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Online technologies and sports: A new era for sponsorship

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ABSTRACT

Online digital technologies have proved to be an important aspect of branding as well as international sport sponsorship since they have the capacity to interact with customers on a global scale through an abundance of digital platforms. The assimilation of online digital technologies has altered the way sports are created, promoted, delivered and consumed.

The purpose of this study was to delve more deeply into the main factors of favorable buyer behavior connected to the sponsorship of sports in the online digital framework. In more detail, the effect of four antecedents variables (i.e. fans' degree of involvement with sport, their degree of attachment with their favorite club, their beliefs about sponsorship in general as well as the frequency of their visits to sport club's online social networks and website pages) on the two main intermediate variables (i.e. fans' awareness of and attitude towards sponsors) and their subsequent impact on fans' purchase intentions regarding sponsors' goods and services. A quantitative approach was used for the purposes of the current research and 3.434 questionnaires were collected by fans who attend sport online with the use of digital/portable devices, which were successfully analyzed by SPSS and AMOS. In accordance with the outcomes, determinants such as sports club attachment, sports involvement and beliefs about sponsorship were discovered to greatly affect supporters' awareness of as well as their attitude towards sponsoring companies. In addition, outcomes revealed that supporters' buying aim was significantly influenced with regard to their attitude towards sponsoring companies as well as their awareness of sponsoring companies.

1. Introduction

The continuous growth of the international sport industry is to a certain extent, owing to the expansive assimilation of online digital technologies, the convergence of buyer needs globally as well as the need for brands to come up with unique and efficient methods to interact with emerging markets. Sport is a field of exceptional financial, social and professional significance, which is in constant growth (Escamilla-Fajardo, Núñez-Pomar, & Parra-Camacho, 2019). The pursuit of the competitive advantage is ongoing and the assurance of online marketing riches is tempting albeit elusive. Consequently, it is crucial for sport organizations to reach and maintain a high level of competitiveness, as well as in any type of organization (Escamilla-Fajardo, Núñez-Pomar, Prado-Gascó, & Ratten, 2020). Due to the uniqueness of the product both strategists as well as researchers frequently identify the innate benefit of

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sport as an industry which is instrumental in online marketing (Evans, Smith, & A., 2004; Harvey, 2001). Despite the fact that literature relevant to the Internet is still in its early stages, the repeated recognition that opportunities for sport exist on the web not only by academics of marketing but also by professionals indicates that these opportunities are immediately obvious to both the practitioner of sports marketing and to the nonspecialist commentator (Arruda Filho and Gammarano, 2018; Standing, 2000; Turner, 1999).

The countless applications of digital technologies and sport industries have greatly altered the way the sport is created, delivered and consumed. Priding itself on some of the most well-known and high traffic sites on the web (Caskey & Delpy, 1999) and with surprisingly comparable demographics between users of the web and supporters of sport (Delpy & Bosetti, 1998), Sport seems to possess more benefits in relation to other industries in the pursuit of efficient methods of marketing on the web. These benefits involve the “stickiness” of sites related to sport or their capacity to engage a visitor for larger amounts of time, and benefits with regard to creating a crucial factor of online success- the online community. In addition, these communities are being recruited from a base which is constantly growing with household access to the net becoming all the more the norm (Bauer et al., 2005).

International brands are exploiting these impelling trends - economic, consumer as well as media- by employing the emotive influence of sport in order to relate to buyers. As competitive rivalry amongst brands becomes continually more intense, sport content- sports clubs, leagues, federations, events, sports people and causes promoted by celebrities- whether communicated online or on-site, uploaded, downloaded broadcast, narrowcast or podcast, will carry on increasing in worth (Glendinning, 2007).

The intricacy of international business environment has obliged companies to reinforce their brands and to make a greater effort to communicate a powerful, steady and suitable message to buyers (Kahle, 2007). For countless brands, sport sponsorship has come to be crucial within their international marketing campaigns and is regarded as possessing the same significance as conventional marketing methods, if not even more.

As stated by the World Advertising Research Center, investment in sponsorship worldwide was projected to come to \$65.8 billion in 2018, of which the greater part was assigned to sports (Handley, 2018). The rapid rate of development of sport sponsorship is prompted not only by international business intricacy and the fragmentation of media channels, but by the greater sophistication as to the way sponsorship is approached by brands as well as sport entities. This demands and ongoing improvement in gauging the return on investment (ROI) for the sponsorship of sport over a broader range of aims, improved demographic study, enhanced flexibility, joint revenues and agreements that are related to performance. “The notable rise in the availability of numerous sport entities as well as the rise in the number of sponsoring companies which are making investments in sport entities implies that sponsorship is capable of assisting a corporation in fulfilling its business and marketing/promotional goals” (Seguin, 2007 p.2).

A collaborative relationship has come forth between online digital technologies and sport sponsorship mainly due to the fact that online digital technology gives brands the ability to interact with greater efficiency and with greater frequency with buyers so as to rapidly enhance brand awareness in emerging markets as well as to offer novel communications platforms and opportunities related to content (Santomier, 2008).

Taking into account the increasing acknowledgment of the Internet as a marketing tool, and the already considerable amount of funds spent on sponsorship deals, sport teams display an innate interest in enhancing profitable Internet sponsorship practices in addition to showing sponsoring companies how advantageous it is as an investment. One way in which this is accomplished is by showing that- because of sponsorship- fans' awareness of sponsors is strengthened, rendering them more enthusiastic and willing to support these companies by buying their products and services (Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2008).

Sponsoring firms invest in sport with the aim of transferring the devotion exhibited to the sports team/league by fans to the firm's brand via sponsoring company - sponsee correlation (Madrigal, 2001). Present studies suggest that fans' connection to the sports team plays an important role in sponsorship awareness (Wakefield & Bennett, 2010), fans' attitude towards sponsoring companies, buying aims of sponsoring companies' products and finally, in increasing sales (Deitz, Myers, & Stafford, 2012). Nonetheless, being conscious of the fact that fans are devoted will not suffice. Marketers have to be conscious of the factors that can impact how supportive fans are of sponsors. Given the somewhat recent appearance as well as the great degree of importance of online digital technologies regarding the development of the sport industry on a global scale, and the rapid development and importance of sport sponsorship to brands and sport entities globally, officials of both sport and marketing are given the chance to be proactive when it comes to identifying and creating sponsorship contracts which provide competitive marketing benefits not only online but also on-site.

Despite the fact that prior studies have paid separate attention to precursors influencing awareness of sponsorship or the relationship between buying aims and sponsorship (Biscaia, Trail, Ross, & Yoshida, 2017), as yet not detailed context has been developed assimilating these concepts so as to fully understand the factors impacting sponsorship effectiveness. Moreover, as yet, no study whatsoever has explored the effectiveness of sponsorship within the sphere of online digital technologies.

The aim of this study is twofold. One aim is to try to offer in a simulated conceptual context so as to explain the determinants impacting fans' awareness of and attitude towards sponsors, in addition to their influence on buying aims to follow. Another aim of this study is to investigate the significance of online digital technologies' assimilation into the field of sport sponsorship through studying the efficiency of the suggested context amongst online viewers of sport.

Thus, this study reviews present literature connected to the sponsorship of sport in order to develop a conceptual context with a view to helping empirical studies in the future as well as supporting managerial decisions in the hope that marketing opportunities given by the Internet are exploited.

2. Theoretical background

Technological development is faster than it was in the previous years, with products and services having more and more

shortened product lifecycles which in turn make the adoption procedure condensed (Ratten, 2008). In accordance with Cantisani (2006), the procedure of technological innovation can be delineated as a series of actions initiated to create new techniques with the assistance of the science and its methodology. Technological innovations engage a new concept, item or process and give the chance to goods as well as services to become up-to-date and utilized for alternating means. Technological innovations facilitate alterations to human life by the manipulation of scientific knowledge (Cantisani, 2006).

Technological innovations include people's learning about contemporary procedures (Cantisani, 2006). People frequently acquire knowledge via their social network, such as sport clubs fans or/and associations. Moreover, social groups can be characterized as depositories of conduct and expertise that empower an individual to use a contemporary technology (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). Through noticing individuals in a social group, people lean the effortless way to adopt a contemporary technology. Most importantly for online digital technologies, an individual notices its social group conduct that in turn influences his own conduct (LaRose & Eastin, 2004). As a result, as technology alters, so does individual behavior (Kock, 2004). Technological innovations also incorporate the development of a contemporary product or service – such as sport attendance through internet - via the utilization of an existing technology (Ratten, 2008). As a result, technological innovations have the ability to cover new market needs provoked by other technological innovations (Rycroft, 2006).

During the past decade, various concepts have been taken into consideration as accountable for selections and usage alterations in regard to online digital technologies, with a focus on understanding the relationship between the discussed theories and the symbolic or real meanings for users of latest technologies, which are constantly evolving in the market (Arruda Filho & Gammarrano, 2018). Online digital technologies constitute the convergence of telecommunications, computing and conventional media; a conceptual meaning which encompasses a set of technologies that are changing at a rapid pace. Convergence denotes the capacity of one platform, for example, a mobile telephone, to process various sources of electronic information (Rines, 2000). Nowadays, our world faces more and more challenges, a fast moving world, an unstable environment, with rapid changes and short life cycles. Therefore, the guarantee of success and performance in the future is uncertain, forcing organizations to constantly seek change to take advantage of new opportunities (Escamilla-Fajardo, Núñez-Pomar, & Prado-Gascó, 2018), such as the development of online digital technologies.

Online digital technologies comprise, but are not restricted to, broadband, websites, wireless and mobile technologies, audio and video streaming, high definition television as well as interactive television. Technological progress has led to the industry of broadcasting undergoing accelerated as well as a dramatic metamorphosis, presenting a host of novel media communication as well as viewing platforms (Santomier, 2008).

The way sport, use, advertising and various programming content reaches audiences has been altered to a great extent. Accessibility to sport organization websites can, in general terms, be accomplished from any geographical location employing a wealth of digital technologies as well as web accessibility. Therefore, the web acts as an international medium which connects people and organizations (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). In each early stages, the web merely provided visitors with text which was written and read in hypertext markup language (Turow, 2009). There was access which was more often than not restricted to connection by means of phones and modems and, because of this, the content of the majority of websites was comprised almost completely of static text and images, frequently providing no interaction for the user.

Contemporary digital technologies media platforms are of greater complexity and are more predictive, economical, thinner and lighter because of the use of nanotechnology and capable of offering improved resolution and rendition of color. Mobile technologies are providing to be a significant and efficient way for brands to reach new buyers offer components of additional value. The virtually global availability of mobile telephones and the important market penetration on a universal scale offer brands the chance to reach a huge and frequently targeted audience.

With the creation of technologies of greater dynamics, web accessibility has become greater and quite a few websites today include media like audio and video files, podcasts as well as live broadcasts of league competitions. More dynamic media have facilitated enhanced interaction as well as empowerment of the user. This technological progress is important both for buyers globally and for business managers who are responsible for decision-making regarding the management and broadcasting of their digital entities. The benefits of multimedia platforms and composite capacity to target particular audiences and the dependability offered by digital measurement (Santomier, 2008). Combined, these determinants offer the user- base means that is more intricate and dynamic and that provides enterprises –including sport organizations - of a professional status with promotional challenges as well as opportunity.

In the past, professional sport organizations frequently took no notice of the marketing of sports on the web and the web was primarily employed as a means of introducing sports club news and information to supporters. The wider use of the web has increased audiences for marketers in a wide range of enterprises which encompass professional sports clubs (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). Apart from the fact that web audiences have grown, sport organizations have experienced increased growth seeing that supporters 'devotion to sports has grown globally as well (Kahle, 2007).

For marketers of sport, this universal increase in the interest of sport has developed an even greater website audience to facilitate. As a result, sport organizations which merely offered information on sports club websites at first, presently employed the web as a thorough business medium by setting up e-commerce applications as well as by creating a web presence which is regarded as a very important aspect of their methods of sport marketing (Kitchin, 2006).

Despite the possible advantages of online marketing, it is also of great significance for sport organizations to fully comprehend the opportunities, restrictions and buyers' needs introduced by online sport marketing (Rein, Kotler, & Shields, 2007). In addition, sport organizations must comprehend the part played by online sport marketing in the general promotional strategy of an organization, especially with regard to the employment of various forms of media and their possible impact on profit-making (O'Reilly & Rahinel,

2006). For instance, it is of utmost importance to comprehend the way in which digital technologies could be integrated into a sports club's sponsorship strategy and the manner in which these technologies might be instrumental in the general marketing plan of an organization.

In order to realize their full potential, sport sponsorship must be activated through various channels of marketing. Brands pay out roughly twice the amount of money to set sponsorships in motion in comparison to ownership rights and until the recent past, brands had failed to allocate a large percentage of their budgets for activation to online digital technologies. Nevertheless, putting interactive marketing campaigns with interesting viral content into practice is an economic way to enhance advertising companies' impact (Paul, 2007). Moreover, "content developed for or at sponsored events and transferred online offers advertising companies the chance to enhance the continuation of the sponsorship initiative beyond the actual event, thus developing greater appeal which transcends merely those attending the events" (Paul, 2007 p.1).

The dynamics of digital media with regard to social interaction as well as niche marketing in addition to its global impact will become more and more significant because "as the content of sport increases online and becomes not only more international but also social, newly discovered online opportunities for marketers are created" (Voight, 2007 p.1). One developing method is for sponsors to aim at buyers on TV as well as through a variety of digital platforms at the same time. As regards the multichannel method by both advertising and sponsoring companies, roughly 58% of individuals watching a sporting event on TV are also engaging in instant messaging, emailing, text messaging or speaking on mobile devices. Furthermore, this multitasking buyers tend to be more motivated and possess greater recall of the advertisements they see than buyers that simply want event (Voight, 2007). Via novel media-driven assimilated partnerships, sponsoring companies as well as sport entities must be conscious of and capable of gauging the efficiency of the sponsorship contracts.

The evaluation of sponsorship is a controversial issue in the literature, suggesting that current methods do not address or understand the great effect of activities concerning sponsorship. Stotlar (2004) believes that assessment is inadequate because of the inability to reinforce the process of evaluation both in theory as well as in practice. Seeing that sponsorship may be identified as a commercial opportunity, the utilization of ROI as a means of assessment is customary. Some companies carry out studies on the advantages of market share or rises in the volume of sales, which are in no way correct gauges of sponsorship evaluation seeing that they do not take advantage of the whole range of benefits that can be gained via activities related to sponsorship. Past research makes reference to the increase in the financial worth of sponsorship as being one of the factors that gives rise to the skepticism with respect to sponsorship evaluation (Lobo, Meyer, & Chester, 2014). Such a one dimensional aspect of modern sponsorship evaluation practices will not be exploited financially if the noncommercial impacts, that is to say, prompts relevant to emotions, are not considered. Previous studies are in agreement that the use of total sales as the sole factor of the effectiveness of sponsorship is extremely dubious as it does not consider determinants like the possible influence of associated marketing campaign outcomes, the carryover implication of prior ads, possible future alterations in the economic situation in addition to entry or exit of competitors (Lobo et al., 2014). Sponsorship results ought to be gauged relative to the level of awareness achieved, attitude development or change in addition to assisted or unassisted brand or company recall.

As characterized by Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2001), the decision-making process which is employed by a person is "the direction of a person's convictions that officials can be employed to help in directing product mix, interaction as well as sales practices". Customarily it is theorized that consumers encounter seven phases of selection concerning purchase, i.e. necessity, recognition, information seeking, pre-purchase evaluation, purchasing, consumption, post consumption evaluation and divestiture (Blackwell et al., 2001). Regarding the pre-purchase evaluation phase, a consumer determines the need for a product or service, sexual formation, and compiles an evaluation. The three aspects which influence a consumer's comprehension and acknowledgment of a sponsorship during the pre-purchase evaluation or post sponsorship phase are correlated with the sponsee, sponsoring company and sponsorship (Speed & Thompson, 2000). The psychological aspects of consumer behavior are often considered to be of great importance when investigating consumer responses to sponsoring companies. Three basic psychological processes influencing customer behavior have been suggested, i.e. data processing, learning in addition to alteration in attitude/behavior (Lobo et al., 2014).

The principles which were selected for the model constructs from the bibliography comprise different elements, with the main construct representing a conceptual base understanding of their informative strength. This did not include all of the non-construct factors, such as leveraging of sponsorship deals, attendance at events and gender, all of which failed to elucidate the reason why sponsorship yields results (Olson, 2010). In addition, the contracts had to be hypothetically unique. For example, when investigating the measures used as well as factor analysis on pretest data, credibility, altruism as well as skepticism were seen to be inconsistent with the sincerity variable. In the sections which follow the role played by each variable regarding the effectiveness of sponsorship is elucidated.

It has been claimed by Gwinner and Swanson (2003) that a number of individuals may express an interest in a specific sport, along with their interest in a particular sports club. Activity involvement was characterized as being "an unnoticeable state of motivation, arousal or interest towards a recreational activity or associated product" (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997 p. 246). Supporters' involvement in sports is considered to be a main factor in creating sponsoring company acknowledgment, attitude towards a sponsoring company and support of sponsoring organization. According to Gwinner and Swanson (2003), the larger the extent of fan involvement, the more favorable the response to a sponsor. Supporter involvement is of the utmost importance to the understanding of sponsorship processes, since it involves an act of indirect powers of persuasion that has the capacity to impact a consumer's impression of the brand via its correlation with the sport property or sport activity. Not many studies as yet have explored the influence of fans' involvement with activities related to sport on their attitudes towards sponsors as well as their purchase intentions (Lobo et al., 2014). This research employed involvement as a multi-dimensional construct which comprises attraction the centrality (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004; Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2004). As stated by Kyle et al. (2004), attraction characterize the discerned

significance of an activity held by a person as well as the interest, pleasure and enjoyment that come from that activity. Centrality characterizes the status an activity possesses in a person's way of life (Kyle et al., 2004). The construct of involvement in an activity has been given very little attention in studies on sponsorship (Alexandris, Douka, Bakaloumi, & Tsaousi, 2008).

The current study also strove to investigate the relationships between sponsoring company awareness, attitudes towards sponsoring companies as well as purchase intentions, based on the frequency of a fan's visits to the sport activity's website and its accounts and social media (i.e. Facebook etc.), a factor which has yet to be explored in the research into sponsorship. In accordance with past studies, the extent that a firm's website features are able to combine features of information reach and richness with personalized services, positively affect the potential for engaging the consumer (Lee, Ungson, & Russo, 2011). The fast-growing digitalization of our world as well as the development in digital technologies have generated a flourishing business field in the so-called "personal technologies" – which can be delineated as "technologies exhibiting a kind of one-to-one binding with the user" (Arbore, Soscia, & Bagozzi, 2014, p. 90) - such as smartphones, laptops, apps, etc. It is a business field with an exceptional growth potential (Bettiga & Lamberti, 2017). According to the very little research that has addressed the role that the Internet and social media play in sport, it has been recognized that the role they play is an efficient medium of relationship marketing which has the capacity to "create significant relationship by way of opportunities offered for communicating, interacting and appreciating its value" (Williams & Chinn, 2010, p. 436). Furthermore, from the standpoint of the sports fan, it is suggested that a fan's extent of identification with the sport property increases by means of his/her interaction on social media websites (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012). On the basis of the aforementioned, it is of interest to consider any impact of the use of websites as well as social media on the efficacy of sponsorship.

Attachment has been characterized as "a connection between a person and a specific property which is based on an emotion" (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2008, p. 194). In terms of consumer behavior, brand attachment could be defined as "an emotive factor which reveals a long lasting as well as unalterable emotional relationship (dissociation is undesirable) to a brand and relationship based on psychological closeness to it" (Louis & Lombart, 2010, p. 118). Attachment might be considered to be a significant determinant for psychographic division since it is indicated above attitudes that are roughly established and constant during a specific period of time (Funk & James, 2001, 2006). In addition, it influences the rise in favorable, emotive and behavioral outcomes (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012; Funk, Haugtvedt, & Howard, 2000), that is to say, improved brand attitude, willingness to pay a premium cost, as well as favorable word-of-mouth (Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2008). Furthermore research has proven that attachment is connected to consumer faith/dedication, satisfaction as well as engagement (Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012). On the premise that goodwill towards the sponsored property can be redirected to the brands or products of the sponsor values sponsoring company- sponsee association (Madrigal, 2001), a large number of studies have suggested that a fan's degree of attachment with his/her favorite team contributes to enhancing attitude towards the sponsor (Meenaghan, 2001). For example, previous studies found that an individual's attachment with the team was linked to attitude towards the sponsor, while other studies noted that fans with a high level of attachment to a team were inclined to display greater positivity towards the sponsor than those who display a lower level of sport team attachment (Dees, Bennett, & Ferreira, 2010).

The beliefs about sponsorship factor involves the way in which a person perceives the aims of sponsorship deals (Harvey, 2001). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), believes are "a psychological inclination to what is conveyed by assessing a specific property with a certain level of positivity or negativity" (p.1), which differ along a favorable – unfavorable continuum. Based on attitude theory, Madrigal (2001) contended that fans create positive or negative beliefs concerning the benefits of sport sponsorship: individuals might appreciate the benefits of sponsorship, that is to say, offering assistance to the team, making a sports event possible, promoting the sports event, offering assistance to the community, etc. Furthermore, other individuals consider the sponsorship of sport to be a means of survival. This belief leads an attitude entity (i.e. sponsorship) to a favorable evaluation (Madrigal, 2001). With this element, no inconsistency exists in the mind of individuals when enterprises also attempt to promote their goods. This belief leads to positive assessment of sponsorship. In contrast, other individuals may correlate sponsorship with commercialization (Yun, Kim, & Cheong, 2020). These individuals may be of the opinion that the sole reason why enterprises participate in activities linked to sponsorship is to yield greater income and they consider sponsorship to be a factor that alters the nature of sport so as to promote commercial benefits (Cheong, Pyun, & Leng, 2019). Consequently, they might be more inclined to create negative beliefs regarding sponsorship and, in turn, unfavorable attitudes towards sponsoring organizations (Nassis, Theodorakis, Afthinos, & Kolybalis, 2014). Koronios, Psiloutsikou, Kriemadis, and Kolovos (2016), carried out in the basketball event setting, offered backing for the role of the "beliefs about sponsorship" factor when it comes to foreseeing behavioral aims.

The present study proposes a novel context for the research of sponsorship which is based on a composite of literature, in the framework of online digital technologies- occurring for the first time in the context of sponsorship. On the basis of the literature, the following model (Fig. 1) as well as hypotheses are put forward:

- H₁.** Sport Involvement (centrality and attraction) are anticipated to impact attitude towards sponsoring organization and awareness of sponsoring organization.
- H₂.** Team Attachment is anticipated to impact attitude towards sponsoring organization and awareness of sponsoring organization.
- H₃.** Beliefs about Sponsorship are anticipated to impact attitude towards sponsoring organization and awareness of sponsoring organization.
- H₄.** The Use of Event Websites and social media is anticipated to impact attitude towards sponsoring organization and awareness of sponsoring organization.
- H₅.** Sponsoring organization Awareness is anticipated to impact purchase intentions.

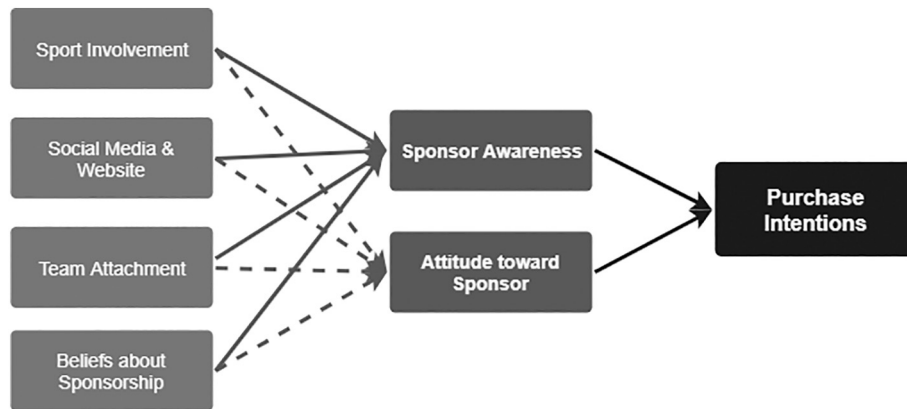


Fig. 1. Online Sponsorship Model

H₆. Attitude towards sponsoring organizations is anticipated to impact purchase intentions.

3. Methodology

From the aforementioned literature review, it is evident that sponsoring firms are faced with formidable decisions related to the management of sponsoring agreements and the examination of factors-variables such as whether the firm should participate in the sponsorship agreement or not. Invariably such decisions are made in the face of imperfect information and uncertainties, and are impacted by a variety of criteria that require precise and up-to-date analysis as well as astute managerial experience and judgment (Neshati & Daim, 2017).

A quantitative approach was used for the purposes of the study and questionnaires were collected from Greek sports spectators of the World Cup Russia 2018, who viewed the event online using digital/portable devices. Data were gathered by means of a survey carried out online which was developed and administered on Limesurvey platform assisted by a well-known website that encouraged visitors that watched the World Cup Russia 2018 using digital platforms to take part in the survey. The survey was completed only by individuals that positively acknowledge their using online means to watch the World Cup Russia 2018. The problem of missing values did not present itself in this research since answers to all questions were obligatory and as a result, questions had to be answered before access to the following question would be given. It is of importance to note that the online compilation of data was employed due to its benefit of being economical when trying to reach a sample of a larger scale in a broad geographical area (Bauer, Reichardt, Barnes, & Neumann, 2005). In addition, it was presumed that individuals who navigated on social media platforms as well as on the Internet would be most likely to be reached via an online questionnaire. Individuals who took part were given incentives through merchandising and to avert double submissions, the study monitored IP addresses and times of completion as a measure for achieving quality control. This particular practice of data compilation, which is consistent with prior online research (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012) resulted in 3434 questionnaires which were successfully completed and, in turn, analyzed by means of SPSS and AMOS.

At total of 3434 males ($n = 3313$, 96.5%) and female ($n = 121$, 3.5) participated in the study. The majority of the participants were between 23 and 41 years old ($n = 1827$, 53.2%) while 26% ($n = 894$) were between 43 and 53 years old. Fewer participants were between 19 and 22 years old ($n = 309$, 9%), under 18 years old ($n = 117$, 3.4%) and over 54 years old ($n = 287$, 8.4%). The distribution of the educational level of the sample was: 49.9% ($n = 1715$) were holders of postgraduate degree, 25.6% ($n = 879$) graduated from high school, 21.7% ($n = 744$) were holders of master or PhD degree. Results regarding marital status showed that 52.6% ($n = 1806$) were married and 44.4% ($n = 1524$) were unmarried. The majority of the participants were private or public employees ($n = 1789$, 52.1%), 21% ($n = 722$) were freelancers and 15.3% ($n = 525$) were students. Finally, 34.43% ($n = 1178$) of the participants had a monthly income between 10,001 and 2000€ while 28.3% ($n = 972$) had a monthly income lower than 600€ and 17.8% ($n = 622$) had a monthly income between 601 and 1000€. *Construct measures and calibration*

A 5-point Likert scale was employed for all measures. Questions for the survey were adapted from those employed by past researchers of sponsorship (e.g. Alexandris & Tsiotsou, 2012; Koronios, Psiloutsikou, Kriemadis, Zervoulakos, & Leivaditi, 2016). Different existing scales were used in order to help define the measurement items in each sub-dimensions, but altered and/or modified accordingly. Researchers studied the assessment with content validity employing a team of experts in addition to a field test. When items were acknowledged as being valid by experts at the percentage of 75%, they were retained. The English version of the questionnaire was translated into the Greek language upon the confirmation of both the researchers and the bilingual editor confirmed that all items and expressions conformed to accurate usage in both adapted versions. In turn, back translating the Greek interpretation of the questionnaire into the English language confirmed that the content of both versions was consistent. The internal consistency was evaluated by 15 students of the Department of sport management at post graduate level. The results of the pilot test indicated that the instrument gauging the 10 primary variables of sponsorship efficacy, had a total of 19 items ranging from 3 to 4 items per dimension.

4. Results

4.1. Statistical analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) utilizing the varimax rotation was put together to explore the factorial structure of the questionnaire. The factorial structure selected to investigate the magnitude as well as the rate of change of eigenvalues was founded on the premise that significant determinants of old to be relative to eigenvalues > 1 and the factor loading ought to be above 0.6. Sampling adequacy was employed to gauge Kaiser-Meyer - Olkin (KMO). KMO larger than 0.8 is indicative of sampling adequacy. Furthermore, validation analysis was carried out employing confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Lastly, so as to explore the hypothesis introduced in the preceding section, the structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed. The overall measures of satisfactory adaptation were: the normed χ^2 index, Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Lomax & Schumacker, 2012). Both CFA and SEM were carried out employing the AMOS software whereas EFA was contacted employing the SPSS software.

4.2. Construct validity of questionnaire

Both EFA and CFA analyses indicated that adaptation of the sport involvement scale, team attachment scale, beliefs about sponsorship scale, attitude towards sponsoring organization scale and purchasing intention scale was satisfactory. More specifically, EFA showed an index of KMO > 0.8 40 scales. The variation of the data clarified by factors differed from 65.4% to 73.4% with regard to the 6 scales. CFA indicated that all the skills had: Normed $\chi^2 < 1$, RMSEA < 0.1 and CFI > 0.9 .

4.3. SEM results

Analysis of SEM are introduced in Table 1. The results of the SEM analysis have bearing on practically all the corresponding suggesting hypothesis (H1 – H12). More specifically, the results of the first study hypothesis so that sport involvement, whether it be centrality dimension ($b = 0.043$, $p < .5$) or attraction dimension ($b = 0.084$, $p < .01$) favorably impact attitude towards sponsoring organizations. In addition, awareness of sponsoring organizations was favorably impacted by the centrality dimension ($b = 0.109$, $p < .001$) as well as the attraction dimension ($b = 0.0193$, $p < .001$) of sport involvement. Moreover, awareness was favorably impacted by team attachment ($b = 0.0125$, $p < .001$), beliefs about sponsorship ($b = 0.0198$, $p < .001$) and the use of an event's website and site and social media ($b = 0.086$, $p < .001$). The results concerning attitude towards sponsoring organizations showed that attitude towards the sponsor was favorably impacted by beliefs regarding sponsorship ($b = 0.0298 < 0.001$) and also by team attachment ($b = 0.0187$, $p < .001$). Lastly, purchasing intention was favorably impacted by attitude towards sponsoring organization ($b = 0.0192$, $p < .001$) as well as by awareness of the sponsoring organization ($b = 0.016$, $p < .05$). The assessment of the initial suggested model indicated that the initial model was discovered not to have a satisfactory adaptation to the empirical data, as practically all of the indicators were beyond than the desire limits ($\chi^2 = 211.5$, CFI = 0.239, RMSEA = 0.248).

The final modified model introduced in Table 2. After being modified high adjustment to empirical data was accomplished and the indexes are greater than the desired values ($\chi^2 = 2.39$, CFI = 0.948, RMSEA = 0.082).

The final model consists of statistically substantial impacts of the centrality dimension of the sport involvement scale on team attachment ($b = 0.330$, $p < .001$) and the use of an event's website and social media ($b = 0.112$, $p < .001$). In addition, the model comprises statistically substantial impacts of the attraction dimension of the sport involvement scale and team attachment ($b = 0.268$, $p < .001$), use of an event's website and social media ($b = 0.125$, $p < .001$) as well as beliefs regarding sponsorship ($b = 0.023$, $p < .001$). Lastly, the final suggested model incorporates statistically substantial impacts of sponsoring organization awareness on attitude towards sponsoring organizations ($b = 0.072$, $p < .001$).

Table 1
SEM model for the investigation of research hypothesis.

Affect				b	p	Result
H1	Involvement centrality	→	Sponsor awareness	0.109	0.005	S
H2			Sponsor Attitude	0.043	0.005	S
H3	Involvement attraction	→	Sponsor awareness	0.193	< 0.001	S
H4			Sponsor Attitude	0.084	< 0.001	S
H5	Team attachment	→	Sponsor awareness	0.125	< 0.001	S
H6			Sponsor Attitude	0.187	< 0.001	S
H7	Beliefs about sponsor	→	Sponsor awareness	0.198	< 0.001	S
H8			Sponsor Attitude	0.298	< 0.001	S
H9	Events web site and social media	→	Sponsor awareness	-0.022	0.697	R
H10			Sponsor Attitude	0.086	< 0.001	S
H11	Sponsor awareness	→	Purchas intention	0.016	0.033	S
H12	Sponsor Attitude	→	Purchas intention	0.192	< 0.001	S

S=Supported, R = Rejected, P = significant (p value) b = coefficient.

Table 2
Final (best) SEM model.

Affect			b	p
Involvement centrality	→	Sponsor awareness	0.106	0.031
		Attachment	0.330	< 0.001
		Sponsor Attitude	0.035	0.007
		Events web site and social media	0.112	< 0.001
Involvement attraction	→	Sponsor awareness	0.190	< 0.001
		Attachment	0.268	< 0.001
		Events web site and social media	0.125	< 0.001
		Beliefs about sponsor	0.023	< 0.001
		Sponsor Attitude	0.071	< 0.001
Team attachment	→	Sponsor awareness	0.124	0.006
		Sponsor Attitude	0.178	< 0.001
Beliefs about sponsor	→	Sponsor awareness	0.196	< 0.001
		Sponsor Attitude	0.284	< 0.001
Events web site and social media	→	Sponsor Attitude	0.088	< 0.001
Sponsor awareness	→	Purchas intention	0.016	0.037
		Sponsor Attitude	0.072	< 0.001
Sponsor Attitude	→	Purchas intention	0.192	< 0.001

P = significant (p value) b = coefficient.

5. Discussion

Sport sponsorship has come to be a valid significant dimension of marketing since it constitutes a long-term investment in developing powerful relations between brands and buyers. The rate of development of sport sponsorship will go on to surpass the rise on conventional media purchases (Santomier, 2008). Online digital technologies have come to be a significant aspect of sport sponsorship due to their capacity to reach buyers during the setting in motion of sponsorships and make thematically connected, assimilated marketing initiatives possible. Through their correlation with sports, such initiatives are able to earn the trust as well as confidence of buyers and, finally, obtain the permission required by brands to interact with the. Online digital technologies enable the accumulation of buyers across a variety of platforms on a universal scale while at the same time conveying a brand's message and strengthening relations with buyers.

The greater the availability for distribution of digital sport content, the more opportunities brands will have to communicate their messages through sport sponsorship. The dynamics of online digital technologies with regard to social interaction, viral and the niche marketing in addition to relationship marketing will establish their role in the processes of marketing and the sponsorship of sport will have even greater significance for international brands.

Online digital technologies are altering the characteristics of the marketing mix "since sponsorship is turning into a more and more dynamic and attractive means for brands. The answer to deriving gains from the newly found opportunities, and to the safeguarding against correlated risks is to make certain that one comprehends the emerging technologies and the opportunities they offer" (Phelops & Otterwell, 2007, p.3). There has been a substantial increase in the worth of sport sponsorship due to online digital technologies, and sport entities as well as brands are confronted with the challenge of creating the skills needed in the management and marketing in addition to the technology infrastructure required to maintain a long relationship of mutual gain.

The aim of the current research was to offer a conceptual framework for the evaluation of the efficacy of sport sponsorship, in the first ever context of online digital technologies. Such a framework provides a straightforward perspective of a complex reality and may be employed as a guideline for directing empirical study (Biscaia et al., 2017). The primary contribution of the current research is the creation of a framework that is substantiated both in theory and through investigation and that could be used by both sport associations and actual or prospective sponsoring organizations as well as by digital media managers so as to better understand the manner in which the efficacy of the sponsorship may be improved.

The principal variables studied were sport supporters 'degree of sponsoring company awareness, their attitudes towards sponsoring companies as well as their ensuing purchase intentions. In addition, the extent of supporters 'involvement with the sports activity along with their attachment with the team, the use of the sporting event's website and/or page on Facebook and supporters' beliefs about sponsorship were also analyzed as primary precursors of sponsorship efficacy.

6. Practical implications

The implications of the present research are that by utilizing the existing framework, sport associations can be helped with showing sponsoring organizations with determinants improved not only awareness but also interest in the sponsor's brand in which factors will ultimately increase sales. One of the most important findings of the current research is correlated with how often a sports event's website as well as its Facebook page is utilized. As previously stated, no prior study of sponsorship has been carried out in relation to the utilization of either the Internet or social media.

The outcomes of the study show that determinants, namely, sport involvement, team attachment, beliefs about sponsorship as well as the frequency of the utilization of a sporting event's website and patent Facebook influence the attitudes of spectators towards

sponsoring companies and sponsoring company awareness subsequently influences purchase intentions. More specifically, attitude towards sponsoring company as well as sponsor awareness greatly moderate independent variables (sport involvement, team attachment, beliefs about sponsorship, the frequency of utilization of a sporting event's website and patent Facebook and purchase intentions). This signifies that the greater degree of sport involvement, team attachment, beliefs about sponsorship and the frequency of the utilization of a sporting event's website as well as patent Facebook enhance the attitude towards the sponsoring company and sponsoring company awareness, which, subsequently result in an increase in purchase intentions.

7. Limitations and further research

Although this research managed to pinpoint significant sponsorship contracts for the viewpoint of the buyer, the outcomes ought to be treated with some caution since sponsorship continues to be a challenging domain which is difficult to comprehend. Firstly, the event employed here was a sporting event which was universal in nature. To succeed in generalizing the outcomes across a range of situations concerning sponsorship, further research employing cover kind of events (e.g. out the music) at various levels (e.g. national, regional and local) have to be carried out. Secondly, the implications for the study, in all probability, are relevant to organizations and sports events which bear similar features to those investigated in this research. Saying that the current research concentrates on sport spectators of Greek origin that had viewed the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia, the generalizability of the outcomes might have been influenced. Thus these outcomes might be regarded as being unique to the Greek market only.

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