorship – particularly of football events – has attracted the attention of enterprises wishing to capitalise on the positive image attributes of the most important teams (Kwon *et al*., 2016). Companies' motivation to sponsor sports has increased as public interest in football has grown. Sponsorship allows brands to connect with consumers by being part of their everyday lives and activities, such as watching live sports events on television (TV) or other devices (Cornwell and Kwak, 2015). However, Kwon *et al*. (2016: 130) report that 'we presently have only a limited understanding of the effects of sponsorship of a sporting event on the image of the sponsorship brand'.

A general consensus exists in the literature that congruence between sponsors and sponsees plays a significant role in determining sponsorship effectiveness (Jeonghee and Junghyun, 2013; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011). Congruence is a term often used to describe consumers' perceptions of similarities between sponsors and sponsees (Han *et al*., 2013), and the impact of congruence in sports activities has been shown to be important for predicting sponsorship effects (Fleck and Quester, 2007; Jeonghee and Junghyun, 2013; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; Söderman and Dolles, 2008; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012). High image congruence is known to generate more favourable sponsorship responses, acting as a brand building tool for sponsor brands (Han *et al*., 2013).

Prior studies of perceived congruence have focused on its impact on sponsor outcomes (Kwon *et al*., 2016; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012). Only a few researchers (e.g. Han *et al*., 2013), however, have explored the conditions that might influence image congruence's effects on consumer responses to sponsorship. For instance, Han *et al*. (2013) tested the moderating effect of sponsor motive and cheering event fit on this path. More recently, Kwon *et al*. (2016) suggested future research on brand image congruence and sponsorship needs to study the role of variables such as consumers' involvement with the sponsor brand and sponsored event. Regarding sports events, Tribou (2011) found that each sport has specific

image attributes, and Woisetschläger and Michaelis (2012) call for researchers to list the attributes to be used in analyses of image transfer.

The present study sought to add to previous research by developing a list of attributes that can be used to study congruence in sponsorships of national football teams and to create a graphical display of results through congruence mapping. Moreover, this study tested new moderators that were expected to enhance the influence of congruency on sponsorship response. Accordingly, this study set two main objectives:

1) To identify the brand image attributes that fans associate with their national team and study the congruence between the brand image of the national team and their sponsors

2) To examine whether fans being clients of sponsor brands and being involved with the national team moderates the impact of image congruence on sponsorship response

The results of this study are expected to be of value to brand managers. Since national teams can boost mass movements and distinct feelings more than sports clubs or their events do, companies that are aware of their most relevant image attributes can more effectively articulate their association with the national football team's image. In this way, they can improve the communication results of their sponsorship. Understanding the role of moderator variables in producing the expected effects of sponsorship is of utmost importance given the need for target audience segmentation. Thus, sponsors need to know whether the response to sponsorship is different for their clients or whether the response depends on fans' involvement with the sponsored team. These are both important aspects for sponsorships through which brands are seeking much more than just increased brand awareness, which, in most cases, is already extremely high.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a literature review highlighting the ways that sports enhance the development of national identity, the importance of sports sponsorship and the impact of congruence on efforts to leverage sponsorship outcomes. The third section describes the two-step approach applied (i.e. qualitative and quantitative phases), as well as the data collection procedures. The results for both steps are then presented. The paper concludes with the study's theoretical contributions, managerial implications and limitations, followed by suggested avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sponsorship Marketing

Sports sponsorship is a significant marketing tool that benefits all the stakeholders involved (Caemmerer and Descotes, 2014; Chanavat *et al*., 2010; Cobbs, 2011; Cornwell and Maignan, 1998; Demir and Söderman, 2015; Nickell *et al*., 2011; Tsiotsou, 2011). According to Verity (2002), under the right conditions, sponsorship can be more effective than

traditional advertising or other promotional activities. Nevertheless, scholars have noted a general lack of systematic studies of how companies decide between alternatives in sponsorship properties (Amis *et al*., 1999; Arthur *et al*., 1997). Some studies have also pointed out the need for an effective solution for the problem of how to assess the financial impact of sponsorship investment (Lee *et al*., 1997; Meenaghan and O'Sullivan, 2013; Pham, 1991; Thomas, 2014; Tsiotsou, 2012; Yang *et al*., 2008). Papadimitriou *et al*. (2008), for example, found that most of Grand National sponsors report no clear or measurable objectives, with limited consideration given to brand-related strategies.

Sponsorship has been defined by Meenaghan (1991) as involving investment – in cash or kind – in a sports property in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property. Sponsorship has been shown to influence consumer recall, awareness and attitudes towards sponsors, as well as purchase intentions. Sponsorship has thus become an attractive way to communicate and leverage positive brand associations, in which the connections facilitated by the formation of strong sponsor-event links allow brands to use sponsorship as a source of differentiation. This result can be difficult for competitors to replicate (Chanavat *et al*., 2009; Cliffea and Motion, 2005; Close and Lacey, 2013; Mazodier and Quest, 2014; Naa and Kim, 2013; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012). Despite this type of marketing's indisputable importance, many authors have mentioned the need to understand better its full range of effects (Chien *et al*., 2012; Demir and Söderman, 2015; McDaniel, 1999; Meenaghan, 2001; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; Zdravkovic *et al*., 2010).

2.2 Image Congruence Effects on Sports Sponsorship

The literature presents a strong consensus that sponsorship can be used as a central driver of brand strategy, creating an extended experience for customers and adding value to brands by leveraging functional and non-functional brand values (Kwon *et al*., 2016). Many studies over the years (Fleck and Quester, 2007; Jeonghee and Junghyun, 2013; Kwon *et al*., 2016; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; Söderman and Dolles, 2008; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012) have examined the impact of image congruence between attributes of sponsors and sponsored sports events. This research has shown that the fit between sponsors and sponsees (i.e. sponsored organisations, causes, events or individuals) is important for predicting sponsorship effects.

Studies have provided evidence that sponsor-property fit is one of the key factors stimulating sponsor recall (Grohs *et al*., 2004; Han *et al*., 2013) and brand favourability (Han *et al*., 2013; Shu *et al*., 2015), as well as likelihood to buy from sponsors (Han *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, consumers who perceive the brand-event image fit of sponsorships as congruent are likely to have more positive cognitive and affective responses to the brands in question. This congruence or fit between sponsor and sponsee happens when consumers' perceived image

assessments and consumers' brand identities have similar associations. According to Keller (1993: 3), brand image is 'perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers' memory'. Osselaer and Janiszewski (2001) report that brand association acts as an information collecting tool to develop brand differentiation. Therefore, establishing a positive brand image has become a crucial task of brand managers (Brochado *et al.*, 2015).

The effects of corporate sponsorship, although generally acknowledged, are not the same for all situations, and emotional responses to sponsorship differ in valence and intensity (Bal, 2010). Based on the conviction that the match between sponsees and brands leads to a variety of positive outcomes for firms, including a more positive image of sponsor brands, the following hypothesis was formulated for the present study:

> **H1**: *A high level of perceived congruence between a national team's image and a sponsor's image is positively associated with higher levels of sponsorship response, defined here as sponsor brand image enhancement.*

In the context of this research, brand enhancement is represented by the difference between consumers' perceived brand image of sponsor brands before and after sponsorship of the national football team. Respondents were thus asked if they have developed an improved sponsor brand image due to the national team sponsorship.

2.3 Client Status as Moderator

Firms enter into sponsorship arrangements for a variety reasons such as 1) to increase brand awareness and 2) to establish, strengthen or change brand image (Cornwell and Maignan, 1998; Gwinner, 1997). The latter construct has been defined as perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers' memory (Keller, 1993). Alexandris *et al.* (2007) found that purchase intentions are significantly predicted by beliefs about sponsorships, attitudes towards events and the centrality dimension of involvement. Olson and Thjømøe (2011) also report that improved object equity and attitudes towards sponsorships are the most important factors for improving sponsor equity. Chanavat *et al.* (2009), in turn, developed a model that demonstrates how multiple sponsorships activate brand-related behavioural dimensions (i.e. cognitive, affective and conative aspects).

Sponsorships are expected to create short- and long-term benefits for sponsoring companies. These include influencing consumer recall (Bennett, 1999; Hansen and Scotwin, 1995; Nicholls *et al.*, 1999), sponsor awareness and identification (Bennett, 1999; Bloxham, 1998; Pham and Johar, 2001), sponsor image (D'Astous and Blitz, 1995; Otker and Hayes, 19878), attitude towards sponsors (McDaniel, 1999; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Stipp, 1998) and purchase intentions (Madrigal, 2001; McDaniel, 1999). Several researchers have sought to identify the variables that can condition these impacts of sponsorship. For example,

Tantiseneepong *et al*. (2012) and Thwaites *et al.* (2012) found that consumers who have a positive perception of the brand in question will be inclined to develop a greater willingness to purchase the relevant products. However, Cornwell and Relyea (2000) found that the link between brand awareness and increased purchase behaviour is tenuous, even though exposure is the key element in determining the value of sponsorships.

According to Pope and Voges (2000), consumers' intention to purchase can be traced to two predominant influences: a positive attitude towards the brand and brand familiarity, which is derived from brand exposure and prior use. Caemmerer and Descotes (2011) demonstrated how pre-existing attitudes towards sponsors moderate sponsorship links. Visentin *et al.* (2016) also favour a consumer-oriented perspective on the role of attitude towards sponsor brands and sponsee involvement in determining customers' reactions to sponsorship activities. In reference to the Chinese market, Liu *et al.* (2015) noticed that sponsor-event fit does not directly impact brand image, but sporting event experiences affect attitudes that enhance sponsors' brand image. Speed and Thompson (2000) suggest that, in addition to sponsor-event fit, perceived sincerity of sponsors and attitudes towards sponsors are key factors in generating a favourable response to sponsorships.

Notwithstanding the diversity of studies that claim that sponsorships are a useful tool to improve brand image and that they increase consumers' willingness to purchase sponsor brands, little or nothing is known about the differential effect of fans being brand clients on the impacts of sponsorship. More specifically, research is scarce on the effect of fit between sponsors and sponsees. Kwon *et al.* (2016) recommend the use of variables related to sponsor brands as moderators in sponsorship studies. Therefore, the first proposition developed for the present study was as follows:

> ***P1****: Image congruence has an intensification effect on sponsor-client status's interaction with sponsorship response so that the positive effect of image congruence on sponsorship response is greater for consumers who are already clients of the sponsor.*

2.4 Involvement with National Team as Moderator Variable

Sponsors perceive differences in how various facets of sports sponsorship packages, such as exposure of the brand and coverage of the sponsored sport, contribute to their impact on brand equity (Henseler *et al.*, 2011). In sports contexts, football is regarded as a defining element of local national identity. Sports and national identity have been strongly connected throughout history, mostly due to fans' conviction that national sports teams can represent the entire nation, thereby fostering a sense of national pride (Popović and Bjelica, 2014). Several studies have emphasised the link between sports and a strong collective identity (Abell *et al*., 2007; Gibbons, 2012; Szabó, 2013; Vincent and Hill, 2011). Popović and Bjelica (2014), for example, showed how the significant achievements of national football teams enhance

peaceful coexistence between various ethnic groups. Mehusa and Kolstad (2011) also concluded that a strong identification with national teams is accompanied by more positive attitudes towards the nations in question.

Identification between fans and national teams can take several forms. Stehle and Weber (2013) propose that singing the German national anthem before games is an important symbolic act in which players embody the nation while fans express their excitement by flying the German flag. Similarly, Vincent and Harris (2013) state that England's popular media coverage of the English football team reflects a heightened consciousness of English identity. Projection onto national teams of non-sports-related hopes or frustrations also occurs. During the 2010 World Cup, Magazine *et al.* (2012) observed that fans used the Mexican national team's performance as an excuse to express their frustration, disappointment and resignation regarding Mexico's failure to achieve international recognition as a viable nation.

Based on their research, Kim *et al.* (2015) report that fan involvement and player and/or team prestige are important sponsee-related antecedents of sponsorship effectiveness. Dees *et al.* (2010) examined involvement with sponsees as a moderator between personality fit and sponsorship outcomes, concluding that sponsors' excitement, competence and sincerity are key drivers of sponsorship response. One of the most common measures of team loyalty in sports sponsorship studies is fan involvement (Dwyer, 2011), defined by Ko *et al.* (2008) as individuals' perceived interest in – and the personal importance of – a sports activity. Therefore, Kwon *et al.* (2016) recommend the use of fan involvement in the sponsored event as a moderator of congruence in sponsorship studies. Accordingly, the second proposition of the present study stated that:

> ***P2***: *Image congruence has an intensifying effect on the interaction of fans' sponsee involvement with their sponsorship response so that the positive effect of image congruence on sponsorship response is greater for consumers with higher involvement with the national team.*

The above hypothesis and propositions were structured into the proposed model shown in Figure 1. The dependent variable is sponsorship response, the independent variable is image congruence and both sponsor client status and sponsee involvement are moderator variables.

Insert Figure 1 near here

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Context: Portuguese National Team and 2014 World Cup

This research focused on sponsorship of the Portuguese national team for the 2014 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup in Brazil, concentrating on four major Portuguese companies willing to capitalise on the tremendous enthusiasm generated around this national team. For the last 20 years, the Portuguese football team has succeeded in attracting an extremely broad national audience, which includes many segments habitually indifferent to football clubs. With the extraordinarily intense media coverage of Cristiano Ronaldo, this excitement has significantly increased. As a result, major Portuguese companies – some of which have recently experienced the liberalisation of their respective markets – have a positive perception of a connection to the national team. All this takes place in a country where football is by far the most popular sport, linking all strata of society.

3.2 Selection of Sponsor Brands

Four brands out of 10 national football team sponsors for the 2014 World Cup were included in this study. The selection process was guided by several criteria. All four brands are perceived as national companies (i.e. majority participation of Portuguese capital). They are market leaders and regular sponsors of the national team, as well as habitually making the largest investments in the national league. In addition, the four sponsors operate in the distribution, financial, telecommunications and energy sectors, so these companies do not offer sporting goods. These are companies that own brands created in Portugal, with a long tradition of association with football and the national team. These characteristics could produce different results from those that occur, for example, with multinational brands.

3.3 Research Method: Qualitative and Quantitative Phase

This study applied a two-step approach encompassing a qualitative phase in May 2014, followed by a quantitative phase in June 2014. Both steps were completed before the first match of the twentieth FIFA World Cup final tournament in Brazil, in the summer of 2014, to avoid any bias arising from match results, which might contaminate consumers' responses.

As previous studies (Kwon *et al*., 2016; Meenaghan and Shipley, 1999; Tribou, 2011) have reported that each sport has specific image attributes, the first objective was to identify image attributes Portuguese fans associate with the Portuguese national team. In the exploratory stage, a total of 15 face-to-face interviews with game spectators were conducted during a preparatory match to identify the main brand associations regarding the national team. Interviews were also sought with individuals outside the stadium, resulting in another 15 interviews with Portuguese who usually do not attend football matches. The sample included

50% male and 50% female respondents of different ages, ranging from 18 to 75 years old, and these individuals were approached in various types of stadium tribunes to ensure different social classes were represented.

The respondents were asked about their recent match attendance for the last six official matches of the national team, live or on TV, and the interviewees were also asked to identify the main associations they have (i.e. positive or negative) with the national team. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Descriptions gathered with open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis. Attributes and/or associations referred to by three or more respondents were included in the set of attributes used in the questionnaire in the quantitative phase of the research. The following seven attribute statements were identified and retained for further analysis:

1) The national football team is a national symbol.
2) The national football team conveys a sense of strength.
3) The national football team elicits strong emotions.
4) The national football team brings me happiness.
5) I am optimistic about the national football team doing well.
6) The national football team connects Portuguese fans.
7) I have positive feelings about the national football team regardless of the final scores.

To assess the relevance of these image attributes to the four sponsors selected, these items were further validated in personal interviews with the sponsors' marketing directors. The interviews were conducted in the companies' headquarters by a research team member. The marketing directors were asked to evaluate the relevance of the list of attributes by expressing their agreement with each attribute (i.e. yes or no). All items were quite acceptable to the sponsors' managers.

This list was thus confirmed as a description of the image attributes associated with the national team. The items were expected to have content validity given that the attributes emerged from the most frequent responses of national team fans in the interview phase and that the items were validated by the four sponsors' marketing managers. Notably, although these image attributes were validated by managers of sponsoring companies, this list reflects the perceptions of 800 people (i.e. customers and non-customers). Thus, these attributes have perceived coherence regardless of whether they match the image managers want.

A quantitative study was then conducted to evaluate the fit between the image attributes of the national team and selected sponsors. The target population were individuals between 18 and 85 years old, all residents in Portugal. Data were gathered through phone interviews by a market research company from a sample of 802 Portuguese individuals. This fieldwork was done in the first week of June 2014. The market study had a sampling error of 3.46% and a confidence level of 95%.

In this phase of the research, participants were asked about their involvement with the national football team (1 = 'Low'; 10 = 'High'). Next, they rated each of the 7 suggested attributes on a 10-point semantic differential scale (1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 10 = 'Strongly agree'), according to their perception of how well each item described their image of the national football team. They were then asked to rate the brand images of the four sponsor brands using the same scale. The respondents were also asked whether their brand image of the sponsors improved with their sponsorship of the national team (1 = 'Strongly disagree'; 10 = 'Strongly agree'). Finally, the participants provided demographic data (age, gender and level of education).

4. Results

4.1 Sample Profile

The sample demographic profile revealed a quite heterogeneous group of respondents. Among the 802 participants, 52% were female and 48% male. Regarding age, 24% were between 18 and 35 years old, around 53% of the respondents were between 36 and 55 years old and the remaining 24% were 56 or more years old. A full 38% had completed ninth grade or less, 32% had stopped studying between ninth and twelfth grade and the remaining 30% had a higher education degree. The respondents were distributed throughout all of Portugal's regions. The sample's representativeness was thus confirmed (see Table 1). The participants reported a high level of involvement with the national team, which can be explained by the popularity of football in Portugal (mean = 6.65; standard deviation [SD] = 2.62).

Insert Table 1 near here

4.2 National Team Associations

The participants' mean scores for the seven image attributes range from 8.40 (SD = 2.19) to 7.43 (SD = 2.44) – for emotions and happiness, respectively. A one-way analysis of variance revealed that evaluations vary according to the respondents' profile. Females evaluate the image attributes more highly than males do, and scores decrease with age (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 near here

The evaluations of these seven items are highly correlated with one another. The test results confirm the adequacy of the principal component analysis (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test: 0.94 and Bartlett's test: $X^2 = 4796.51$; p = 0.00), which extracted a single factor explaining 65.98% of the total variance. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient confirmed internal consistency (0.93).

4.3 Sponsor-Sponsee Congruency

This study conceptualised congruence as the image-based similarity between the national football team and its sponsors. Figure 2 below presents the congruence found between the image attributes of the national team and its sponsors (i.e. congruence maps). Around 84% (n = 675) of the respondents were clients of Sponsor 1, 55% (n = 441) of Sponsor 2, 18% (n = 147) of Sponsor 3 and 56% (n = 450) of Sponsor 4. Seven paired t-tests were conducted for each sponsor to determine if a significant mean difference exists between perceived sponsor and sponsee attributes. Overall, the national team image is evaluated more positively than the sponsors' image is, with the exception of the strength attribute (see also Table 2 above).

Insert Figure 2 near here

The reliability score of the seven-item scale is 0.89 for Sponsor 1, 0.94 for Sponsor 2, 0.95 for Sponsor 3 and 0.95 for Sponsor 4. This study applied McDaniel's (1999) conceptualisation of evaluative congruency as the perceived similarity between sponsor and sponsee attributes. The first definition of congruency considered in the present research spans a continuum from congruence (0) to no congruence (a maximum of 9 = 10 - 1). To calculate sponsor-sponsee congruence scores, the absolute difference scores between the national team and sponsors' images were used for all seven items (Gammoh *et al*., 2014; Johnston and Paulsen, 2011; Kressmann *et al*., 2006; Sirgy, 1982; Sirgy *et al*., 1991). The final lack of congruence score consisted of the average of the absolute difference scores for the seven attributes, with lower numbers representing higher congruence. The mean and SD for each company's scores were calculated.

4.4 Model Estimates

The research hypothesis (H1) predicted that the higher the congruence between the national team and sponsors' images, the more positive the sponsorship response would be. Regression analysis was conducted for each of the four sponsors to test this proposition. The interpretation of the resulting coefficient estimates took into account that higher values of the independent variable are associated with lower congruence. Table 3 shows that image congruence has a significantly positive impact on sponsorship response for all brands. According to the results, the greater the perceived congruence between the sponsors and the national team is, the higher is the positive impact of sponsorship on sponsor image. Thus, a successful sponsorship response is more likely when a sponsor and sponsee's attributes fit together (see Table 3). As the estimated coefficient is statistically significant for the four sponsors and it has the expected sign, H1 is supported.

Insert Table 3 near here

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The first research proposition (P1) predicted that sponsorship response is more strongly pronounced for those fans who are already clients of the sponsors' company and/or brand. To test P1, moderated regression analysis was performed by treating the binary variable of sponsor client status (Yes = 1) as a moderator of the effects of sponsor image congruence on sponsorship response. Therefore, the multiplicative term of sponsor client x sponsee-sponsor congruence was introduced.

P1 predicted a positive effect of this term on sponsorship response. As shown in Table 4, Model 1 regressed sponsorship response on image congruence without the interaction term. Sponsor client status was also included as a control variable. The results reveal that both variables have significant positive effects on sponsorship response in three of the four regressions. For three of the four brands, the increase in sponsor image is stronger for those who are already clients of the sponsors, and image congruence has a significant impact on sponsorship response. Model 2 added the multiplicative term, but the results do not support the first proposition. Although the estimates have the expected sign, they are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Moreover, the change in the coefficient of determination (R^2) from Model 1 to Model 2 is not significant. Overall, these findings suggest that client status does not affect the relationship between image congruence and sponsorship response.

Insert Table 4 near here

The second research proposition (P2) predicted a moderating effect of national team involvement on the relationship between image congruence and sponsorship response. Moderated regression analysis was also used to test this proposition by introducing a multiplicative term of national team involvement with image congruence. P2 predicted a positive influence of team involvement on the multiplicative term of sponsor client x sponsee-sponsor image congruence.

The results for Model 1 indicate that both national team involvement and the image congruence variable are statistically significant for all sponsors. When the interaction term was added to the regression, the other variables – congruence and involvement – remained significant (see Table 5). Model 2's results reveal that the parameter estimate for the multiplicative term has the expected sign and that this is significant. The other variables also remain significant, as is the change in R^2. Image congruence appears to be a better predictor of sponsorship response when involvement with the national team is stronger. Thus, P2 is supported.

Insert Table 5 near here

Finally, a model with all the variables was estimated (see Table 6). The results of the overall model provide further support for H1 and P2.

Insert Table 6 near here

5. Conclusion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

The conditions under which response to sponsorship of national teams can be empowered are far from being completely understood. Previous studies (Han *et al.*, 2013; Kwon *et al.*, 2016) have emphasised the role of sponsor-sponsee congruence in leveraging sponsorship outcomes and maintained that reliable tests for possible moderating effects on levels of sponsorship response merit future research. To answer this call, the present study targeted sponsors of a national football team. Using a mixed methods approach, this research sought to develop a list of attributes to be used in congruence studies and test for the possible moderating effects on the relationship between image congruence and sponsorship response.

Regarding the first objective, the qualitative phase identified seven main attributes Portuguese fans associate with their national team: national symbol, strength, strong emotions, happiness, optimism, connection and positive feelings. Answering previous researchers' call for the development of a list of image attributes for each sport (Kwon *et al.*, 2016; Woisetschläger and Michaelis, 2012), the present attribute list adds to the existing literature (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2013; Kwon *et al.*, 2016) by identifying the attributes connected specifically to the national football team. The fans' perception of this team as a national symbol and its role in connecting heterogeneous Portuguese fans confirm previous studies' findings that highlight the role of sports in enhancing and expressing national identity (Magazine *et al.*, 2012). Given the huge international interest in football, national teams have attracted increasing attention, and they have become a matter of national pride for communities all over the world.

To meet the first research objective, the present study conducted seven paired t-tests for the four sponsor brands selected, measuring the congruence between sponsors and sponsee at the attribute level. The results are displayed in the congruence maps above (see Figure 2). This study thus answered Woisetschläger and Michaelis's (2012) call for further research conducting congruence analysis at the attribute level.

The data analyses' results reveal that the national team in question has a stronger perceived image than the sponsors do in the case of six attributes. The exception is the strength attribute perhaps because the sponsors selected are already leaders in their corresponding sectors and benefit from strong perceived brand awareness, image and equity. These results offer some important insights into the desired congruence between national teams and sponsor brands' images. Since sponsor brands seek to strengthen brand associations by supporting national teams, the findings indicate that these companies all still have room to strengthen perceptions of most of their attributes by focusing on communicating messages that convey positive feelings, strong emotions and happiness. Particularly in the case of happiness, the important

difference in brand image fit detected in this study indicates the four sponsors need to strengthen this attribute. The same applies to the ideas of connecting and belonging, which pave the way for community strategies or even tribal marketing.

This research's quantitative phase succeeded in meeting the second objective. The findings demonstrate that a more favourable enhancement of sponsor brands' image occurs as image congruence between sponsors and national teams increases. This result matches that of some previous studies (Han *et al*., 2013; Naa and Kim, 2013). More importantly, the present research's findings add to the existing literature by showing that a significant direct relationship holds even after a moderator variable is added to the model.

The moderated regression analyses' results show that sponsor client status facilitates sponsorship response but that this factor does not act as a moderator between image congruence and sponsorship response. Furthermore, the model estimates revealed that involvement with the national team has both a direct impact on sponsorship outcomes and moderates the relationship between sponsor-sponsee congruence and sponsorship response. This moderating effect on sponsor image enhancement reinforces the unique advantages that well-targeted sponsorship relationships bring to the process of creating positive brand images. From a theoretical perspective, this and previous studies of sports fans, therefore, support the conclusion that sports sponsorship offers sponsors the capacity to leverage the strong connection that fans feel with their sports teams (Gibbons, 2012; Szabó, 2013; Vincent and Hill, 2011).

To summarise, the present results are expected to contribute to the literature by identifying specific image attributes that can be used in studies targeting the sponsorship of national sports teams. Moreover, this study reveals that the sponsorship benefits offered by congruence between sponsors and sponsees are leveraged when fans are involved with the sponsees. In addition to confirming the findings of Dees *et al*. (2010), Kim *et al.* (2015) and Speed and Thompson (2000), the present research's results reinforce the idea that fans' involvement with sponsees strongly affects sponsorship response. This also emphasises the role of dependent variables as moderators in this response, confirming previous work done by, among others, Caemmerer and Descotes (2011), Ko *et al*. (2017), Sirgy *et al*. (2008) and Visenti *et al*. (2016).

5.2 Implications for Practice

The importance of football is undeniable, particularly in European countries such as Portugal. As a result, the sponsors associated with teams participating in the most important football events, such as the FIFA World Cup, risk investing astronomical values whose return is still not fully known. A key concern in sports investment is deciding under what conditions this sponsorship support should be boosted. In the case of national team events, endorsements

take on special features. Not only can team awareness be linked to sponsors, but also an entire set of attributes is associated with nationalities, often causing patriotism to be projected on sponsoring brands.

The present study's results could have implications for managers who represent either sponsees or sponsor brands. The findings suggest that, when the image of both sponsors and sponsees are perceived as being similar in the seven attributes identified, the sponsors are more likely to be regarded as congruent with the national football team and, thus, that their sponsorships can be particularly effective. Congruence has a clear, direct effect on brand image enhancement. The results presented in the congruence maps developed at the attribute level offer important insights for sponsors regarding the attributes that can help to improve congruence levels. More specifically, the analyses revealed the existence of a congruence gap in seven attributes for Sponsor 1 and six for Sponsors 2, 3 and 4. The paired t-tests and the congruence maps displaying image perceptions of the sponsors and national team under study could help these four companies identify areas for future improvement to close the gap between the national team and the firms' brand images. Brand components such as happiness, optimism or positive feelings can thus be important links to consumers in co-branding strategies and brand partnerships.

For companies willing to consider a national football team as part of their marketing communication tools, this study's results also reveal that sponsorship effects are higher for those consumers who have a higher level of involvement with the relevant football team. Accordingly, when deciding whether to sponsor sports events, companies must take into consideration their target market's (i.e. current and potential customers) degree of involvement with the sport. Consumers who are involved are more exposed to the sponsorship. Therefore, companies need to plan communication strategies that reach both fans who actively attend sports events – whether live or on TV – and consumers who might not be exposed directly to sports sponsorship campaigns. In their communication strategies, companies need to keep in mind that customers who are less involved with football might complain about the sponsorship decisions of sponsor brands.

The ideal campaigns are those that increase participation and involvement with the national team in question and sponsors' brands at the same time. In parallel, social networks could open a new avenue for this kind of strategy. Due to the high visibility of football players, new market segments can be attracted by the involvement of the national team and sponsor brands in social causes such as campaigns to improve nutrition, children's scholastic success, protection of senior citizens or even international peace.

Since sponsorship is an important marketing communications tool that enhances brand image, brand managers need to identify strategies and programmes that can be used to leverage sponsorship response in different targeted segments. In this way, building and developing

brand image attributes that fit with the national team image can have an extremely significant impact on sponsorship responses. As this type of response appears to be less intense among consumers who are not already clients, sponsors must select communication strategies that leverage sponsorships' effects on this group.

From the sponsees' point of view, this research highlights the importance of identifying the image attributes associated with national teams in each sport, in order to find sponsors who share the same perceived image attributes. If sponsees are interested in developing long-term relationships with their sponsors, sponsees must enhance these partnerships by emphasising the image attributes that can be transferred to sponsors' brands. Among other possibilities, this can be done through public relations campaigns led by either team directors or coaches who normally play an important role in reinforcing their teams' perceived attribute alignment.

5.3 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

No research is without its limitations, and, in this study's results, five types of limitations need to be mentioned. First, the research only examined the sponsorship congruence between a single national football team and four of its sponsors, and, second, the analyses only examined the perceived sponsor-sponsee fit for Portuguese supporters. Third, this study focused on a specific period – the weeks prior to a World Cup. Fourth, the sponsors selected are all quite well-known national companies with a large market share. Last, the image attribute items obtained in the qualitative phase from Portuguese national team fans were only validated by company managers who could be seeking to project the desired and not real image of their brands.

Suggested avenues for further research include replicating this study in a period of lower public involvement or after a national team's poor performance in an international sports competition. Another avenue would be to do a similar study of national teams in sports that are less popular than football and with less well-known sponsors. This research conceptualised congruency as a continuum between no congruence and congruence, which means that a congruence gap may appear when sponsors' brand image outperforms their sponsee's image or vice versa. Future studies could explore the impacts of attributes' congruence gaps on sponsorship outcomes. Regarding the methodology of content analysis of image attributes, future studies may also consider including validation by consumers of sponsor brands.

Another topic that merits future research is company profiles (e.g. sector, size and capital structure) that benefit the most from sponsoring national teams, namely, those more likely to exhibit the highest sponsor-sponsee congruency in terms of image attributes. Finally, as this

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study targeted the sponsorship of a specific national team, future research needs to address the cross-country validation of the list of attribute items.

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Figure 1 Proposed model
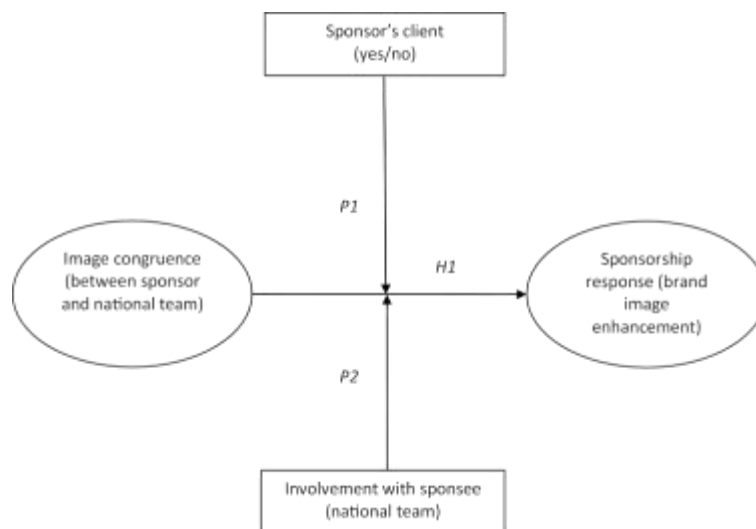
Table I Respondents' profile

Variable	Categories	Count	(%)
Demographics			
Gender	Female	420	52
	Male	382	48
Age group	18-35	189	24
	36-55	422	53
	56 or older	191	24
Education	Less than 9th grade	304	38
	9th-12th grade	259	32
	Higher education	239	30
Geographic	I	136	20
area (Portugal's	II	41	6
regions	III N	114	17
according to	III S	103	15
Nielsen	IV	58	9
standards)	V	114	17
	RA	107	16
Fan involvement			
Involvement	1 1 2 1 3 1 4	132	16
with national	5 1 6	201	25
team (ten-point	7 1 8 1 9 1 10	469	58
Likert scale)			

Table II National team image and sponsors image – descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance results

Item	National team Mean	Gender F	Age group F	Schooling years F	Sponsor 1 Mean	Sponsor 2 Mean	Sponsor 3 Mean	Sponsor 4 Mean
National symbol	8.30	7.39***	1.69	25.84***	7.37	7.38	6.46	7.55
Strength	7.62	7.93***	0.91	18.97***	8.16	8.15	7.24	8.22
Emotions	8.40	1.58	1.26	4.66**	6.06	6.40	5.58	6.72
Happiness	7.43	0.00	5.59***	22.73***	5.80	7.14	6.35	7.06
Optimism	7.63	12.36***	1.81	11.81***	7.11	7.74	6.20	7.90
Connection	8.44	13.01***	1.52	5.01***	6.98	6.65	5.66	6.76
Positive feelings	8.08	5.07**	0.50	9.43***	6.38	6.59	5.11	6.67

Notes: ***; ** and * = statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively

Figure 2 National team-sponsor image congruence maps by item
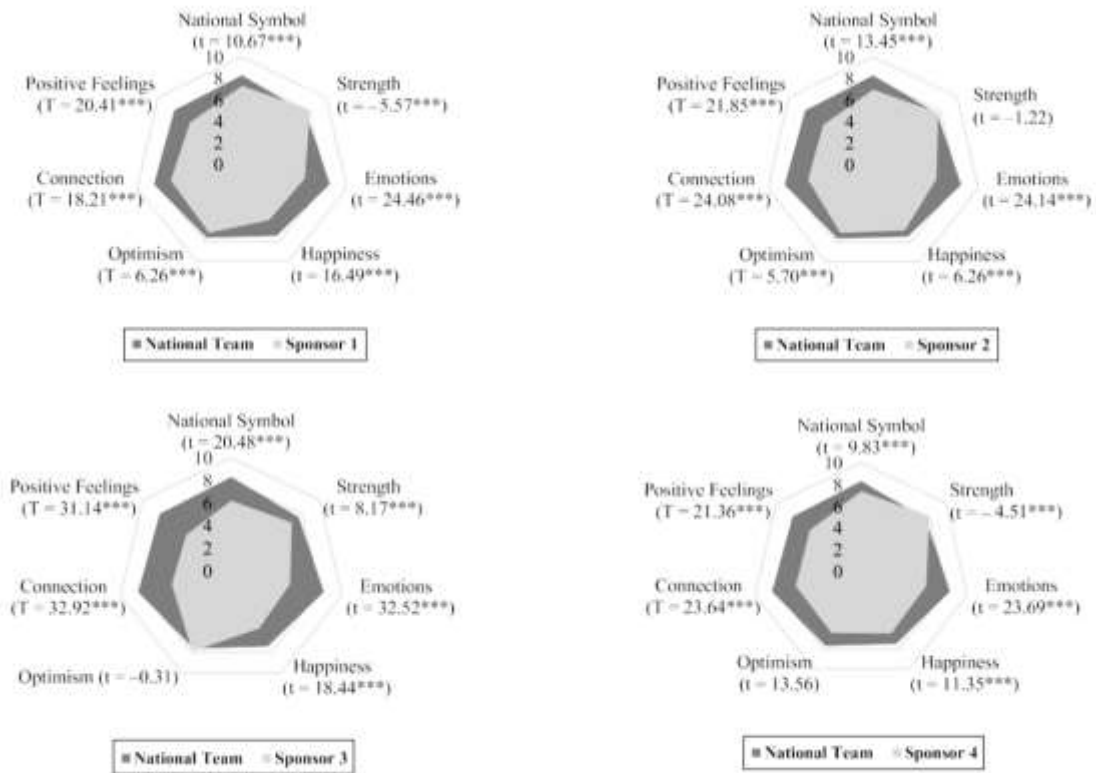
Notes: ***; ** and *= statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10 per cent level, respectively

Table III Regression analysis explaining effect of image congruence on sponsorship response

Variables	Sponsor 1		Sponsor 2		Sponsor 3		Sponsor 4	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Independent	8.49	0.15***	8.51	0.14***	8.27	0.16***	8.64	0.14***
Sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS)[a]	−1.03	0.06***	−0.93	0.05***	−0.94	0.05***	−1.04	0.05***
		$F = 342.05$***		$F = 342.05$***		$F = 382.05$***		$F = 403.61$***
		Adj. $R^2 = 0.299$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.299$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.323$		Adj. $R^2 = 0.335$

Notes: ***; **; and * = statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively; [a]sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS) ranges from congruence (0) to no congruence (a maximum of 9 = 10 1), so negative coefficients mean positive impacts (i.e. as image congruence increases, sponsorship response also increases); Adj R^2 = adjusted coefficient of determination

Table IV Moderated regression analysis (moderating effect of sponsor client status)

	Sponsor 1		Sponsor 2		Sponsor 3		Sponsor 4	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Model 1								
Independent	8.08	0.26***	7.85	0.18***	8.08	0.18***	8.49	0.18***
Sponsor client (1 = yes) Sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS)[a]	0.45	0.23**	0.95	0.16***	0.61	0.22***	0.24	0.17***
	−1.02 =	0.06***	−0.87 =	0.05***	−0.92	0.05***	−1.03	0.05***
		173.56***		196.89***		$F = 196.31$***		$F = 203.08$***
		Adj $R^2 = 0.301$		Adj $R^2 = 0.328$		Adj $R^2 = 0.328$		Adj $R^2 = 0335$
Model 2								
Independent	8.43	0.43***	7.70	0.22***	7.93	0.19**	8.23	0.23***
Sponsor client (1 = yes) Sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS)	0.04	0.46	1.22	0.29***	1.42	0.40***	0.67	0.29**
Sponsor client* sponsee-sponsor congruence (ABS)	−1.15	0.14***	−0.82	0.07***	−0.87	0.05***	−0.93	0.08***
	0.16	0.15	−0.12	0.10	−0.35	0.15**	−0.19	0.10*
		$F = 116.08$***		$F = 131.76$***		$F = 133.67$***		$F = 136.86$***
		Adj $R^2 = 0.304$		Adj $R^2 = 0.329$		Adj $R^2 = 0.332$		Adj $R^2 = 0.337$

Notes: ***; ** and * = statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively; [a]sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS) ranges from congruence (0) to no congruence (a maximum of 9 = 10 1), so negative coefficients mean positive impacts (i.e. as image congruence increases, sponsorship response also increases); Adj R^2 = adjusted coefficient of determination

Table V Moderated regression analysis (involvement)

Variables	Sponsor 1 B	Sponsor 1 Standard error	Sponsor 2 B	Sponsor 2 Standard error	Sponsor 3 B	Sponsor 3 Standard error	Sponsor 4 B	Sponsor 4 Standard error
Model 1								
Independent	5.56	0.27***	6.10	0.25***	4.79	0.23***	5.49	0.24***
Involvement with sponsee	0.38	0.03***	0.34	0.03***	0.50	0.03***	0.43	0.03***
Sponsee-sponsor image congruence								
(ABS)▪	−0.87	0.05***	−0.86	0.05***	−0.90	0.04***	−0.92	0.05***
		$F = 288.01^{***}$		$F = 270.51^{***}$		$F = 442.56^{***}$		$F = 362.49^{***}$
		Adj R^2 = 0.417		Adj R^2 = 0.402		Adj R^2 = 0.524		Adj R^2 = 0.488
Model 2								
Independent	4.52	0.43***	4.59	0.41***	3.65	0.41***	4.51	0.42***
Involvement with sponsee	−0.47	0.14***	0.54	0.05***	0.66	0.05***	0.56	0.05***
Sponsee-sponsor image congruence	−0.06	0.02***	−0.30	0.13***	−0.52	0.12***	−0.54	0.14***
Involvement with sponsee × sponsee-sponsor image congruence	0.53	0.06***	−0.08	0.02***	−0.05	0.02***	−0.05	0.02***
		$F = 197.09^{***}$		$F = 191.57^{***}$		$F = 302.53^{***}$		$F = 260.10^{***}$
		Adj R^2 = 0.423		Adj R^2 = 0.416		Adj R^2 = 0.530		Adj R^2 = 0.492

Notes: ***; ** and * = statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively; ▪ sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS) ranges from congruence (0) to no congruence (a maximum of 9 = 10 1), so negative coefficients mean positive impacts (i.e. as image congruence increases, sponsorship response also increases); Adj R^2 = adjusted coefficient of determination

Table VI Comprehensive model (all variables)

Variables	Sponsor 1		Sponsor 2		Sponsor 3		Sponsor 4	
	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error	B	Standard error
Independent	4.50	0.55***	3.99	0.43***	3.56	0.41***	4.31	0.44***
Involvement with sponsee	0.53	0.06 ***	0.53	0.05***	0.65	0.05***	0.56	0.05***
Sponsor client (1 = yes)	0.04	0.42	0.97	0.26***	0.66	0.34**	0.36	0.16**
Sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS)	−0.56	0.17 ***	−0.27	0.14**	−0.51	0.12***	−0.50	0.15***
Sponsor client ⨯ sponsee-sponsor congruence (ABS)	−0.15	0.14	−0.01	0.09	−0.09	0.12	−0.07	0.09
Involvement with sponsee ⨯ sponsee-sponsor image congruence (ABS)	−0.06	0.02***	−0.07	0.02***	−0.05	0.02**	−0.05	0.02***
		$F = 128.50$***		$F = 229.38$***		$F = 183.73$***;		$F = 256.03$***
		Adj $R^2 = 0.443$		Adj $R^2 = 0.528$		Adj $R^2 = 0.533$		Adj $R^2 = 0.489$

Notes:***; **; and *= statistically significant at the 1, 5 and 10% level, respectively; Adj R^2 = adjusted coefficient of determination