Chapter 11
National Team Fans:
Is Passion Enough to Leverage Sponsor Brands?

Carmo Leal

UNIDCOM/IADE – Unidade de Investigação em Design e Comunicação, Portugal & Universidade Europeia, Portugal

Pedro C. Dionísio

Business Research Unit, ISCTE, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal

Ana M. Brochado

DINÂMIA'CET, ISCTE, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Football (i.e., soccer) is the most popular sport in Portugal, whose national team is considered a symbol of the entire country. This study sought to identify this team's fan profile and brand image's main components and the main determinants of the team's sponsorship effectiveness. Data were collected on fans several weeks before the 15th Union of European Football Associations Euro 2016. This study's initial qualitative phase was followed by a quantitative phase. Thirty face-to-face interviews were conducted, after which 801 fans filled out a survey. Qualitative analysis identified nine image associations that Portuguese fans link with their national team: national symbol, pride, passion, strength, strong emotions, happiness, optimism, connection, and positive feelings. Four clusters of fans' expectations and demographics were found, confirming heterogeneity. The team's sponsorship effectiveness is stronger for sponsors' clients and highly involved fans, as well as when brand image congruence exists between sponsors and the sponsee.

INTRODUCTION

Sports rank among the most important topics covered by the media worldwide (Horky, 2010), and sports are commonly thought to play an important role in national identity (Meier et al., 2019) and to influence many individuals' lives strongly. Understanding fans as consumers and their motivations to attend sports events is one major reason researchers are especially interested in sports (Capella, 2002). While sports club identification's effects have been widely studied (Beea, King, & Stornellic, 2019; Chavanat, Martinent, & Ferrand, 2009; Delia & James, 2018; Demirel, Fink, & McKelvey, 2018; Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006; Kwon, Lee, & Kim, 2015; Richelieu & Lopez, 2008; Stander, Beer, & Stander, 2016), the relationship between fans and their national team has been less frequently addressed in the literature. Some exceptions are Hart's (2017) research on loyalty to national teams and clubs, Bogdanov's (2011) study focusing on the impact of national sports teams on individuals' national identity, and Kwon et al.'s (2015) work on identifying the benefits generated by fans' identification with a national team for global event brand equity. However, the existing knowledge about fan typologies linked to national teams remains incomplete despite the increasingly important role of sponsorships in national teams' international competitions (Delia & James, 2018).

In Portugal, the national football (i.e., soccer) team has been gaining more supporters even among the most unexpected audiences such as seniors and people who have previously never been interested in sports. Since Euro 2004, which took place in Portugal, and Brazilian coach Luis Filipe Scolari's success, the Portuguese national team has become a patriotic symbol, with the Portuguese flag placed in car and house windows in cities and towns all over the country and even abroad. The Portuguese's manifestation of love for their country appears to have been awakened by the national team.

In addition, Cristiano Ronaldo, currently considered one of the greatest players in the world (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2019), has already been undeniably of value by fulfilling his promise to bring Portugal's name to the fore on the European stage. Because of Ronaldo, the entire country began to believe that it could win European games and championships, but some Portuguese still did not dare believe that their country could go so far. The present study was conducted in 2016, the year in which Portugal became the European football champion, with a focus on the national football team.

This study sought to define national team fans' profile, as well as the impact of the fit between sponsor and national team images on sponsorships' effectiveness. More specifically, the research objectives were:

1. To ascertain potential correlations between fans' expectations of the team's results and these individuals' demographic and socioeconomic profile
2. To identify fans' most important image associations regarding the Portuguese national team
3. To test whether the most important associations vary according to demographics and socioeconomic status
4. To verify if sponsors' brand image enhancement is stronger for fans more heavily involved with the national team
5. To determine if image congruence's positive impact on sponsorship is greater for fans who are currently sponsors' clients

The current research sought to achieve these still poorly addressed objectives to find out whether, despite club sponsorship's declining effectiveness (Connor & Mazanov, 2010; Crompton, 2015; MacK-

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