

From fans to buyers: antecedents of sponsor's products purchase intention

Sponsor's
products
purchase
intention

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the indirect and direct effect of perceived congruence between fans' identification with a team and the intention to buy sponsor's products. The level of perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sports team, as well as fans' attitude toward the sponsor and their purchase intention toward products from the sponsoring company are analyzed.

Design/methodology/approach – A sample of 2,647 football fans who support two well-known Portuguese professional football teams completed a questionnaire. Structural equation modeling with multigroup analysis was carried out to test the model and the hypotheses.

Findings – Team identification has an effect on perceived congruence, on attitude toward sponsors and on intention to buy. The results also show the positive direct and indirect effects of both perceived congruence on attitude toward the sponsoring company and on purchase intention of sponsors' products. However, neither congruence nor attitude show significant results on purchase intention.

Originality/value – This study departs from previous studies, in that it investigates the direct and indirect (i.e. mediated) effects of perceived congruence. Firstly, it analyzes the mediating effect of perceived congruence between team identification and purchase intentions. Secondly, it explores the mediating effect of perceived congruence between team identification and attitude toward the sponsor.

Keywords Purchase intention, Team identification, Congruence, Sponsorship, Football fans

Paper type Research paper

Executive summary

A fan's level of identification with the sports team they support has been widely used as key determinant on sponsorship. However, the evaluation of the direct effects and mediation function of perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored (i.e. supportive team) calls for further clarification (Johnston and Paulsen, 2011). In addition, the abundance of contradictory results (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2011; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016) reinforces the need of fully understanding the importance of perceived congruence on purchase intention. Based on the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), the congruence theory (Osgood and Tunnenbaum, 1955) and the attitude theory (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), the current study aims to fill the following critical gaps in the sponsorship literature: to demonstrate the indirect effect of congruence between team identification and purchase intention, to expose the causality between team identification and perceived congruence and to clarify the effect of congruence on attitude toward the sponsor and on the purchase intention toward the sponsor's products. In total, 2,647 fans from two of the most popular football teams in



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Portugal participated in this study. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed to examine the model fit and to test the research hypotheses. The results showed that perceived congruence played a significant mediation role, accounting for 65 percent of the indirect effects between team identification and purchase intention. A significant mediation role of congruence between team identification and attitude toward the sponsoring company was also found. In a context of professional football teams, fans' identification has significant positive direct effects on perceived congruence, on attitude toward sponsoring companies and on purchase intention.

These results suggest that sport teams' managers should consider the need to increase the level of fans' identification regarding the teams they support. On the other hand, sponsorship operations must be performed with consistency and authenticity to promote greater perceived congruence to form positive attitude responses and high levels of purchase intention.

Introduction

In 2000, companies worldwide invested approximately US\$25bn in sponsorships (Tripodi *et al.*, 2003). In 2018, the investment value is expected to reach the US\$57.5bn (IEG, 2017), representing an increase of 130 percent. Sports will seize 70 percent of all investments made in 2018 (IEG, 2017), and football will continue to be the most sponsored sport, both in terms of the number and the magnitude of the sponsorships (Buhler *et al.*, 2007). All sponsorship agreements closed during the year of 2012 accounted for a total of US\$4.5bn (IFM Sport Marketing Surveys, 2012).

Football has a high visibility, stimulates audience's emotional side and can generate high levels of excitement and a deep affective connection with the spectators. As a matter of fact, this sport endangers fans in such way that in addition to fan's identification (Angel *et al.*, 2016; Madrigal, 2000), the concept of congruence between sponsor and sponsored (e.g. football team) has been analyzed regarding the effects of sponsors on buyers (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Speed and Thompson, 2000).

However, according to Groza *et al.* (2012), this connection has not received proper attention. Little research addressing the fit between the sponsor and the object has been conducted (Olson and Thjørmøe, 2011), and the way in which it benefits the sponsor's brand value is unclear or inconclusive (Wang *et al.*, 2011). Most literature has displayed a significant direct relation between congruence and attitude toward sponsors (Olson and Thjørmøe, 2011; Rifon *et al.*, 2004; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016). Although past research shows similar results, a lack of knowledge about congruence's role as a potential mediator (Johnston and Paulsen, 2011) in sponsors-related evaluations has been highlighted by several authors (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Cornwell, 2008). Hence, the need of fully understanding the key aspects of congruence as the link among intention and buying calls for further research. A limitation of the vast majority of the research conducted on the topic lays in the fact that the population under analysis is majorly composed by students, instead of adequate real-world samples. Additionally, some results are contradictory. Several studies (e.g. Devlin and Billings, 2018; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016) confirmed the existence of direct effects among congruence, attitudes related to sponsors and intentions to buy. Conversely, Mazodier and Merunka (2012) verified no positive and direct effect of attitude similarity (i.e. part of congruence) on the same outcomes. Lastly, in a study conducted with two Asian countries, distinct effects were found concerning congruence on attitude and intention (Wang *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, the present study aims to fill two critical gaps and to achieve the subsequent objectives: to demonstrate the indirect effect of congruence between team identification and intention to buy and to expose the causality between team identification and congruence on a realistic scenario. This will model the process on understanding the effects of team

identification and congruence on attitude toward sponsors and on intention to buy sponsors' products.

Literature review, theoretical model and hypotheses

Team identification

In a conceptual formulation widely accepted by the scientific community (Trail *et al.*, 2003), team identification is defined as "...the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as fans of the team, are involved with the team, are concerned with the team's performance, and view the team as a representation of themselves." (Branscombe and Wann, 1992, p. 1,017). Cialdini *et al.* (1976) were the first to try to understand the relationship between fans and sports teams, a very interesting research topic up till nowadays (e.g. Gwinner *et al.*, 2009; Lings and Owen, 2007; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2016; Wann and Pierce, 2003). Thus, the concept of individuals' identification with sports teams, including the fit with sponsors, has received some attention during the past years (Cobbs *et al.*, 2016; Deitz *et al.*, 2012; Koronios *et al.*, 2016; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016). The social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) has been used to explain the fundamentals of fans' identification with sports teams, and according to the congruence theory (CT; Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955), it is likely that fans with higher levels of identity will desire harmony within their beliefs. Thus, these individuals will see congruence between sponsoring companies and their sports team. It would be unbalanced and incongruent to recognize the sponsors as a negatively valued element linked to sports teams, which are positively evaluated.

However, some results are inconsistent. Deitz *et al.* (2012) showed that the individuals' identification with the event did not have a positive effect on congruence; however, Gwinner and Bennett (2008) confirmed that high levels of identification resulted in high levels of perceived congruence. Following the evaluative consistency cue (Madrigal, 2001), it is expected that fans with greater levels of identification with the team will perceive a greater fit between sponsors and their favorite team. In this sense:

H1. Fans' identification with the sports team has a positive and direct effect on perceived congruence between sponsors and sports team.

The theory of attitude (TA; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) posits that attitudes are better understood based on the beliefs that gave rise to it. As a result, if fans perceive a fit between them and the team, they recognize and believe in its identity proprieties. Therefore, it is expected that this recognition and valuation could influence fans' attitude toward the sponsors. In this sense, research has shown that the identification with the sports team is an important predictor of fans' reaction regarding sports team sponsorships (Biscaia *et al.*, 2014; Madrigal, 2001; Walker and Kent, 2009). The results revealed its ability to influence positively fans' attitude regarding the sponsor company (Gwinner and Swason, 2003; Parker and Fink, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, if the fan highly identifies him/her with the team, he/she could develop a more favorable attitude toward the sponsoring company.

H2. Individuals' identification with the sports' team has a significant and positive effect on the attitude toward the sponsoring company.

On the other hand, individuals who highly identify themselves with the team are more likely to display a stronger purchase intention toward the sponsoring company products than those with weaker levels of identification (Dees *et al.*, 2008; Deitz *et al.*, 2012; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Koronios *et al.*, 2016; Lings and Owen, 2007; Madrigal, 2000, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2005). When companies support the sports team, the sponsoring brands might be perceived as paternalistic members of the group. In addition, these brands might even reinforce individual's feelings of belonging to the group, because a fundamental aspect of fans' identification is their motivation toward establishing and maintaining bounds with the group through their behaviors. Therefore:

- H3. Individual's identification with the sports team has a significant and direct effect on intentions to buy products from the sponsoring company.

Congruence between sponsors and sports team

The term congruence has been largely used in the sponsorship literature to refer the idea of parenting, resemblance, affinity, harmony or congruence between the sponsor and the sports team (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Deitz *et al.*, 2012; Fleck and Quester, 2007; Roy, 2010; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016). Congruence can be defined as the "...extent to which consumers perceive a logical connection between both parties to the relationship (i.e. sponsor and sponsored)" (Meenaghan, 2001, p. 105). It has been assumed that the evaluation of any given object is affected by the existence of congruence with the framework of references in human thoughts. This is true in such a way that extreme incongruence between two parties requires extensive cognitive elaboration that cannot be resolved, thus leading the individual to negative evaluations causing feelings of frustration (Jagre *et al.*, 2001).

In the sponsorship context, fans who perceive higher levels of congruence between the sponsor and the sports team tend to develop a more favorable attitude toward the sponsoring company and their products. Although most of research has shown positive effects between congruence and purchase intentions (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016; Dees *et al.*, 2010; Gwinner and Bennet, 2008; Han *et al.*, 2013; Olson and Thjomøe, 2011; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Roy, 2010; Wang, 2017; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016), including the sponsor supporting the rival team (Angell *et al.*, 2016), and falsely sponsored brands (Devlin and Billings, 2018); some studies report contradictory outcomes (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Mazodier; Merunka, 2012; Prendergast *et al.*, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2011). Due to the abundance of inconsistent results, we decided to follow the dominant ones, thus establishing the following hypothesis:

- H4. Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sports team has a positive and direct effect on the intention to buy sponsors' products.

Cornwell (2008) points out the need for understanding the role of congruence, namely, as a potential mediator (Johnston and Paulsen, 2011). Few studies have analyzed the mediator effect of congruence on the evaluation of the sponsor (Johnston and Paulsen, 2011). The effects of congruence as a mediator between teams' image and the sponsors, and between individuals' behavior to buy sponsors' products, has not been confirmed (Johnston and Paulsen, 2011). Nevertheless, Papadimitriou *et al.* (2016) stated that congruence indirectly influenced purchase intention through the attitude towards the sponsoring brand. To analyze the mediator role of perceived congruence, as defined by Baron and Kenny (1986), either between team identification and attitude toward the sponsoring company or between team identification and purchase intention, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- H5. Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sports team will mediate the relationship between the identification with the sports team and the attitude toward the sponsoring company.
- H6. Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sport team will mediate the relationship between the identification with the sports team and the purchase intention of products from the sponsoring company.

Attitude toward sponsor company and purchase intentions

Research has been evidencing that a fan's attitude toward sponsor influences their intention to purchase products from the sponsoring company (Barone *et al.*, 2000; Dees *et al.*, 2008; Gwinner, Bennet, 2008; Koo *et al.*, 2006; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016;

Zhang *et al.*, 2005). As attitude is a function of individuals' beliefs about an object (i.e. sponsored company) and behavioral intentions are strongly influenced by attitude, if fans evidence favorable attitudes toward the sponsoring companies, they will manifest stronger behavioral intentions to buy their products. In this sense, the following hypothesis was formulated:

- H7. Attitude toward the sponsoring company has a positive and direct effect on the purchase intention of sponsor's products.

Fans tend to look to sponsoring companies supporting their favorite teams as allies (Madrigal, 2000), developing favorable attitudes about them. This positive disposition may even expand through the development of purchase intention to the sponsor's product. Based on this assumption, it is expected that attitude toward the sponsoring company will play a mediation role between identification with sports team and the purchase intention of the sponsoring company's products: Therefore:

- H8. Attitude toward the sponsoring company will mediate the relationship between identification with the sports team and the purchase intention of sponsors' products.

Methodology

Sports teams

Fans from two of the three most supported football teams in Portugal were recruited: Sport Lisboa e Benfica (SLB) and Sporting Clube de Portugal (SCP). According to Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) (Sportmultimedia, 2014), SLB is the football team with the highest amount of registered fans, accounting for a total of 235,000 members, followed by Bayern Munchen FC, Futbol Club Barcelona and Manchester United. SCP is the third biggest Portuguese football in terms of fans, accounting for a total of 101,956 members (Media Capital Digital, 2013). The sponsors of these football teams are two of the most famous beer producers companies in Portugal. Their brands are exposed on the players' shirts and on the stadium's billboards.

Sample and procedures

The total sample was formed of individuals who identified themselves as fans of SLB or SCP. All participants declared living in Portugal, both genders were accepted and age varied between 16 and 75 years old. Convenience sampling method was used, and all participants were users of the digital sports newspaper "A Bola" (www.abola.pt) with more than 287 million views per week (A Bola, 2014). Data were collected through an online survey available at the "A Bola" homepage. A total of 4,913 individuals answered the questionnaire, but only 2,647 were accepted as valid. Measurement invariance was performed between two groups (G1 and G2), mutually exclusive and of equivalent size, randomly selected from the initial pool.

According to the sociodemographic characteristics of G1 ($n = 1,323$), 95.1 percent are men, 51.2 percent aged between 25 and 44 years ($M = 33.1$ years), 60.3 percent are married, 57.3 percent are employed workers and 25.3 percent students, 39 percent of participants have a bachelor degree or equivalent and 36 percent have completed high school. G2 ($n = 1,324$), 94.9 percent are men, 52.7 percent aged between 25 and 44 years ($M = 32.41$ years), 61.3 percent are married, 58.0 percent are employed workers and 24.8 percent students, 41.8 percent of participants have a bachelor degree or equivalent and 36.3 percent have completed high school.

Assumptions

SEM (Arbuckle, 2007) was performed according to the following assumptions: sample size (Hair *et al.*, 2009), asymmetry values for SEM are $|Sk| < 2-3$ and $|Ku| < 7-10$ (Finney and DiStefano, 2006) and absence of multicollinearity was verified through the variance inflation factor (VIF), for which values below 5 are considered as acceptable (O'Brien, 2007).

Measuring and scaling

Concepts and factors were measured through the items in Appendix 1. Questionnaires were translated from original language (i.e. English) to Portuguese and adapted to the context, following the methodological procedures of retroversion (Vallerand, 1989).

Data analysis

SEM (Arbuckle, 2007), using AMOS software (Analysis of Moment Structure, v20.0) and the maximum likelihood (ML) method was performed. Coefficients significance was analyzed according to Z test by applying AMOS (critical ratio and p -value). The significance of direct, indirect and total effects was obtained by a Bollen–Stine bootstrap of 2,000 samples. To analyze the mediation effects, procedures proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) were followed. Estimates $p \leq 0.05$ were considered significant. Two-step procedures (Anderson and Gerbin, 1988) to test the hypothetical relationships between variables in the model were adopted.

Reliability and validity assessment

Reliability coefficients were obtained, according to the following values: composite reliability (CR) of each factor was above 0.7 cut-off value (Hair *et al.*, 2009) and factor loadings ≥ 0.696 statistically significant, representing acceptable internal consistency (Hair *et al.*, 2009). Items used to measure all 11 constructs and factors displayed acceptable convergence validity, showing average variance extracted (AVE) values above 0.5, considered as adequate (Hair *et al.*, 2009) (Tables 1–6).

Constructs under analysis presented discriminant validity, verified by comparing AVE scores and the squared correlation of each construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and by the correlation between each construct (Anderson and Gerbin, 1988). Only Cognitive Affective Identification (ICA) and Personal Evaluative Identification (IAP) did not achieve discriminant validity, combining them into one factor called Cognitive Affective and Personal Evaluative Identification (ICAAP).

The results show that the model had acceptable fit, although the chi-square did not exhibit perfect fit: χ^2 (128) = 855.95, B-S, ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2/df = 6.92$). Following Byrne (2010) recommendations, seven indices were considered, showing good fit: PCFI = 0.806, CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.956 e RMSEA = 0.041, p (RMSEA ≤ 0.05) = 0.000; IC90% (0.039 - 0.042), GFI = 0.949, PGFI = 0.744 e SRMR = 0.035).

Results*Results of the structural model*

The global evaluation of the structural model was considered acceptable, as five of the seven selected indices indicated good values. In addition, the adjustment was very good, and only two indices indicated values considered unacceptable, as expressed by the following table:

The measurement invariance analysis showed acceptable fit between G1 and G2: the configural model showed invariance (Model 1); metric invariance (Model 2) between groups and taken into account chi-square differences test ($\Delta\chi^2$ (13) = 23.094, $p = 0.041$), displayed an existence of differences between groups; and structural model (Model 3) exhibited invariance

Table 1.
Measurement of
variables

Variable/items	Scale
<p><i>Team identification</i></p> <p>Cognitive/affective and personal evaluative dimension: I think of my favorite team as part of who I am. My favorite team's successes are my successes attributes that define fans of my favorite team apply to me also</p> <p>My favorite team has a lot to be proud of I am proud to be fan of my favorite team apply to me also</p> <p>My favorite team has a lot to be proud of. I am proud to be fan of my favorite team. My favorite team is worth supporting</p> <p>Other evaluative dimension</p> <p>Others have positive view of my favorite team</p> <p>Others respect my favorite team</p> <p>Most people consider my favorite team to be better than rival teams</p> <p><i>Perceived congruence</i></p> <p>There is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor [team name] and [company name] The sponsor [company name] and [team name] fit together well</p> <p>The company [company name/brand name] and the event [team name] stand for similar things</p> <p>It makes sense to me that this company [company name] sponsors this event [team name]</p> <p><i>Attitude</i></p> <p>Negative/positive</p> <p>Unsatisfactory/satisfactory</p> <p><i>Purchase intentions</i></p> <p>I would be more likely to buy [product-category] of [sponsor name] over its competitors. Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by company [sponsor name] that sponsor the [team name]. I am likely to buy more products and services from [sponsor name] sponsoring [team name]</p>	<p>Nine items: team identification scale (TIS), adapted from Dimmock and Grove (2006) scale varies from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</p> <p>Four items: adapted from speed and Thompson (2000) scale varies from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</p> <p>Two items: Adapted from Gwinner and Swason (2003) seven-point semantic differential scale. Respondents were asked: "Thinking about (sponsor), please evaluate the company by selecting the point on each scale that best represents your presents your attitude toward the company"</p> <p>Three items: Adapted from Biscaia et al. (2013) scale varies from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)</p>

($\Delta\chi^2(16) = 2.748, p = 0.840$). Differences in CFI (i.e. ΔCFI) showed invariance between all models, as proposed by [Cheung and Rensvold \(2002\)](#), considering as acceptable $\Delta\text{CFI} \leq 0.01$. Regarding the scores expressed by ΔCFI , measurement invariance was achieved between two groups of fans of two sports teams (i.e. SLB and SCP), as seen in the following table:

Hypothesis tests

Direct effects

Fans' identification with the sports team showed a positive and significant effect on perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored ($\beta = 0.86, p < 0.0010$), confirming [H1](#). In addition, fans' identification exerts a positive and significant prediction on attitude toward sponsor companies ($\beta = 0.74, p < 0.001$), as well as on purchase intention to sponsored products ($\beta = 0.49, p < 0.05$), supporting [H2](#) and [H3](#) ([Figure 1](#)).

Constructs/items	Mean	SD	B	CR	AVE
Team identification	6.41	0.81			
ICAAP-	6.25	0.93		0.881	0.554
ICA1 – I think of my favorite team [team name] as part of who I am	6.34	1.26	0.820**		
ICA2 – My favorite team’s [team name] successes are my successes	5.49	1.55	0.654**		
ICA3 – Attributes that define fans of my favorite team [team name] apply to me also	5.60	1.66	0.648**		
IAP1 – My favorite team [team name] has a lot to be proud of	6.57	0.97	0.784**		
IAP2 – I am proud to be fan of my favorite team [team name]	6.58	0.95	0.728**		
IAP3 – My favorite team [team name] is worth supporting	6.71	0.91	0.814**		
IAO – Other evaluative identification	5.02	0.97		0.777	0.538
IAO1 – Others have a positive view of my favorite team [team name]	5.56	1.41	0.770**		
IAO2 – Others respect my favorite team [team name]	5.42	1.60	0.733**		
IAO3 – Most people consider my favorite team [team name] to be better than rival teams	5.23	1.78	0.696**		
C – Congruence between sponsor and team	4.01	1.47		0.885	0.659
C1 – There is logical connection between the event and sponsor [team name] and [company/brand name]	3.99	1.90	0.811**		
C2 – The sponsor [company/brand name] and the team [team name] fit together well	4.42	1.81	0.900**		
C3 – The company [company/brand name] and the event [team name] stand for similar things	3.13	1.90	0.715**		
C4 – It makes sense to meet that this company [company/brand name] sponsors this event [team name]	4.40	1.85	0.811**		
A – Attitude toward sponsor company	4.94	1.31		0.922	0.855
A1 – Negative/positive	5.09	1.47	0.931**		
A2 – Unsatisfactory/satisfactory	5.05	1.48	0.918**		
IC – purchase intention to the sponsor’s products	3.87	2.05		0.909	0.771
IC1 – I would be more likely to buy of [company/brand name] over its competitors	4.20	2.40	0.880**		
IC2 – Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by [company/brand name] that sponsor the team [team name]	3.84	2.34	0.960**		
IC3 – I am likely to buy more products from [company/brand name] sponsoring [team name]	3.73	2.40	0.786**		

Table 2.
Descriptive statistics, standardized factor loadings, CR coefficients and AVE for the measurement model

Note(s): $n = 1,323$; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; β = standardized factor loadings; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; ** $p < 0.001$; $p \leq 0.05$, Composite Reliability (CR) assessed using the reliability coefficients. In terms of reference value, for exploratory investigations an appropriate value was considered: $CR > \text{or} = 0.70$, with $p \leq 0.05$ (Hair *et al.*, 2009, p. 612)

Contrarily to what was expected, the direct effect of perceived congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored on purchase intention was not significant ($p = 0.11$), rejecting [H4](#). The effect of attitude toward the sponsoring company on intention to buy their products was likewise not significant ($p = 0.09$), refusing [H7](#). In sum, the results show that the model explained 73 percent of variance to perceived congruence between sponsor and sponsored, 55 percent to attitude toward sponsor company and 44 percent to purchase intention on sponsor’s products.

Indirect effects

Perceived congruence displayed a mediation effect, according to [Baron and Kenny \(1986\)](#) expressed by the significant indirect effects ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$), between team identification and attitude toward sponsor company, confirming [H5](#). Consequently, the indirect effects of identification with the sports team on attitude toward the sponsoring company explained

Table 3.Correlation matrix
between constructs,
AVE and correlation
among the factors
squared

		ICAAP	IAO	C	A	IC
ICAAP	Φ	0.742**				
	φ^2	0.551				
IAO	Φ	0.523**	0.734**			
	φ^2	0.273	0.539			
C	Φ	0.324**	0.354**	0.812**		
	φ^2	0.104	0.125	0.659		
A	Φ	0.252**	0.303**	0.651**	0.925**	
	φ^2	0.063	0.092	0.424	0.856	
IC	Φ	0.294**	0.263**	0.607	0.512	0.878**
	φ^2	0.069	0.069	0.368	0.262	0.771

Note(s): Φ = correlation between constructs; φ^2 = correlation among squared factors. ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$; ICAAP = cognitive/affective and personal evaluative identification; C – congruence between sponsor and team; A = attitude toward sponsor company; IC = purchase intention to sponsor's product

Table 4.Fit indices of the
structural model

χ^2	χ^2/df	CFI	PCFI	RMSEA	IC	90%	GFI	PGFI	TLI	SRMR
(1,288) 885.957	6.922	0.950	0.795	0.067	0.063	−0.71	0.926	0.693	0.940	0.075

Table 5.Results of multigroup
analysis of the
structural model

	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	p	CFI	ΔCFI	TLI	RMSEA
Model 1: configurational invariance	1755.69*	256	–	–		0.949		0.942	0.046
Model 2: metric invariance	1778.78*	269	23.09	13	0.041	0.949	0.000	0.945	0.045
Model 3: structural invariance	1781.53*	275	2.74	6	0.840	0.949	0.000	0.947	0.044

Note(s): * $p < 0.000$; $\Delta\chi^2$ = difference in chi-square; Δdf = difference in degrees of freedom; ΔCFI = difference in CFI

77 percent of total effects. H6 was likewise confirmed by the mediation role of congruence between sport team identification and purchase intention of sponsored products ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), showing 65 percent of the total effects. Attitude toward the sponsoring company expressed mediation by the significant indirect effects ($\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$) between team identification and intention to buy sponsors' products. Therefore, H8 was confirmed, as seen in the following table:

Discussion of the results

Team identification, congruence between sponsor and sponsored team and attitude toward sponsors.

Research has shown that team identification is an important predictor of several fans' reactions toward companies sponsoring their sports team (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Madrigal, 2001; Walker and Kent, 2009). This study exhibited that fans' identification with their team acts positively and significantly on congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored and on attitude development regarding the sponsoring company. This result may be explained based on the SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals tend to have congruent perceptions with the salient aspects of their own identities. Therefore, they may also consider congruent the institutions that embody these identities, such as companies sponsoring sports team which fans feel connected to.

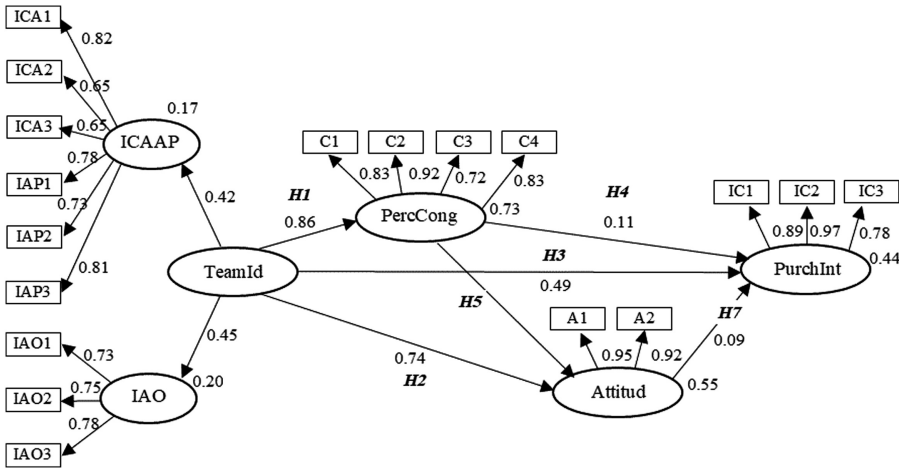
Table 6.
Path estimates for the
direct, indirect and
total effects

H	Path estimate	Confirmation	β	Z
H1	Identification → Congruence	YES	0.86**	11.246
H2	Identification → Attitude	YES	0.74**	11.818
H3	Identification → Purchase intention	YES	0.49*	2.366
H4	Congruence → Purchase intention	NO	0.11 ^{ns}	0.788
H7	Attitude → Purchase intention	NO	0.09 ^{ns}	1.276

Effect – response	Mediation role	Direct	B		Total	% of indirect effect
			Indirect	Total		
H5	Attitude toward sponsor company Team identification mediated by perceived congruence	YES	0.09*	0.29**	0.37**	77
H6	Intention to buy sponsored products Team identification mediated by perceived congruence	YES	0.14*	0.25**	0.39**	65

Note(s): ns = none significant; H5 and H6 = indirect effects according to Baron and Kenny (1986); * $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.05$

Figure 1.
Standardized
coefficients of the
structural model



The results corroborate past literature, concerning positive and significant effects on attitude toward sponsor (Lacey and Close, 2013; Parker and Fink, 2010; Zhang *et al.*, 2005). However, in one of the studied countries, Wang *et al.* (2011) did not confirm the existence of significant effects. These differences may rely on cultural differences (Wang *et al.*, 2011). The effects of congruence confirm results by Gwinner and Bennett (2008), yet diverging from Deitz *et al.* (2012), whose outcomes did not show any significant effects, probably because of the additional cognitive effort that fans, who highly identify themselves with the team, need to perform to evaluate the connections between the sponsor and the sponsored (Jagre *et al.*, 2001).

Team identification and purchase intention of sponsor's products

The results demonstrate that fans' identification with sport team had a positive and direct effect on intention to purchase sponsored products. This evidence seems to find its conceptual element on the behavioral involvement that structures the definition adopted by social identity. The behavioral involvement can be translated into actions such as buying products, using and exhibiting clothing allusive to the team, showing team symbols or saving time and resources to organizations that safeguard and promote the identity of their sports team (Heere and James, 2007). According to the SIT, highly involved fans tend to act to reinforce their bounds with the other group members. These passionate consumers may be convinced that their support for the sponsors makes them "greater" supporters of their favorite team, thus developing greater purchase behaviors. The results support past studies (Dees *et al.*, 2008; Deitz *et al.*, 2012; Devlin and Billings, 2018; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Koronios *et al.*, 2016; Lings and Owen, 2007; Madrigal, 2000, 2001; Wang, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2005), which have recognized that fans with strong identification with their sports team are more likely to consider buying products from sponsors than those with weaker identification.

Perceived congruence, attitude toward sponsor and purchase intention

Congruence is a positive factor, facilitating the knowledge on the association that emerges from the sponsored activity and the sponsored (Fleck and Quester, 2007). The direct effect of perceived congruence between sponsor and sponsored on purchase intention was not significant. This means that the action of perceived congruence by itself is not relevant. Fans' perception of congruence between the sponsor and the sponsored team does not foster the purchase of sponsor's products.

Our results contribute to the debate on the controversial role played by congruence, as it has been highlighted by several studies (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Cornwell, 2008). There is still a lack of understanding about the role of congruence, and these results converge with other studies (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Prendergast *et al.*, 2010), who verified that congruence did not generate a higher level of purchase intention. Thus, the displayed outcomes are divergent from other studies (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016; Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Dees *et al.*, 2010; Devlin and Billings, 2018; Gwinner and Bennet, 2008; Han *et al.*, 2013; Koo *et al.*, 2006; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; Rifon *et al.*, 2004; Speed and Thompson, 2000; Roy, 2010; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016), which confirmed the existence of direct effects of congruence on buying intention.

Indirect effects

Mediation of perceived congruence and attitude toward sponsor

As far as it concerns the present study, congruence had a mediation effect between team identification and purchase intention, explaining 65 percent of the total effect. A mediation role was also found on congruence between team identification and attitude toward sponsor, whose indirect effects matched 77 percent of total effects. In other words, what seems unparalleled is that the total effects of fans' responses to sponsorship have been significantly extended when perceived congruence acted as a mediator. Several studies found similar results (Dardis, 2009; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2016), showing that congruence indirectly influences purchase intention. Contrarily, Johnston and Paulsen (2011) did not confirm this mediation effect. Thus, the present study fills a critical gap in sponsorship literature by demonstrating the relevance of congruence's indirect effect, showing that as perceived congruence increases, so does the relationship between team identification and purchase intention.

Theoretical implications

The results introduce a set of particular theoretical implications that should be highlighted. Firstly, the relevant contribution regarding the lack of knowledge about the role of congruence as a powerful mediator and in sponsors response, as identified by several authors (Alonso Dos Santos and Calabuig, 2018; Cornwell, 2008). Specifically, on developing favorable attitude toward sponsoring company and in increasing intention to purchase (Olson and Thjørmøe, 2011; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016). Secondly, in the context of professional football teams, the results sustain the idea that fans' identification with the sports team consists the cognitive and affective basis (Dimmock and Grove, 2006), supporting the functioning of other sponsorship variables (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013). Thirdly, team identification had a strong effect explaining 73% of variance on perceived congruence. This evidence is in line with the assumptions of the CT, making it possible to highlight the importance of perceived congruence as a key construct to be considered in further studies on the effectiveness of sponsorship (Fleck and Quester, 2007). Lastly, the overall model designed for this study englobes key concepts (team identification, perceived congruence, attitude toward the sponsor and purchase intention toward sponsor's product) that explained 44 percent of the variance of purchase intention as a terminal effect of the sponsor.

Managerial implications

These results have implications for professional football team managers and for brands or products managers from the sponsoring companies. Sport team managers should develop activities to increase the level of fans' identification with the team. The results indicated that supporters with a higher level of identification are more likely to buy products from the sponsoring company. On the other hand, fans with higher level of identification form a more favorable attitude toward the sponsoring company. Thus, fans' relationship programs should provide a social context that fosters the relevance of social identification with their favorite team (Crompton, 2015; Fransen *et al.*, 2013), hence increasing the likelihood of group norms and behaviors being reinforced.

The results suggest sponsoring brands' managers to implement sponsorship strategies aiming at increasing the level of perceived congruence between the sponsoring company and the sponsored team. Activation initiatives must be implemented with harmony and authenticity to promote a greater perceived congruence, and ultimately, a more favorable attitudinal response.

Limitations

There are several limitations that could explain the results obtained. The brands used as stimuli in this research are real brands with a high reputation and familiarity among consumers. According to Roy (2010), this might lead individuals to react to the measurement scale solely based on brand's information they already had and less based on the stimuli presented in the questionnaire. Secondly, this research only used one product category (beer – drinks); thus, caution is required when trying to generalize the results. Thirdly, a convenience sample withdrawn from a range of fans identified with the sports team was used.

Future research

The results showed no significant role of attitude toward purchase intention on sponsored products. It has been highlighted that when sponsorship is seen as over-marketed, viewers may form a negative attitude toward the sponsorship (Mikhailitchenko *et al.*, 2012). It is, therefore, considered appropriate to explore and deepen these issues in forthcoming studies. The sponsorship context, including competition levels, such as professional leagues and/or amateur championships are interesting settings for further the application of this study.

Conclusion

In an effort to influence spectators' attitudes about themselves and their products' sales, companies have been sponsoring sports teams, hoping that the passion fans feel for their teams will eventually spread to the company itself and their products. The sponsorship commitment may rely in the company's opportunity to share with the sports team "the heart" of the consumer. Fans' identification is the emotional basis for sponsoring companies to influence beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviors of those considered to be their clients' database.

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Appendix 1

Variable/definition	Items	Scale
Team identification Definition "...the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as fans of the team, are involved with the team, are concerned with the team's performance, and view the team as a representation of themselves" (Branscombe and Wann, 1992, p. 1,017) Three dimensions Cognitive/affective Degree of self-categorization and emotional involvement with team Personal evaluative Personal value connotation attached to support for team Other evaluative Subjective impression of the value connotation that others have regarding support for team. (Dimmock <i>et al.</i> , 2005, p. 75)	Dimensions Cognitive/affective and personal evaluative I think of my favorite team as part of who I am My favorite team's successes are my successes Attributes that define fans of my favorite team apply to me also My favorite team has a lot to be proud of I am proud to be a fan of my favorite team My favorite team is worth supporting Other evaluative Others have a positive view of my favorite team Others respect my favorite team Most people consider my favorite team to be better than rival teams	Nine items: TIS, adapted from Dimmock and Grove (2006) Responses to the scale were made on a continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)
Congruence between the sponsor and the sport team Definition: "...perceptions of congruence is the extent to which consumers perceive a logical connection between both parties to the relationship (i.e., sponsor and sponsored activity)" (Meenaghan, 2001, p. 105).	There is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor [team name] and [company name] The sponsor [company name] and the team [team name] fit together well The company [company/brand name] and the event [team name] stand for similar things It makes sense to me that this company [company name] sponsors this event [team name]	Four items: Adapted from Speed and Thompson (2000) Responses to the scale were made on a continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)
Attitude toward sponsor company Definition "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 1)	Negative/positive Unsatisfactory/satisfactory	Two items: Adapted from Gwinner and Swason (2003) Responses to semantic differential scale, with seven-point scales. Respondents were asked the following: "Thinking about (company name), please evaluate this company by selecting the point on each scale that best represents your attitude to the company"

(continued)

Table A1.
Measurement of
variables

Table A1.

Variable/definition	Items	Scale
Purchase intentions Definition: "... expectation or probability of an individual to behave in a specific way in relation to the acquisition... use of a product" (Mowen and Minor, 2003, p. 143)	I would be more likely to buy [product-category] of [sponsor name] over its competitors Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by company [sponsor name] that sponsor the [team name] I am likely to buy more products and services from [sponsor name] sponsoring [team name]	Three items: Adapted from Biscaia <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Madrigal, 2001 Responses to the scale were made on a continuum from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)

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