The effect of quality and leverage on the image transfer model: the moderating role of involvement

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to examine the influence of perceived sponsorship leverage on perceived product quality and the image transfer model, under moderation by fan involvement.

Design/methodology/approach – A self-report online survey was carried out after the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Responses were received from 422 individuals in 21 countries. The leverage scale was validated using exploratory factor analysis. Then, partial least squares–structural equation modeling was employed to examine the validity and reliability of the scales and test the structural model. Finally, multigroup analysis was used to examine how involvement moderates the influence of leverage.

Findings – Attitudes toward sponsorship and purchase intention are influenced by the perceived leverage and quality of the product. The multigroup analysis shows that perceived leverage does not influence the attitudes of individuals with low involvement. The influence of perceived leverage on perceived product quality is greater in individuals with high involvement.

Research limitations/implications – Sponsors should use collateral marketing strategies to target specific segments of individuals with high and low involvement separately. Showcasing the sponsoring products of brands renowned for their high quality could positively influence the results of sponsorship.

Originality/value – This article contributes to the sponsorship literature by exploring how sponsors can capitalize on collateral marketing actions. It also contributes to the theory of image transfer by exploring how perceived product quality can influence the effectiveness of sponsorship.

Keywords Sponsorship, Image transfer model, Product quality, Articulation, Activation

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In recent years, research into sports sponsorship has attracted the attention of numerous scholars (Maldonado-Erazo *et al.*, 2019; Novais and Arcodia, 2013). This increase in interest is due to various reasons. First, investment in sponsorship at a global level has increased significantly in recent years, from $16.6bn in 1996 (Meenaghan, 1998) to $65bn in 2018 (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019). Second, competition in the sponsorship market has also increased as the number of leagues and sports, their global reach and the number of sponsors per team or event have also grown (Dreisbach *et al.*, 2018). Lastly, the measurement of the return on investment (ROI) in sponsorship is still a handicap within the industry because almost half of sponsors do not have standardized indicators to measure ROI (Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013). Notable difficulties in obtaining these indicators include the fact that the same company sponsors different teams in the same discipline, that the same company sponsors different

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sporting disciplines at the same time and that the temporal horizons can be huge (e.g. the FIFA World Cup is held every four years). Therefore, performance indicators currently employed in the academic literature consist of measuring attitudes toward the sponsor's brand (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2017) and purchase intention (Lobo *et al.*, 2014) in the process of image transfer (Alonso Dos Santos *et al.*, 2019; Grohs and Reisinger, 2005).

The increase in competition in the sector has heralded a decrease in the effectiveness of the measures adopted (Alonso Dos Santos *et al.*, 2018). Given this rise in competition and the fall in effectiveness, sponsors are allocating more and more resources to sponsorship leverage. This is defined as "*the act of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and sponsor*" (Weeks and Cornwell, 2019, p. 639). The sponsors of the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia carried out several leverage actions. Examples are Coca-Cola's "Pass the Happiness" campaign, Adidas's "Out-of-Home" campaign and Visa's interactive experiences in the stadiums. Despite the investment and actions carried out during the leverage process, more research in this area is needed; according to academics, this nascent and underresearched area (Donlan and Crowther, 2014) "*has not received adequately sophisticated empirical work*" (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019, p. 23).

The main objective of this manuscript is to examine the influence of leverage and perceived product quality of sponsors on the image transfer model. To achieve this objective, the sample was segmented based on the fans' level of involvement. The results show how leverage influences perceived product quality and the process of image transfer. The results specifically provide this insight for groups of fans with high and low involvement. This research contributes to knowledge of the process of leverage and its influence on other variables. This knowledge can show managers the path to collateral marketing strategies and can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their sponsorship investment.

2. Theoretical framework

This research examines how leverage can influence perceived quality and the image transfer model in sports sponsorship depending on fan involvement. The proposed model is specified in Figure 1. The following sections present the hypotheses of the model.

2.1 Image transfer model

The image transfer model has been widely examined in the academic literature (Novais and Arcodia, 2013) in settings as diverse as surfing (Chiu and Pyun, 2020) and the Olympic Games (Kwon and Shin, 2019; Mazodier *et al.*, 2017), to cite but a few examples. Through this process,

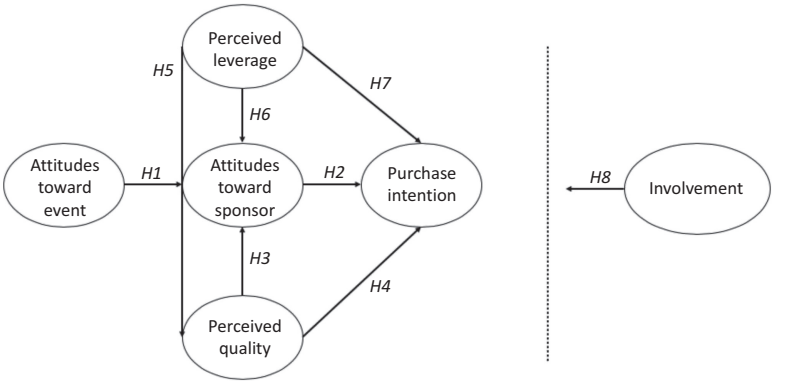

Figure 1.
Model of image transfer influenced by quality and leverage

the organizations that sponsor sporting events expect the image of the sponsee (e.g. an event, activity or organization) to be transferred to the sponsoring company (Gwinner, 1997). This transfer improves attitudes toward the sponsor and enhances intentions to buy its products or services (Madrigal, 2001). The aim is to evoke positive sentiments and attitudes toward the sponsor by closely associating an event that the consumer values highly with the brand of the sponsor (Grohs and Reisinger, 2005). The image transfer model has received widespread approval in the academic literature (Gwinner, 1997; Novais and Arcodia, 2013), and its relationships have been previously tested for diverse sporting disciplines. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Stronger attitudes toward an event generate better attitudes toward its sponsor.

H2. Stronger attitudes toward a sponsor generate greater intentions to buy.

2.2 Perceived quality

Perceived quality is defined as "*consumers' judgment about a product's relative superiority in a market*" (Chang and Ko, 2014, p. 67). It is a key antecedent in the processes of purchase decisions and loyalty to products (Beneke *et al.*, 2013) and services (Wang, 2010).

Up to this point, the examination of the influence of perceived quality in sports management has centered on the influence of the quality of the brand or destination provider of the sporting service on perceived value, satisfaction (Crespo-Hervás *et al.*, 2019; Foroughi *et al.*, 2016; Moon *et al.*, 2011) or the quality of the relationship between sponsee and sponsor (Kim *et al.*, 2011). The goal in this paper is to introduce into the model the quality of the product that sponsors the sporting event, following the argument that Bee and Dalakas (2015) proposed for advertising. Unlike in prior studies, it is the sponsor's product that is evaluated, not the brand.

In other knowledge areas, it is common to encounter significant relationships between service or product quality and attitudes or between quality and purchase intention. For example, positive online reviews of products elicit more positive attitudes toward these products and a stronger purchase intention (Lee and Shin, 2014). Similarly, the perceived quality of dishes in restaurants leads to greater levels of satisfaction and a higher probability of purchase (Jang and Namkung, 2009). In addition, the influence of quality has been observed in the process of image transfer in brand change (Delassus and Descotes, 2012). Considering that multiple studies have found that product quality is an antecedent to purchasing (Garretson *et al.*, 2002; Grewal *et al.*, 1998) and that service quality of a sporting event influences attitudes and purchase intentions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3. Higher perceived quality generates stronger attitudes toward sponsors.

H4. Higher perceived quality generates stronger intentions to buy.

2.3 Sponsorship leverage

Activation forms part of the leverage process. It refers to all activities that make the audience interact and engage with the sponsor (Degaris *et al.*, 2017). Even though the concept of activation is frequently confused with the concept of leverage, activation is carried out to encourage interaction and increase involvement with the sponsor (Weeks and Cornwell, 2019). Specifically, activation of sponsorship refers to "*communications that promote the engagement, involvement, or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor*" (Weeks *et al.*, 2008, p. 639). Leverage may be nonactivational for a mass media audience but activational for event attendees, depending on where the individuals are or how they interact. Although leverage initiatives vary and are not formally classified, the International Events

Group (IEG, 2016) estimated leveraging expenditure at a ratio of 1:1 to 8:1 to harness the full benefits of sponsorship.

Despite its importance, the concept of sponsorship leverage is scarcely discussed in the academic literature. Until now, the aim of the authors has been to examine the role of activation in improving memory (Cornwell *et al.*, 2006), attitudes (Weeks *et al.*, 2008) or congruence (Coppetti *et al.*, 2009). Other studies have compared the effect of congruence by articulating the basis and significance of its relationship (Na and Kim, 2013). Finally, studies have also examined the mechanisms through which sales-oriented activation campaigns affect customer evaluations (Dreisbach *et al.*, 2018) and the mediating and moderating role of leverage in sponsorship (Degaris *et al.*, 2017). All in all, further research in this area is needed to examine how sponsorship leverage influences perceived quality and the image transfer model, an area that has not yet been explored in the academic literature.

Here, the term "perceived" is used to differentiate between the actions that sponsors actually take and those perceived by users. Previously, it has been suggested that the perceived leverage actions of the brand of the sporting event sponsor could influence attitudes toward the brand (Degaris *et al.*, 2017). It has also been suggested that leverage through advertising would positively influence purchase intentions and the perceived quality of the sponsor's products (Bee and Dalakas, 2015) in the sequence predicted by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Leverage actions could influence perceived product quality in the same way that activation increases recall and positive evaluations of the sponsor, as reported by other researchers (Cornwell *et al.*, 2005; Weeks *et al.*, 2008). It is reasonable to expect that if activation improves evaluations of the sponsor's brand, perceived leverage actions could also directly influence perceived product quality. Thus, fans that perceive higher leverage by the sponsor are expected to report higher levels of perceived quality, better attitudes toward the sponsor and stronger purchase intentions.

H5. Greater perceived leverage generates higher perceived quality.

H6. Greater perceived leverage generates better attitudes toward the sponsor.

H7. Greater perceived leverage generates stronger intentions to buy.

2.4 Involvement

According to Gwinner (1997), the degree of fit, level of sponsorship, frequency and involvement moderate the strength of the image transfer between the sponsee and the brand of the sponsor. Involvement is a person's perception of the relevance of an object based on that person's needs, values and interests (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). It varies according to individual characteristics, situational factors and the characteristics of the product or stimulus. Involvement is a useful concept for understanding the behavior and attitudes of sports fans. Prior research has found significant differences in the way that fans process image transfer (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016). For example, Speed and Thompson (2000) found that involved fans are more predisposed to respond favorably to sponsorship actions than noninvolved fans. Highly involved consumers are more willing to pay more attention and exercise greater effort in processing information (Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993). Thus, if fans more assiduously frequent alternative means of communication about the event (Pritchard *et al.*, 2009), process messages better and have a better attitude toward messages (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014), it is to be expected that the fan's involvement will moderate the relationship between leverage, quality and the process of image transfer, enhancing the effect of leverage.

H8. Fan involvement positively moderates the influence of leverage on perceived quality and the image transfer model.

The model in Figure 1 shows the hypotheses and the links between the variables. The backbone of the model is the image transfer process (Gwinner, 1997; Novais and Arcodia, 2013). The collateral variables represent the influence of leverage and quality on the model's dependent variables. The leverage and quality variables were included in the model so that their influence on the image transfer process could be analyzed. This analysis enabled the study of the influence of external variables on an indicator of sponsorship effectiveness and the antecedent variables. The involvement variable is shown separately to reflect its moderating role in the model.

3. Method

3.1 Data collection and sample

Data to test the hypotheses were collected using a survey carried out in July 2018. The survey was conducted using Amazon Mechanical Turk a week after the 2018 FIFA World Cup event. Respondents were rewarded €1.50 for answering a survey hosted by LimeSurvey. Convenience sampling was used to distribute the questionnaire in countries that participated in the 2018 FIFA World Cup, so all participants were from countries that had competed in the event. The sample consisted of 422 people from 21 countries.

The survey data were processed prior to the analysis. The country of origin of the respondents was examined using the IP of the server where the questionnaire was answered. Lost data were eliminated using the Mahalanobis indicator (1936). This process gave a sample of 409 individuals. Many of the respondents in the sample were from England (34.7%). Other countries with high participation were Costa Rica (12%), Poland (8%) and Nigeria (7%). The rest of the countries had a low representation (less than 5%). These included Italy, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Mexico, Panama and France, although there were also respondents from other countries. The broad spread of the country of origin in the sample reduced possible bias due to local leverage actions in the selected countries. In order to contrast possible differences between countries, the sample was divided into three groups according to sample size (England, Costa Rica and the rest of the countries). No significant differences were found between groups in terms of purchase intent: $F(2,406) = 0.461$, $p = 0.632$, nor in terms of attitudes toward the sponsor: $F(2,406) = 0.237$, $p = 0.789$.

In terms of the sample characteristics, the mean age of the respondents in the sample was 33 years (range 18–48; SD = 10.8) and the percentage of women was low (27%). Regarding the response rate between men and women, other manuscripts have had a similar response rate (Melnick and Wann, 2011) or higher response rate of men than women (Menefee and Casper, 2011). According to Wann *et al.* (2001), males are more likely to be sports fans than females, which may result in greater interest in responding to this type of survey

3.2 Measures

All scales employed in the research were five-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). All scales had been reported to have adequate psychometric properties in previous studies. Six variables and 21 items were used. The size of the sample was ten times the number of indicators of any construct or the number of structural relationships (Barclay *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, the sample size was greater than the minimum required to achieve a statistical power of 80%. The minimum values of R^2 were detected to be 0.1, with a significance of 1% (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

The perceived quality scale (PerQua) was adapted from Chang and Ko (2014). This scale was used by Kumar and Jayasimha (2019). Items were "*The sponsor's product*. . . [2018 FIFA World Cup Russia] *is higher in quality standards*"; "*. . .is superior in quality standards*;" "*. . .offers higher quality*."

The scale for attitudes toward the sponsor (AttSpo) was adapted from Dees *et al.* (2008), who had previously adapted it from Quester and Thompson (2001). Items were "*I think favorably of companies that sponsor the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia*"; "*Companies that sponsor the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia are successful*"; "*Companies that sponsor the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia provide quality products/services*"; "*Companies that sponsor the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia are professional.*"

The purchase intention scale (IntBuy) was adapted from Dees *et al.* (2008) and Smith *et al.* (2008). Items were "*The 2018 FIFA World Cup would make me more likely to use the sponsor's products*"; "*The 2018 FIFA World Cup would make me more likely to consider the sponsor's products the next time I make a purchase*"; "*I would be more likely to buy the products of the sponsor of the 2018 FIFA World Cup as a result of this sponsorship.*"

The attitude toward the event scale (AttEvent) was adapted from Doyle *et al.* (2014), who previously adapted it from Ruth and Simonin (2003). Items were "*Overall, my attitude toward the FIFA World Cup is positive*"; "*My overall attitude toward the FIFA World Cup is unfavorable (reverse coded)*"; "*Generally, I have a good attitude toward the FIFA World Cup.*"

Finally, the involvement scale (Invol) was adapted from Ko *et al.* (2010) and had previously been used by Alonso Dos Santos *et al.* (2018). Items were "*Football (soccer) is an important part of my life*"; "*Most of my friends are in some way connected with football (soccer)*"; "*To me, there is no other sport like football (soccer).*"

3.3 Developing the perceived leverage scale

The perceived leverage scale was developed and validated based on studies in this area that had previously used measurement scales (Chang and Ko, 2014; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014; Parra Camacho *et al.*, 2018). Items were first generated based on research on leverage, articulation and activation published in Web of Science, ProQuest and ScienceDirect up to and including the year 2017 (Bee and Dalakas, 2015; Coppetti *et al.*, 2009; Cornwell *et al.*, 2006; Davies and Tsiantas, 2008; Dees, 2011; Degaris *et al.*, 2017; Flöter *et al.*, 2016; Herrmann *et al.*, 2016; Madrigal and King, 2017; Na and Kim, 2013; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; O'Reilly and Lafrance Horning, 2013; Simmons and Becker-Olsen, 2006; Uhrich *et al.*, 2014; Wakefield, 2012; Weeks *et al.*, 2008). Then, news media, social media and specialized web pages (e.g. IEG) were revised and explored to detect activation and leverage strategies that could be reflected in the scale items. Table 1 shows the items. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then carried out to develop a more concise, reliable version of the instrument. Following this, the instrument was revised by three academic experts and five business administration students. Finally, confirmatory factor analysis was performed to examine the convergent and discriminant validity and the reliability of the items and the construct using partial least squares–structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The coefficients are described in detail in the next section.

4. Results

The analysis was carried out in four stages. First, EFA was performed using the FACTOR software (Lorenzo-Seva and Ferrando, 2006). The aim was to examine and validate the internal structure of the perceived leverage scale. Then, the psychometric properties of the instrument were analyzed (analysis of the measurement model). PLS-SEM was used to test the model in SmartPLS software (Ringle *et al.*, 2015). Hypotheses H1–H7 were thus tested. This method enabled prediction and investigation of the relationships between the endogenous and exogenous variables with smaller samples in more complex models than those allowed when using covariance-based (CB-SEM) methods (Shiau *et al.*, 2019). The method also provided a focus that was both exploratory and confirmatory (Hair *et al.*, 2018).

	Mean (SD)[1]	R IT-c [2]	α without item	Asymmetry	Kurtosis	Factor loading
During the FIFA World Cup, I noticed radio, Internet or television ads from the sponsoring brands related to the event (LV 1)	3.76 (1.00)	0.344	0.843	−0.888	−0.556	0.539
During the FIFA World Cup, I was able to see in-store promotions of the event's sponsoring brands (LV 2)	3.78 (1.10)	0.425	0.8	−0.739	−0.14	0.619
During the FIFA World Cup, I received samples or demonstrations of the products of the sponsoring brands (LV 3)	3.46 (1.27)	0.613	0.775	−0.65	−0.584	0.842
During the FIFA World Cup, I received merchandising from the event sponsors (LV 4)	3.46 (1.26)	0.597	0.78	−0.652	−0.553	0.826
During the FIFA World Cup, I received information related to the event from the sponsors of the event in other ways (LV 5)	3.62 (1.19)	0.518	0.772	−0.753	−0.253	0.751

Note(s): [1]SD = Standard deviation; [2]Corrected item–total correlation

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, corrected item–total correlation, alpha if the item is removed, asymmetry, kurtosis and factor loadings of the indicators of the perceived sponsorship leverage scale

Finally, partial least squares–multigroup analysis (PLS-MGA) was used to test whether involvement-based data groups were significantly different in their group-specific parameter estimates (Hypothesis 8).

4.1 *Exploratory factor analysis*

The scale for perceived leverage of sponsorship was examined following the recommendations of Lloret-Segura *et al.* (2014). First, the properties of the items in the scale were analyzed by checking the corrected item–total correlation values, as well as the mean, standard deviation, asymmetry and kurtosis values. Table 1 shows the statistics. The values of the corrected item–total correlation were higher than the minimum value of 0.3 recommended in the literature (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994).

The maximum likelihood method and oblimin direct rotation were used to extract the components. In the social sciences, where phenomena of interest are interrelated, oblimin rotation is capable of presenting clearer, simpler and more easily interpretable structures than orthogonal rotation (Lloret-Segura *et al.*, 2014). The parallel analysis procedure (Timmerman and Lorenzo-Seva, 2011) was chosen to determine the number of factors to extract. The root mean square residual (RMSR = 0.036 < 0.05) and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI = 0.975 > 0.95) were used to check the model fit. Beforehand, the sample fit was tested: KMO index = 0.933; Eigenvalue = 2.59; Bartlett's test of sphericity $p < 0.001$ ($\chi^2 = 847$; df = 10). Finally, the theoretical interpretability of the factor solution extracted from the EFA was checked. The lower limit of the loading of the indicators on the construct was 0.539. The explained variance was 60.43%. It was not necessary to eliminate any indicators because their factor loadings were all greater than 0.40 (Ferrando and Lorenzo-Seva, 2017). These data corroborate the underlying structure and unidimensionality of the construct. The G-H replicability index was 0.874 (>0.80), indicating the stability of the solution in other contexts and samples (Ferrando and Lorenzo-Seva, 2017).

4.2 Analysis of the measurement model

Evaluation of the measurement model involved verifying the reliability and validity of the constructs and items that make up the model (Hair *et al.*, 2018; Sarstedt *et al.*, 2014). The coefficients of the indicators are summarized in Table 2. The indicators of convergent validity (AVE > 0.5), internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha >0.7; Composite Reliability > 0.8) and discriminant validity (HTMT < 0.9) had coefficients that met the recommended criteria in all cases (Nunnally, 1978).

The discriminant validity was also evaluated by confirming that the square root of the AVE was superior to the correlations between the constructs of the model (Fornell–Larcker criterion; Table 3). Also, the cross-loadings of the items (not shown in the table) were examined (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

4.3 Analysis of the structural model

The collinearity of the indicators was tested by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF < 3). The model's predictive capacity was confirmed because all coefficients of the exogenous variables were superior to 0 ($Q^2 > 0.23$ in all cases). The values of the coefficient of determination (R^2) show that the model predicts 40% of the variance of purchase intention, in comparison with 29% for attitudes toward the sponsor.

The results of the hypothesis testing for the model (Table 4) show that AttEve has a significant effect on AttSpo (0.358, $p < 0.01$) and AttSpo has a significant effect on IntBuy (0.144, $p < 0.01$) for the image transfer model. Regarding the quality hypotheses, the results show that quality influences AttSpon (0.279, $p < 0.01$) and IntBuy (0.288, $p < 0.01$). Finally, perceived leverage influences quality (0.742, $p < 0.01$), AttSpon (0.232, $p < 0.01$) and IntBuy (0.454, $p < 0.01$). The results support all hypotheses.

4.4 Measurement invariance and multigroup analysis (MGA)

MGA was used to evaluate moderation by a given variable in multiple relationships (Matthews, 2017). The aim in this study was to determine whether there are significant differences between two groups for each relationship described in the model. To obtain two groups of individuals according to their involvement, the segment was split using *k*-means cluster analysis following the Ward method in SPSS, as recommended by Hair *et al.* (2016). Then, an analysis of variance was performed to confirm the differences between groups, as per the method described by Alonso Dos Santos *et al.* (2016). The first group comprised individuals with low involvement ($n = 187$), whereas the second group consisted of individuals with high involvement ($n = 222$).

The following step was to analyze the measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM) to determine "*whether or not, under different conditions of observing and studying phenomena, measurement operations yield measures of the same attribute*" (Horn and McArdle, 1992, p. 117). The procedure has been detailed by Henseler *et al.* (2016) and

Construct	R^2	Q^2	α	*Rho_A*	CR	AVE	Factor loadings
Leverage			0.844	0.846	0.896	0.682	0.755–0.845***
AttEvent			0.817	0.819	0.891	0.731	0.832–0.869***
AttSpon	0.437	0.238	0.760	0.771	0.846	0.580	0.701–0.803***
Quality	0.489	0.306	0.748	0.752	0.856	0.664	0.798–0.828***
IntBuy	0.627	0.449	0.839	0.839	0.903	0.756	0.862–0.874***

Table 2. Evaluation of the model

Note(s): ***$p < 0.01$; Correlation (R^2), Stone–Geisser test (Q^2), Size of the Effect (f^2), Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha (α), Extracted Variance (AVE) and Factorial loads

Matthews (2017). The first step was to confirm that the size of the subsamples had a statistical power of at least 80%. Also, the coefficients of reliability and validity were required to be within the limits recommended in the literature for each group. The same was true of the configural invariance, which means that the same basic factor structure exists in all groups (Henseler *et al.*, 2016). Next, the MICOM procedure was executed with the permutation test (1,000 permutations; stop criterion = 7). It was also necessary to check the compositional invariance (i.e. original correlations were greater than the 5% quantile correlations) and composite equality (i.e. original mean difference and original variance difference fell between the 2.5 and 97.5% boundaries). Only partial invariance was confirmed for leverage and purchase intention. In contrast, full measurement invariance was confirmed for quality and attitudes toward the sponsor. It was still possible to continue with the analysis of comparing the groups using the standardized coefficients of the relationships in the MGA, although the data could not be pooled for leverage, attitudes toward the sponsor or purchase intention (Henseler *et al.*, 2016; Schlägel and Sarstedt, 2016).

In terms of the MGA, the second and third columns of Table 4 show the path coefficients for the segments with low involvement (Group 1) and high involvement (Group 2), respectively. The second column shows the differences in the path coefficients for both groups and the level of significance. The last column shows the p values of the permutation test for the path coefficients. The first row reveals that perceived leverage only influences attitudes toward the sponsor in the most involved individuals. Leverage influences purchase intention in both groups of consumers. However, the influence is greater in the group with low involvement. In terms of the relationship between leverage and perceived quality, the MGA reveals no differences between the groups, although there is a difference according to the permutation analysis: in both groups, the influence is positive and significant. Therefore, the results only partially support Hypothesis 8, which posits that fan involvement positively moderates the influence of perceived leverage on perceived quality and the image transfer model.

	Activation	AttEvent	AttSpon	IntBuy	Quality
Activation	0.83	*0.70*	0.59	0.85	0.87
AttEvent	0.58	0.86	*0.76*	0.73	0.78
AttSpon	0.49	0.61	0.76	*0.69*	0.76
IntBuy	0.72	0.60	0.57	0.83	*0.81*
Quality	0.70	0.61	0.58	0.72	0.81

Note(s): Heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) above the diagonal; square root of the AVE on the diagonal (italics) and correlations between the dimensions below the diagonal (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

Table 3.
Discriminant validity

	Path analysis	Group 1	Group 2	$\lvert\Delta\rvert_{1-2 \text{ path coeff}}$
AttEve – > AttSpo (H1)	0.358^{***}			
AttSpo – > IntBuy (H2)	0.144^{***}			
Quality – > AttSpon (H3)	0.279^{***}			
Quality – > IntBuy (H4)	0.288^{***}			
Leverage – > Quality (H5)	0.742^{***}	0.602^{***}	0.699^{***}	0.097^{**}
Leverage – > AttSpon (H6)	0.232^{***}	0.092	0.278^{***}	0.186^{**}
Leverage – > IntBuy (H7)	0.454^{***}	0.488^{***}	0.302^{***}	0.187

Note(s): $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{***}p < 0.01$

Table 4.
Hypothesis testing and MGA by segment

5. Discussion and implications

Sponsors continue to increase their ratio of investment in collateral communication actions (O'Reilly and Lafrance Horning, 2013). The academic literature on leverage and activation in sporting sponsorship is also growing (Cornwell *et al.*, 2006; Olson and Thjømøe, 2011; Weeks *et al.*, 2008). However, as numerous scholars in this area have suggested, research on this phenomenon must be broadened to understand its influence on different groups of fans and consumers (Cornwell and Kwon, 2019; Novais and Arcodia, 2013).

This study aimed to measure the influence of perceived leverage and quality on the image transfer model. The analysis examined how fan involvement moderates the influence of perceived leverage on quality, attitudes toward the sponsor and purchase intention. A survey was conducted following the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia. Next, statistical methods were employed to validate a leverage scale and test the validity and reliability of the measurement model. The structural model was then examined. Finally, using the MICOM procedure, the differences between the groups based on their involvement were examined.

The results verify the image transfer model. Attitudes toward the event influenced attitudes toward the sponsor, and attitudes toward the sponsor influenced purchase intention. This relationship has already been verified several times by studies in different contexts (Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Novais and Arcodia, 2013). On this occasion, in the case of soccer and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, image transfer is also verified. These results indicate that attitudes toward the 2018 FIFA World Cup were positively transferred to the brand of the sponsor. Thus, sponsors made progress with their objective of enhancing attitudes toward their brand or achieving greater volumes of expected sales. This image transfer justifies the investment by sponsors, who increased their status and brand awareness while improving attitudes toward the brand by taking on the values of the sponsored event or sport. Although researchers lack the control mechanisms to isolate a direct relationship between sponsorship and sales performance, one of the principal conclusions is that sports organizations should investigate how to enhance attitudes toward their brand (e.g. through activation) to increase sales revenues.

Perceived product quality influences attitudes toward the brand and purchase intention. These results have various implications in terms of brand strategy and performance. First, mechanisms should be employed for the regular measurement of perceived quality. This could be achieved, for example, through online reviews on specialized blogs, websites or social networks. Second, it also highlights the strategy of umbrella brands, where emblematic products can generate positive attitudes and greater purchase intention toward the rest of the brand's products. Lastly, it would be advisable to showcase these emblematic products in the collateral marketing actions. The results of the proposed model suggest that doing so could enhance attitudes and intention.

Regarding the influence of perceived leverage, this variable positively influences attitudes toward the sponsor, perceived quality and purchase intention. These results are consistent with the findings of Weeks *et al.* (2008), who observed that leverage influences attitudes toward the brand and the corporate brand. They also observed that the leverage actions could contribute to increasing congruence when the brand is perceived as commercially interested in the sponsorship. This could prove to be an advantage when a company begins a new sponsorship agreement. Dees (2011) noted that sponsors should design their activational leverage actions around new media and technology as much as possible because these tools increase the capacity for interaction and segmentation. Regardless of the approach, leverage actions must be addressed from an integrated and strategic perspective to forge longer-lasting relationships (Donlan and Crowther, 2014). Therefore, carrying out communication and marketing activities in parallel with sponsorship is recommended because these activities help sponsors attain their objectives. The answer to the questions of how to do this and which parallel communication actions to implement will depend not only

on the economic and logistical capabilities of companies but also on their creativity (Madrigal and King, 2017). Regardless of the specific approach, activities should be aimed at increasing engagement with fans.

Finally, the segmentation shows that the most involved fans have stronger attitudes and higher perceived product quality when they are targeted by the leverage actions. For the less involved fans, the influence of perceived leverage on attitudes toward the sponsor is not significant, and the influence of perceived leverage on perceived product quality is significantly less than for the highly involved fan segment. These differences may arise because more involved individuals pay more attention to processing the message (Behe *et al.*, 2013), remember leverage actions better (Cornwell *et al.*, 2006), pay more visual attention to the product (Behe *et al.*, 2015), tend to remember the sponsors of their team with greater ease and have more favorable attitudes toward sponsors (Bee and Dalakas, 2015). The less involved individuals may not develop a significant attitude or greater levels of perceived quality because they do not remember or pay attention to marketing actions. A possible cause is that they are not sufficiently interested in the sporting event.

Less involved individuals develop stronger purchase intentions than more involved individuals. Signaling theory suggests that the participation of a company in sponsorship might be a sign of substantial marketing efforts. This in turn might be interpreted as a credible sign of the company's performance in the market, which helps establish beliefs about the brand (Kirmani and Wright, 1989). Less involved individuals would base their perceptions of sponsors on the participation of the company in the sponsorship. In contrast, more involved individuals would be aware of and would remember the sponsor's brand from beforehand and may thus already consume the sponsor's products.

In terms of specific leverage and segmentation strategies based on fan involvement, the following leverage actions are recommended. These are especially aimed at more involved consumers. In addition, they should increase engagement. These actions are to develop games set in the context of the event, hold video chats with players from the tournament, use social media to comment live on the event, supply additional audiovisual content about the players and even organize autograph sessions. Actions specifically targeting less involved groups could include communicating corporate social responsibility actions in parallel with or as a result of the tournament. These actions could catch the attention of alternative channels of communication. Other recommended actions for this group are those aimed at socialization through participation, besides the inherent values of the sport itself and actions linked to a sense of patriotism (Alonso Dos Santos *et al.*, 2020)

6. Limitations and future lines of research

This manuscript is not free from limitations in relation to both the method and the context. First, a nonprobabilistic method was used to obtain an international sample. The countries in the sample do not follow a statistical distribution that would allow the results to be extrapolated or enable international analysis. We do not have further sociodemographic information that would allow us to establish an average profile of the respondent for each country. It would also be of interest to repeat this study for small-scale or even local sporting events. Despite its limitations, this study has great value, looking deeper than ever before into the effect of sponsorship leverage and suggesting ways to make investments by companies and managers more effective and efficient.

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