Impact of Attitudinal Constructs on Sport Team's Country Image and Intention to Travel

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Abstract

A positive team image not only constitutes a key asset for businesses but may also play key role in enhancing the fans' perceptions of the team's country image and their intention to travel to such countries. The present paper aims at measuring the impact of global fans' attitudinal constructs such as team attachment, team achievement and team involvement on the team's country image and their intention to travel to this country through the indirect impact of the sponsor's image. Data collected through an online survey from 710 participants showed that team country image is mainly determined by team achievement and that there is a positive relationship between the sponsor's image and team country image. Interestingly, the findings also showed that team achievement impacts team country image through the indirect impact of the sponsor image. The implication of this research is that having positive feelings about the team's country image would psychologically raise global fans' positive feelings about the image of this team's country which would, in turn, evoke the fans' interest to travel to this team's country.

Introduction

Sport sponsorship is an important form of sponsorship which involves sport teams, leagues, competitions sponsorship… etc. Businesses often use sport reference sponsorship in their quest of improving their image amongst fans and sport followers. For this reason, Sport sponsorship has become the centre of attention of both businesses and policy makers at the country level (Walraven, 2013).

There are some attitudinal constructs that have been largely addressed in previous research as predictors of the sponsor's image such as sport involvement, team attachment, and team achievement (Kim, Kang, & Kim, 2014; Koronios, Psiloutsikou, Kriemadis, Zervoulakos, & Leivaditi, 2016; Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). In this research, the focus is on the impact of the two dimensions of sport involvement (centrality and attraction) in addition to team attachment and team achievement on the sponsor's image. Previous studies have addressed the effect of sport sponsorship on the fans' perceived country image. This was done through studying the relationship between the sport event and its sponsors and their impact on

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the image of the country organizing the event (Lim, Iglesias, Nadeau, O'Reilly, & Heslop, 2015; Nadeau, O'Reilly, & Heslop, 2013), in addition to how this is reflected on the fans' intention to visit this country again as tourists (Nadeau, Heslop, O'Reilly, & Luk, 2008). Due to the gap of not studying the impact of the most popular teams that have fans all over the world and their sponsors on the country image that these teams belong to and their impact on the fans' intentions to travel to these countries, the present research aims at measuring the impact of attitudinal constructs such as team attachment, team achievement and team involvement (both centrality and attraction) on the sponsor's image. Furthermore, it aims at measuring the impact of the sponsor's image on the team's country image, and in turn, the impact of that team's country image on the fans' intention to travel to that country.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis Development

Determinants of Sponsor Image

It is important to study fans' attitudes towards the team itself and their intention to travel to the country of their team's sponsor with the aim of investigating whether there is any positive impacts for sport sponsorship on sponsoring (Pope, 1998). Sponsor image is also one of the sponsorship outcomes that may be predicted by some attitudinal constructs such as sport involvement, attitude towards the event and beliefs about sponsorship (Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007; Christensen, 2006; Lings & Owen, 2007; & Tsiotsou and Lalountas, 2005)

which play an important role in the formation of sponsor image. Havitz and Dimanche (1997) have described sport involvement as the individual's motivation about a particular sport or activity. For sport sponsorship, involvement should refer to the degree the sport fan is exposed to the sponsorship, which means the more the fan is involved in sport, the more they would know about its sponsors and recall their links (Walraven, Koning, & van Bottenthe, 2012). Unlike our research, previous studies examined the influence of product involvement and fan identification on the response to the sponsor's products in relation to awareness, attitudes, and purchase intention. They found that sponsors producing high-involvement products had more favourable attitudes between highly identified fans (Lee, 2005). Kyle, Graefe, Manning, and Bacon, (2004) have declared that sport involvement has two main dimensions: the first is related to the importance of the activity for the sports fans and the interest and pleasure they get from it; this is called 'sport attraction', while the other dimension refers to the position of this activity in the individual's life, and this is referred to as 'involvement centrality. Involvement is treated in this research as a multidimensional construct. Although Kornois and his colleagues (2016) reported a negative relation between a sponsor's image and sport involvement, Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009), reported a positive relation between team involvement attraction and sponsor's image, but a negative one for the involvement centrality.

Biscaia and his colleagues (2013) have found a positive relation between sport involvement and the fan's degree of interest in a particular sport, which affects the attitude towards the sponsor positively. Lee, Scott, and Kim (2008) have studied the effect of fans' involvement with a celebrity on fans' familiarity and intention to travel to the celebrity's country in which a celebrity involvement was found to positively affect visitation intentions. Similarly, Olson (2010) have found that fans who are highly involved in sport react more positively with the sponsor than those who are less involved. Therefore, based on such evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Team involvement with its two dimensions: attraction (H1a) and centrality (H1b) hold a positive influence on the sponsor's image.

Some previous research concentrated on the idea of teams' vicarious achievement and its great impact on the behaviours of fans (Robinson & Trail, 2005) and they found that the success of the fans' team gives them a sense of personal achievement and increases their self-esteem as well (Mohamed, 2016). Previous studies also found that teams with previous achievements and successful track records attract lots of fans (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). Team achievement refers to the impact of the team's usual performance whether high or low on the team fans' recalling of the sponsor. That's to say, fans tend to recall more the sponsor of the winning teams as positive feelings are evoked in them rather than those of the losing teams (Wakefield& Bennett,

2010). Fisher and Wakefield (1998), declared that team high performance is an important factor for the fans' recognition of the team which makes them more attached to that team. Very few researches shed the light on the impact of the sport team's achievement on the team's sponsor image (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Therefore, we aim to find out whether the team's previous successful history would give the team a positive image about its sponsor or not and whether that would lead the fans to buy the products that carry the name of that sponsor or not. Based on these previous findings, we anticipate the following hypothesis:

H2a. Team achievement hold a positive influence on sponsor image.

The term of 'team attachment' has been used by Funk and his colleagues (2000) to refer to the psychological relation or connection between the fans and a specific sport team. Some previous studies have studied attachment from other points of views other than teams such as impact of being attached to a player or to a sport on attending games (Murrell & Dietz, 1992; Schurr, Wittig, Ruble, & Ellen, 1988). Most of these previous studies focused on how the fans' attachment to a team, sport, player affects games attending. According to Funk and colleagues, most of the fans who attended the Women's World Cup were interested to watch the soccer itself more than their interest in a particular team while others' interest in a particular player was behind the reason for attending the game (Funk et al., 2000). Therefore, one of the aims of our study is to examine the effect of

team attachment on the team's sponsor image. Unlike our research, Filo, Funk, and O'Brien (2008) studied the impact of event attachment on sponsor's image. They found that charity motives contribute to event attachment while charity motives and event attachment contribute to sponsor's image. It was also found that team attachment has an impact on consumers' behaviours as consumers with high level of team attachment were found to attend more to home games that those with low level of team attachment (Wann& Branscombe, 1993). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2b. Team attachment has a positive impact on sponsor's image.

The Consequences of Sponsor Image

Country image refers to the image of the team's country and how it is affected by the image of the sponsor. Kotler, Haider, & Rein, (1993) define an image of a place as "the sum of all those emotional, and aesthetic qualities such as experience, beliefs, ideas, recollections and impressions, that a person has of a place" (p. 141). This definition makes it evident that the individual forms an image based on his own frame of reference. We aim to assess the effect of image of the team's sponsor on the image of the team's country given that this link has been largely overlooked in the current literature. The only study that measured the relationship between the two previously mentioned factors was that by Nebenzahl and Jaffe (1991) in which the impact of sponsoring international events on country image was measured through interviews with Israeli adults attending 1988 Olympic

Games in South Korea, to measure their attitudes towards electronic goods made in Korea. Their study proved a positive relation between sponsorship and country image in relation to product evaluation. Similarly, Hui and Zhou (2003) have found that the image of a famous brand of a particular product produced in a well- known country would be more positively affected than the image of the same product if it were produced in a less well- known country. Alternatively, many previous researchers have found a strong effect of country image on brand image (i.e., Hsieh et al., 2004; Hsieh and Lindridge, 2005; Koubaa, 2008; Stennkamp et al., 2003). Therefore, in line with all these previous findings, we anticipate that:

H3. There is a positive relationship between sponsor's image and country's image

Furthermore, in relation to the impact of the team's country image on fans' intention to travel, it is well documented in the literature that countries with positive and strong images are more likely to be taken in consideration as a destination of travel (Leisen, 2001). Team country's image used here includes both the cognitive and the affective elements; that's the fans' own knowledge about the team's country and their emotions and feelings towards it (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Previous research has tested the impact of team's country image (cognitive and affective) on the intention to travel indirectly; that is that the impact of the affective country image on the attitude toward the country was measured first and then

the impact of the attitude toward the country on the intention to travel to that country was measured second. It was found that attitude towards the team's country has a positive impact on intention to visit the country (Kim& Kwon, 2018). In line with these previous findings, also Lindblom et al., (2018) found an indirect relation between the team's country image and intention to travel as they found that cognitive and affective country images are positively related to the destination beliefs, and the destination beliefs, in their turn, are positively related to intention to travel. Similarly, Ponnapureddy et al., (2018) have found that team country image mediates international tourists' intention to travel through psychological destination image, functional destination image, and attitude towards the destination in a quantitative study conducted in Russia on tourists going there on a vacation. Therefore, the last hypothesis of this study is anticipated as follows:

H4. Perceived country image has a positive influence on fans' intention to travel Lastly, a potential mediation effect may take place between the determinants of sponsor image and team's country image, through the impact of sponsor image. Similarly, a mediation may be existing between sponsor image and travel intention via the intervening influence of country image. In relation to the indirect effect of the determinants of sponsor image on the country image through sponsor image, McGehee and his colleagues (2003) found that individuals with high levels of enduring involvement with running have an increased frequency of travel to running events, and spending on goods and services related to the running sport. Therefore, a significant impact of the two dimensions of sport involvement: attraction and centrality is expected on the country image through the mediation of the sponsor image. Additionally, we anticipate a significant impact of team achievement on country image through the indirect impact of sponsor image as the achievements of the team would improve the image of the country only when the sponsor's image is enhanced. Another significant impact of sponsor's image on the intention to travel through the indirect influence of the country image is expected given that an enhanced image is necessary for the sponsor image to encourage individuals to visit the country.

Methods

To conduct this study a multi-country sample was used. A total of 1210 participants took part in the study of which only 710 respondents were included in the sample. The other 500 were excluded either because they didn't complete the questionnaire to the end (386 participants) or the participants were permanently living in the same country of their favourite team (114 participants). The participating respondents were residing in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Germany, UK, France, Pakistan, Algeria, Lebanon, Canada, USA, Sudan, Palestine, Yemen, Sweden, Qatar, South Korea, Jordan, Australia, Turkey, Romania, Morocco, Oman, Bahrain, Malaysia, and Italy. In terms of nationalities, these were

Egyptians, Saudis, Emiratis, Iraqis, Germans, British, Pakistanis, Algerians, Lebanese, Canadians, Americans, Sudanese, Tunisians, Palestinians, Yemenis, Swedish, Jordanians, Australians, Moroccans, and Syrians.

The data collection was carried out online. The e-questionnaire was posted on a YouTube channel owned by one of the researchers involved in the study (name hidden for the anonymous review). The Youtube channel regularly broadcasts videos reviewing football matches. The channel has currently 90,848 subscribers and totalling 12 million watches thus far. Thirty of the most popular football teams in total were selected, given that they were the most viewed with high percentages on social media, out of which 12 were excluded as they were not selected by any of the participants. The teams selected were Liverpool, Real Madrid, Barcelona, Manchester City, Roma, Paris San German, Atletico Madrid, A.C.Milan, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, Arsenal, Chelsea, Galatasary, Basel, Borussi Dortmund, Tottenham, Juventus, and Inter Milan. The sponsors used for the selected teams for the season 2018/2019 are Standard Chartered, Fly Emirates, Rakuten, Etihad Airways, Qatar Airways, Fly Emirates, Trade Plus500, Fly Emirates, Deutsch Telekom (T-Home), Chevrolet, Fly Emirates, Yokohama Tyres, Turkish Airlines, Novartis& Adidas, Evonik, AIA, Jeep, and PIRELLI respectively. The sampling approach adopted here was therefore non-probability convenient based.

Despite its limitations, this approach is increasingly being used in fan-based studies (Denscome, 2014). Regarding the measures, all latent variables involved in this study were measured using scales adapted from previous studies. Impact of Involvement attraction, centrality, attachment, and sponsor image was captured using Tsiotsou and Alexandris' items (2009). Country image was assessed using items from Martin and Eroglu (1993). On the other hand, intention to travel was measured by using items from Gibson,Qi, and Zhang (2008).

The data collection was prone to common method bias. For this reason, a post-hoc test was applied here to ensure no major impact of common method bias. Here, the Harman's single factor test was used (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The latter shows that the single factor accounted for less than 50% of the total variance, which suggests no major sign of common method bias.

Lastly, the study controlled for respondents' age, gender and previous visit to the country as these were found to affect visit intention.

Analysis

A two-step analysis is conducted here, starting with the measurement model and followed by the structural model. Measurement model assessment is about the relationship between the latent constructs and their indicators (Henseler et al., 2009). As for the structural model, it refers to the links between the latent constructs included in the study (Jarvis et al., 2003).

Measurement Model

In measurement model, researchers typically assess the validity and reliability of the constructs involved in the study. Two aspects of validity are discussed here, namely convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity is assessed through the average variance extracted (AVE), whereas the discriminant validity is examined using square roots of AVE. Establishing convergent validity requires the AVE scores to be higher than the 0.5 threshold (Henseler et al., 2009), while for discriminant validity to be accepted, the square root of each construct's AVE need to be greater than the correlations with the remaining constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Regarding constructs' reliability, this was assessed through composite reliability scores (CR) and Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which should both exceed the 0.7 cutoff value (Schmiedel et al., 2014). Lastly, collinearity issues were also checked using the variance inflation factor (VIF). Here, all VIFs did not exceed the 5 threshold value, confirming no major issues of multicollinearity, but also no serious issues of common method bias (Kock and Lynn, 2012). Tables 1 and 2 below show satisfactory values for all the aforementioned quality indicator, hence confirming a reliable and valid measurement model.

Tables (1)
Cronbach's Alpha, AVE and VIF values

	α	CR	AVE	VIF
Country Image	0.952	0.958	0.588	1.01
Inv. Attraction	0.848	0.929	0.868	2.34
Inv. Centrality	0.637	0.797	0.574	2.16
Sponsor Image	0.9	0.937	0.833	1
Team Achievement	0.598	0.829	0.708	1.27
Team Attachment	0.718	0.876	0.78	1.54
Travel Intention	0.869	0.918	0.789	/

Table (2)
**Square root of AVE**

	Age	Country Image	Gender	Inv Attraction	Inv Centrality	Prev Visit	Sponsor Image	Team Achievment	Team Attachement	Travel Intention
Age	1									
Country Image	0.052	0.767								
Gender	-0.082	-0.028	1							
Inv Attraction	-0.067	0.247	-0.053	0.932						
Inv Centrality	-0.059	0.243	-0.112	0.725	0.757					
Prev Visit	0.001	-0.068	0.046	0.039	0.032	1				
Sponsor Image	0.031	0.34	0.059	0.321	0.312	-0.073	0.913			
Team Achievment	0.008	0.275	0.056	0.344	0.324	0.036	0.388	0.842		
Team Attachement	0.022	0.244	0.038	0.521	0.458	-0.018	0.293	0.438	0.883	
Travel Intention	-0.01	0.372	-0.026	0.159	0.186	-0.182	0.245	0.136	0.178	0.888

Structural Model

Following the evaluation of the measurement model, the next step is to assess the relationships hypothesized in the conceptual framework proposed in this study. Figure 2 presents the path

coefficient, the significance level and the coefficient of determination (R2) for the structural model.
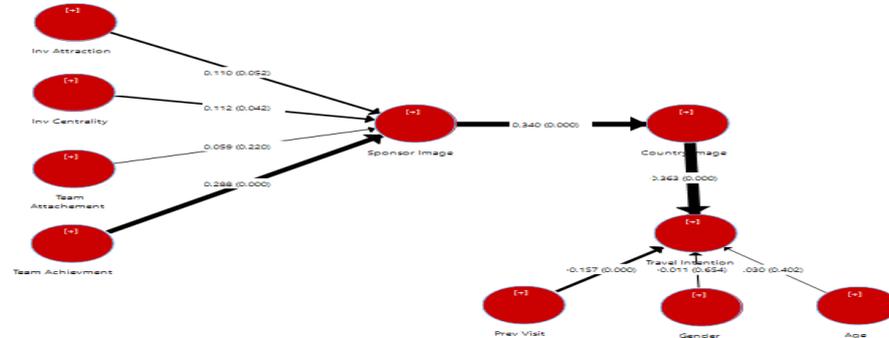
Figure 1. Structural model

In relation to the determinants of sponsor image, only team achievement (β=0.28, P ≤ 0.01) and involvement centrality (β=0.11, P = 0.04) exhibited significant influences, yet with involvement centrality showing a very weak effect. Hence, H1b and H2b are accepted, while H1a and H2a are both rejected. As for the influence of sponsor image on country image, figure 2 shows a significant and positive effect (β=0.34, P ≤ 0.01). Similarly, country image does in turn have a positive and significant influence on intention to travel (β=0.36, P ≤ 0.01). Hence, H3 and H4 are both accepted. With an R^2 of 0.16 for travel intention, 0.11 for country image and 0.19 for sponsor image, it can be claimed that 19% of sponsor image is explained by the four determinants involved, whereas 11% and 16% of country image and intention to travel respectively are explained in this model.

Mediation Analysis

In this study, a potential mediation effect may take place between the determinants of sponsor image and country image, through the impact of sponsor image. Similarly, a mediation may be existing between sponsor image and travel intention via the intervening influence of country image. To confirm this, a mediation test is applied following the guidelines of Hair et al (2012). Table 3 indicates the results.

Table (3)
Mediation Test

Paths	Direct	Indirect	Outcome
Inv.Attraction→Country image	β= 0.04	β= 0.02	No Mediation
Inv Centrality → Country image	β= 0.06	β= 0.02	No Mediation
Team Attachment → Country image	β= 0.11*	β= 0.02	No Mediation
Team Achievement → Country image	β= 0.07	β= 0.07***	Full Mediation
Sponsor image → Travel intention	β= .34***	β= 0.10***	Partial Mediation

*Significant at 5% **Significant at 1%   ***Significant at 0.01%

As per table 3, the mediation test shows that a partial mediation exists between team achievement and country image through sponsor image. Here, the direct effect between team achievement on country image is 0.11*, while its indirect influence is 0.09*. Turning to the mediation between sponsor image and travel intention, the results reveal a partial mediation through country image (β=0.12**). This means that an enhanced image is not a condition for sponsor image to encourage individuals' to visit the country, but would play a role in enhancing the latter. The same applies to sponsor image in the link between team achievement and country image.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has tackled an increasingly important marketing approach, namely sport sponsorship. More importantly, the study examined the link between sponsoring and fans' attitudes towards the team's country. The results are next discussed.

The determinants of sponsor's image:

The current findings show that sponsor's image is mainly determined by team achievement with involvement centrality having a trivial influence. This is in line with existing evidence positing the important role of team achievement when it comes to the drivers of sponsors' image. In this regard, it was argued that brand/company recall is better enhanced when the sponsored teams achieve good performance (Fisher and Wakefield, 1998; Wakefield and Bennett, 2010). This is probably due to the fact that positive experiences would evoke positive thoughts about actors involved in this experience. According to Boen, Vanbeselaere, & Feys, 2002, fans' association with winning teams affects their self-image positively. This positive feeling would evoke the fans to recognize the sponsors of those winning sport teams (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010). Regarding the positive (although weak) influence of involvement centrality, this is again in line with extant literature arguing that sport involvement would typically lead to positive attitudes and reactions toward the sponsor (Biscaia and his colleagues., 2013; Olson, 2010). Contrastingly, the non-significant influence of both team attachment and involvement attraction is against previous findings. Indeed, studies by Gwinner& Swanson (2003) and Tsiotsou and Alexandris (2009) reported a strong link between attachment to the team and the sponsor's image. This is probably due to the fact that the participants in this study came from different backgrounds which might evoke the probability that they differ in the method of involvement and attachment to their teams from each other which led to a different impact on the sponsor's image as well.

The influence of sponsor's image on country image and visit intention

The current results unveiled a positive relationship between the sponsor's image and team's country image. Interestingly, the findings also showed that team achievement impacts its country image through sponsor's

image. This means that when the sponsored team achieves good results, not only the sponsor's image is enhanced, but also the team's country image is improved. In turn, the sponsor image was found to also indirectly affect visit intention through country image. Here it could be argued that having positive feelings about the team's sponsor would psychologically raise positive feelings about the image of this team's country which would, in turn, evoke the fans' interest to visit this team's country. Similarly, country image was also found to hold a positive direct influence on visit intention, in line with previous evidence (Kim& Kwon, 2018; Lindblom et al., 2018; Ponnapureddy et al., 2018).

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The majority of the participants came from Arabic background due to the nature of the YouTube channel that broadcasts sport news related to professional Arabic football players playing in European leagues. We acknowledge that a higher number of participants from foreign countries would enhance generalisation. Having said this, the fact that the majority of the participants from Arabic countries can be an advantage for the research since this prevents bias to any of the teams' sponsors. Additionally, this helps sponsors and investors promote their brands in the whole global market particularly in the Middle East.

In conclusion, it could be argued that team achievement is a critical factor in sport sponsorship as the latter is only a driver for the sponsor's

image, but also a key driver for country image which would in turn encourage fans to visit the country of the team. Such findings hold important implications for sponsors whose image would be really affected by the fans' association with teams like Barcelona and Real Madrid, for example, because of the high achievements of such teams. Results of this study would be helpful for sport sponsors to build good relations with sport clubs with higher achievement, as this would in turn, have a positive impact on the sponsor's own image and the country's image as well. The strength of the research lies in the fact that the majority of the participants live in other countries different from that of the sponsors of the teams as this would help to promote to the sponsor's products and brands in new markets. An evidence of this implication is Liverpool's team pursuit to end its deal with New Balance company being unable to distribute its products and its failure to make a good use of the popularity of the Liverpool FC around the world. Therefore, Liverpool FC signed a deal with Nike instead of its current New Balance though they were offered $10 million less than that paid by the New Balance deal, given that New Balance cannot match Nike's offer in relation to the marketing and distribution of Liverpool's products (Published by Liverpool Echo & The Independent on the 25th of October, 2019).

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