



Drivers of sponsorship effectiveness in athletics races

Determinantes de la eficacia del patrocinio en las carreras de atletismo

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Abstract

Introduction: The athletics races take place in the heart of public space and enjoy high levels of visibility. Race organizers benefit from connecting with sponsoring companies that want results in promoting and selling their brands.

Objective: The aim of the research was to test a conceptual model to explain the effects of sponsorship on runners. It used running involvement, perceived altruistic sponsor motives, brand recognition and perceived congruence between sponsors and running as the determining constructs.

Methodology: This research shifts the focus from spectator-based sponsorship to participant-based sponsorship. A sample of 736 runners from one of Portugal's most popular athletics races completed a questionnaire. A Structural Equation Modeling analysis was carried out to test the model and the hypotheses.

Results: The model explained that 49% of attitudes toward sponsors and 15% of runners' purchase intentions. The strongest effects were the effect of brand recognition on perceived congruence and the effect of perceived altruistic motives on attitudes toward the sponsor brand. However, running involvement had no significant effect on attitude towards the sponsoring company.

Discussion: This research demonstrates the role played by perceptions of sponsors' altruistic motivations in shaping favourable responses to sponsoring companies and runners' intention to buy sponsors' products.

Conclusions: The effects of sponsorship of athletics races on runners have been demonstrated, particularly the significant role of brand recognition and perceived altruistic motives. This study offers important implications for race organizers and sponsoring companies.

Keywords

Athletics; congruence; involvement; motives attributions; sports sponsorship.

Resumen

Introducción: Las carreras de atletismo se celebran en pleno espacio público y gozan de gran visibilidad. Los organizadores se benefician de la colaboración con empresas patrocinadoras que buscan resultados en la promoción y venta de sus marcas.

Objetivo: Probar un modelo conceptual para explicar los efectos del patrocinio en los corredores. Se utilizaron como variables determinantes la implicación en la carrera, los motivos altruistas percibidos, el reconocimiento de la marca y la congruencia percibida.

Metodología: Nuestra investigación se basa en una perspectiva centrada en el corredor. Una muestra de 736 corredores de una de las carreras de atletismo más populares de Portugal relleno un cuestionario. Se llevó a cabo un análisis de Modelos de Ecuaciones Estructurales para probar el modelo y las hipótesis.

Resultados: El modelo explicó el 49 % de las actitudes hacia los patrocinadores y el 15 % de las intenciones de compra de los corredores. Los factores con mayor impacto fueron el reconocimiento de marca y los motivos altruistas percibidos del patrocinador. La participación en carreras no tuvo un efecto significativo en la actitud hacia la empresa patrocinadora.

Discusión: Esta investigación demuestra el papel que desempeñan las percepciones de las motivaciones altruistas de los patrocinadores en la formación de respuestas favorables a las empresas patrocinadoras y en la intención de los corredores de comprar productos de los patrocinadores.

Conclusiones: Se han demostrado los efectos del patrocinio de carreras de atletismo en los corredores. Este estudio ofrece importantes implicaciones para los organizadores de carreras y las empresas patrocinadoras.

Palabras clave

Atletismo; atribuciones motivadoras; congruencia; implicación; patrocinio deportivo.

Introduction

Running is perhaps the most popular physical activity people can do. Every year, there are over 1,968 locations in the world where races can be run over various distances: marathon, half marathon, road race (10 km, 5 km) and ultramarathon (AIMS, 2024). Recent reports indicate that approximately 65 million Americans (Galic, 2024) and 50 million Europeans (European Mile, 2020) run regularly, which makes running a vibrant industry. In Spain, for example, more than 90 half marathons are organised every year, around 8 a month (Finishers, 2025).

The most popular distance is the 5 km run, which accumulated 8.9 million registered runners in 2019 (Running USA, 2024). The consumer retail purchases of sports equipment, athletic footwear and athletic apparel increased in 2022 to \$63 billion in the US, (Tighe, 2024). The European Sporting Goods Market has been valued at \$184.47 billion (Verified Market Research, 2024).

Sponsorship is a strategic decision to promote brands and create lasting relationships with consumers - the runners. Worldwide sponsorship spending in 2022 was \$97.4 billion with annual increases of 8% (Lumency, 2024). Sports alone were responsible for 70% of all sponsorship investments (IEG, 2017). For example, Virgin Money signed a contract in 2010 for £17 million to become the official sponsor of the London Marathon for five years (Virgin Money, 2020). Since 2022 Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has become a sports sponsor and is estimated to invest \$40 million annually in marathon sponsorships worldwide (Ghosh, 2021).

These sponsorship market values express in a surprising way the fascination of sponsoring companies for athletics races. Although Cornwell and Kwon (2020), in their review, and Cornwell et al. (2024) argued that effectiveness in reaching the consumer public is the most researched topic in sponsorship, resulting in a surplus of articles, there are still several factors that remain unclear regarding the effectiveness of sponsorship effects. And these factors are more relevant from the perspective of the sports participants (Dreisbach et al., 2021; Koronios et al., 2024; Temerak & Winklhofer, 2023), which is what sets this study apart, namely athletics race participants. We have therefore drawn up a set of variables to clarify their effects: (i) running involvement; (ii) brand recognition; (iii) altruistic sponsor motives; and (iv) perceived congruence between the brand and running influences on attitudes towards the sponsoring company, and on the intention of runners to buy sponsors' products.

The present study therefore aims to fill two critical gaps:

1) The application of sponsoring in the context of the world of running and runners. Grassroots and participation-based sports, and niche sports events, do not receive the same mainstream exposure (media) as major spectator-based sports. Our research is based on a shift in focus from spectator-based to sponsorship participant-based (Koronios et al., 2022b).

However, they still provide an attractive vehicle for sponsors to engage with specific target markets (Eddy & Cork, 2019). The existence of studies approaching running from the perspective of the effects of sponsorship are rare (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012; Eddy & Cork, 2019; Fransen et al., 2013; Lough et al., 2014; Papadimitriou et al., 2016).

2) The clarification of contradictory and divergent results in terms of the effects of sponsorship. This is necessary because: 2a) despite the apparent consensus on the role of perceived congruence between sponsor and sponsored in the context of running (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008), only one out of the five investigations evaluated these variables, and divergent results were found between the three groups (Papadimitriou et al., 2016) (for example, they did not show the effects of perceived fit between the sponsor and the event on sponsor brand purchase intentions in the three groups of volunteers, runners and spectators); 2b) in the context of soccer, basketball, and athletics races, surprisingly increased sports involvement did not have positive effects on the response to sponsorship by spectators, fans and runners (Dreisbach et al., 2021; Eddy & Cork, 2019). In addition, the concept of running involvement was not used in the five previously mentioned studies, despite being a useful variable. For instance, Eddy and Cork (2019) adopted the term 'sport commitment' and Lough et al. (2014) 'runner identity'. However, the term running involvement is considered the most suitable for the objective of this study because it captures the two dimensions of centrality and attraction that running activity exerts on the runner (see Beaton et al., 2011; Ridinger et al., 2012). The concept of perception of sponsor motives is also



unique and relevant to race runners. Although Eddy and Cork (2019) adopted the term 'sponsor goodwill', it does not capture all the facets of attribution motives of sponsoring companies. Much of the current sponsorship research has been conducted through the lens of sports spectators (Herrmann et al., 2016; Dreisbach et al., 2021); however, as Eagleman and Krohn (2012) noted, there is also a need to understand responses to sponsors by participants in events. Recognizing this knowledge gap in the fundamentals above, the aim of the study was to test a model to measure the attitudinal responses and behavioral intentions of runners in relation to the sponsoring company and the purchase of the sponsors' products. The variables considered as predictors of runners' responses were: (i) running involvement, (ii) brand recognition, (iii) altruistic motives (iv) perceived congruence between the brand and race.

Running involvement and brand recognition

Some studies have examined runners' motivations for participating in marathons (Ridinger et al., 2012), however limited attention has been given to the concept of leisure involvement in running, and its relationship with sponsorship effectiveness. This approach is rarely used in sports management and, when used, differs in contextual approaches, for example the involvement with professional sport teams (Funk et al., 2004). As developed within the consumer behavior literature, our research adopted the definition of Havitz and Dimanche (1997) as 'a multifaceted construct that represents the degree to which participation in a sports activity becomes a central component of a person's life and provides both hedonic and symbolic value'. Involvement is an important factor because of its potential influence on people's attitudes and behavior in relation to a product or activity (Ridinger et al., 2012), including the processing of sponsorship information in consumers' minds (Dos-Santos et al., 2016).

However, whilst one reality is the spectators, television viewers and team fans, the other reality is the sportsmen, in this case the runners. In the context of football, during the Korea/Japan FIFA World Cup, spectator involvement had a direct positive effect on sponsorship awareness (Ko et al., 2008). In the context of international tennis, the spectators who were less involved did not process the recognition of the sponsor's message (Dos-Santos et al., 2016). In contrast, sports involvement had a positive influence on sponsor recognition in golf spectators (Lascu et al., 1995), and in basketball spectators (Koronios et al., 2022a). However, there are contradictory results, since the sports involvement of television viewers of tennis was not a significant predictor of sponsor awareness (Bachleda et al., 2016). From a participant-based perspective, Koronios et al. (2022b) confirmed the positive results of sport involvement (taekwondo athletes) on the sponsors awareness. In the context of running in general, research on the effects of sports sponsorship is scarce: Eagleman & Krohn, 2012; Eddy & Cork, 2019; Fransen et al., 2013; Lough et al., 2014; Papadimitriou et al., 2016). However, in one of the studies, the authors found significant differences in sponsor recognition by marathon runners, depending on the level of runner involvement (Beaton et al., 2011).

Consequently, it was hypothesized that runner involvement would affect brand recognition and sponsorship outcomes. It was therefore decided to test the following hypothesis:

H1: Running involvement has a positive, significant and direct effect on sponsors' brand recognition.

Running involvement and perceived congruence between the brand and running

To understand the concept of involvement and its influence on sponsorship effectiveness, different authors have turned to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Applied to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), ELM serves as the 'engine' that shapes attitude (one of the pillars of TPB). For example, if a sponsor's brand activation is processed via the central route, based on involvement, the attitude formed will be more persistent and more likely to influence future purchase intention. The results have demonstrated convergence in the existence of a positive relationship between involvement and perceived congruence. The results have demonstrated convergence in the existence of a positive relationship between involvement and perceived congruence. Lacey and Close (2013), in the context of a professional cycling event, observed a positive effect on spectators, which affected the event perceptions of a congruent fit; and the event involvement of television viewers of the FIFA World Cup and the London Olympic Games had a positive effect on brand-event fit (Mazodier & Quester, 2014). In addition, the tendency to favor the running activity in which runners are highly involved may be shared by companies that support the activity through sponsorship. That is, it is likely that runners with higher levels of involvement, according to the congruity theory (Jagre et al., 2001),



desire a harmony in their beliefs, and will respond better to those companies involved in the same area, e.g., the manufacturing of sports goods. For example, Finisher or Enervit sports nutrition sponsorships of the Valencia and Barcelona marathons make sense because the brands produce products designed to help runners stay hydrated and perform better in the race. However, a sponsorship between Xiaomi and the Madrid marathon is incongruent because the two entities appear to have little in common with one another.

Thus, to maintain congruence, the tendency for runners with higher levels of running involvement to perceive a logical link and affinity with the sponsoring company should be expected.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H2: Running involvement has a positive, significant and direct effect on the perceived congruence between the brand and running.

Running involvement and attitudes towards sponsoring company

It has been highlighted that individuals tend to respond negatively to incongruous sponsorship, because it will be difficult to reconcile cognitively an extreme lack of harmony, which can lead to negative affection and unfavorable judgment, and ultimately cause negative evaluations (Dos-Santos et al., 2019). In terms of the notion of evaluative consistency (Madrigal, 2001), to avoid changes that affect involvement with the running, judgements regarding the sponsoring company must take on a positive significance. In this way, they contribute to consonance, consequently maintaining a positive appraisal of the activity that is a central element of runners' lives. In other words, will there be higher levels of attitude towards a sponsoring company in runners where the practice of running is an activity of high personal significance and central to their lives? Overall, the results have shown a positive relationship between involvement and attitude towards sponsors (Olson, 2010; Koronios et al., 2022a; Moharana et al., 2023; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Son & Williams, 2023; Koronios et al., 2024) found positive effects between object involvement and sponsorship attitude; NASCAR fans showed favorable attitudes toward the sponsor of their favorite driver (Dalakas & Levin, 2005). However, Evans and Eddy (2022) observed the opposite. In the running context, Eagleman and Krohn (2012) found direct, positive effects of runner identification with running on attitudes towards sponsors. In contrast, Koo and Lee (2019), when sponsor-event congruence levels were reduced, did not show effects of sports involvement in spectators on attitudes towards the sponsor. Also, in the context of German soccer league fans, in an experimental analysis, it was shown that the direct effect of fan identification on sponsor attitude was non-significant (Dreisbach et al., 2021).

Thus, to maintain an evaluative consistency, in line with the importance and centrality that the activity represents for itself, it should be expected that runners with higher levels of running involvement will evaluate favorably the sponsoring companies. It would be illogical to view the running activity - an important and positively valued element - linked to a negatively valued element, the sponsor. A runner who is highly engaged with running, in terms of congruity theory (Jagre et al., 2001), is grateful for and will view positively the companies and brands that have provided - sponsored - the possibility of running the race.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H3: Running involvement has a positive, significant and direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsoring company.

Running involvement and attributions of sponsor motive

In the last 10 years, few studies have been carried out on the factors associated with the reasons given for sponsoring a company (attribution of sponsor motives) (Deitz et al., 2012; Grohs & Reisinger, 2014; Han et al., 2013).

Given this scarcity, there is an urgency to understand the elements and processes that can cause distrust and make consumers skeptical about the true motives of sponsoring companies. They are thus a priority for research that may fill explanatory gaps (Rifon et al., 2004), showing how consumer responses to sponsorship are formulated. The concept of consumers' perceptions of the sponsorship company's motives corresponds to consumers' inferences about sponsors' commercial and altruistic intentions obtained from an evaluation of the sponsorship program (Rifon et al., 2004). Olson (2010) did not verify a

positive and significant direct effect between the object categories involvement and sincerity (altruistic motives, perceived sponsor support), while (Deitz et al., 2012; Son & Williams, 2023) showed the opposite: an individual's level of social identification with the sponsored event was shown to be positively associated with sponsorship response.

The aim is to capture runners' perceptions of the sponsor's intentions, not the actual motives of the sponsoring company. A sponsoring company that genuinely shows concern for the race in which the runner is involved, and provides resources in proportion to the prestige of the event, can be perceived as an ally of the highly involved runner. This is precisely because the company supports the event which is something the runner believes in, and which is important to them. For example, it has been shown that self-brand identification is enhanced by cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement with the event brand (Temerak & Winklhofer, 2023). In view of the above, what is plausible is that runners with a higher level of involvement with a race, attribute altruistic motives predominantly focused on the benefits of the activity, rather than commercial motives that predominantly support the interests of the company (e.g., to exploit running, with a view to generating sales for the brand).

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H4: Running involvement has a positive, significant and direct effect on altruistic sponsor motives.

Brand recognition and perceived congruence

In line with the exponential growth of sports sponsorship, the awareness that sponsorship is a widely accepted mechanism is used for determining the effectiveness of the sponsorship agreement (Biscaia et al., 2013). Consistent with these ideas, it is generally accepted that repeated exposure is important for increasing the profile of a given brand in consumers' minds (Beaton et al., 2011). However, several authors (Carrillat et al., 2014; Smith, 2004) have argued the opposite. They argue that the higher the level of recognition, the greater the ability to see where there are inconsistencies between the sponsor and the sponsored object. However, in terms of congruity theory (Jagre et al., 2001), the more knowledge runners have about a sponsored race, the more information they possess and the more prepared they are to evaluate how sponsor brands have attributes that are congruent with the characteristics of the activity and the purpose of the race.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H5: Sponsor brand recognition has a positive, significant and direct effect on perceived congruence between the brand and the sporting event.

Attribution motives of sponsor and perceived congruence and attitudes towards the sponsoring company

It is clear that consumers take into account the supposed motivation of companies when they provide sponsorship. Further, the nature of this perceived motivation is a factor that influences consumer responses.

The perspective of attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980) is based on the assumption that individuals are social perceivers who make causal inferences about the events they observe and experience. When applied to the context of sponsorship, attribution theory can argue that when consumers, in our case runners, observe the sponsorship of a particular activity or sporting event with which they are involved, they tend to give positive reasons for that support and show gratitude to the company for the sponsorship it has provided. Therefore, it is plausible they will show higher levels of attitudes towards the sponsoring company.

In turn, since runners have positive attitudes towards brand sponsors derived from perceived altruistic motives, then it seems plausible, in terms of congruity theory (Jagre et al., 2001), that the assessment of the presence of congruence is influenced by these positive attitudes derived from perceived altruistic motives.

Finally, Fishbein's attitude theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), applied to the sponsorship context, argues for the existence of a causal flow through the components of attitude (beliefs → affections → behavioral intentions). Thus, it seems plausible that the runners' positive belief stemming from altruistic motives, may well exert a positive effect on attitudes towards the sponsor company."



It has been highlighted that the sponsors' lack of sincerity regarding interest in the event (Speed & Thompson, 2000), and the suspicion that the mass appeal of these events is the real reason behind the sponsorship (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Plewa et al., 2016), do not lead to the attribution of altruistic motives. For example, Jacobs and colleagues in a review found a high prevalence of so-called controversial sponsors in sport (i.e. alcohol, foods and drinks high in fat, salt and sugar) (Jacobs et al., 2025). Indeed, altruistic motives and sponsor sincerity have generally been found to have a positive relationship on high-level sponsorship effects, but there are contradictory results. Perceived sincerity and genuine altruistic motives (Kim et al., 2010; Koronios et al., 2022a; Koronios et al., 2024; Silva, 2024) had a positive effect on consumer responses at the level of feelings of gratitude towards the sponsor; and the perceived sincerity had significant positive effects on sponsorship response (favorability and interest) (Asada et al., 2023; Carrillat & Grohs, 2019; Dreisbach et al., 2021; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Olson, 2010; Park et al., 2024; Speed & Thompson, 2000), perceived sponsor support (Asada et al., 2023; Son & Williams, 2023) and perceived motivation to serve the company in CSR activities led to a less favourable attitude towards the sponsor serving motives (Kang & Matsuoka, 2022); but Deitz et al. (2012) did not verify the existence of direct effects of favorable motives attributed to the sponsor on the attitudes of fans to the sponsor.

In summary, it is possible to conclude that despite the different contexts, there appears to be no convergence of results in demonstrating unequivocally that the genuine and positive reasons given for the company's intent to sponsor are a factor influencing consumer responses to sponsorship.

Therefore, if the runner attributes altruistic motives to the company, it can develop a higher level of perceived congruence between the brand and running and a more favorable attitude towards the sponsoring company.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H6: Attribution of sponsors' altruistic motives has a positive, significant and direct effect on perceived congruence between the brand and running.

H7: Attribution of sponsors' altruistic motives has a positive, significant and direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsoring company.

Perceived congruence and attitudes towards the sponsoring company

Companies seek to link their brands to events to leverage secondary brand associations (Keller, 1993) and to lead consumers to infer that the brand shares associations with that sponsored entity. The harmony and perceived adequacy of these associations reflect the essence of the congruence concept. Given the widespread commercialization and expansion of sponsorship as a marketing platform, it has been argued that the perceived congruence between the sponsoring brand and the sponsored event is an adequate indicator of positive sponsorship outcomes (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020). It is thought that the congruence between sponsor and sponsored is able to determine a wide variety of responses from individuals (Cornwell et al., 2006; Deitz et al., 2012; Olson, 2010; Speed & Thompson, 2000). In other words, perceived congruence is based on brand authenticity and relationship, which influences both basic outcomes (i.e., cognition, affect, behaviour) and deeper engagement outcomes (i.e., loyalty, attachment, passion, love) (Cornwell, 2019).

Congruity theory has been used to help explain why individuals respond negatively to incongruous sponsorship (Dean, 2002; Jagre et al., 2001; Olson & Thjørmøe, 2011; Speed & Thompson, 2000). In the context of spectators, several authors have found that perceived congruence had positive effects on attitudes towards sponsors (Bachleda et al., 2016; Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Gwinner & Bennett 2008; Han et al., 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Shin et al., 2018; Silva, 2024), and Becker-Olsen and Hill (2006), in the context of sports for the disabled, have also shown that a low level of perceived congruence is likely to diminish the perceptions of credibility and the global attitude towards the sponsor. In the running context, only one investigation has evaluated these variables. Papadimitriou et al. (2016) found that the volunteers, runners and spectators of the Athens Marathon, half marathon, 5 km and 10 km road race, showed that the perceived fit between the sponsor and the event had positive effects on the attitude toward the sponsoring brand.

Thus, it seems plausible that according to congruence theory, runners who perceive higher levels of congruence between sponsor and runner develop a more favorable attitude towards the sponsoring company.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H8: Perceived congruence between the brand and running has a positive, significant and direct effect on attitudes towards the sponsoring company.

Attitudes towards the sponsoring company and intention to buy sponsors' products

The main motivation for companies to invest in sponsorship is to obtain a response from the consumer in which purchase intention, purchase and brand loyalty are elements of importance and these constitute the best evidence for sponsorship effectiveness (Koo & Lee, 2019). The results of the research were seen to converge: spectators who showed higher levels of attitude towards the sponsoring companies showed more declared purchasing intentions than spectators who showed lower levels of attitude. Globally, in various sporting contexts, there has been a broad consensus that there is a positive relationship between the attitude towards the sponsoring company and the intention to buy the sponsor's products (Alexandris et al., 2012; Bachleda et al., 2016; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Evans & Eddy, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2018; Koo & Lee, 2019; Koronios et al., 2022a; Koronios et al., 2022b; Koronios et al., 2024, Madrigal, 2001; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Silva, 2024; Speed & Thompson, 2000). In the running context, only one investigation evaluated the relationship between these two variables: Papadimitriou et al. (2016) found divergent results in the three groups - volunteers, runners and spectators of the Athens Marathon, half marathon, 5 km and 10 km road race - and did not find a positive relationship between the attitude towards the sponsoring brand and purchasing intentions. In turn, Fishbein's attitude theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), applied to the sponsorship context, argues in favor of the existence of a causal flow through the attitude components (beliefs → affects → behavioral intentions).

In short, runners tend to see sponsors who support their favorite event or activity in a positive light and therefore develop positive feelings and favorable attitudes towards them, maybe even amplifying this positive disposition by purchasing their products.

Thus, it was decided to test the following hypothesis:

H9: Attitudes towards sponsoring companies have a positive, significant and direct effect on the purchasing intentions of sponsors' products.

Method

The study was empirical in type, transversal, using an associative strategy in a comparative process (Ato et al., 2013). Insert the text of the method with Cambria font, size 11, justified and single line spacing.

Participants

The sample consisted of 736 runners from the Scalabis Night Race, one of Portugal's most renowned official races, held annually since 2010. Among respondents, 52.9% were men and 47.1% were women. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 64 years ($M = 41.2$, $SD = 9.29$), with the largest groups being those aged 35–44 years (42.0%) and 45–54 years (27.2%). In terms of education, 56.3% had at least a Bachelor's degree, and 35.6% reported having a college education. Regarding marital status, 46.4% were married, 28.2% single, and 16.2% in a partnership. Over half of the runners (63.3%) traveled from outside the host city (more than 20 km away). On average, 17.9% of respondents indicated that they participate in the race every year. The most commonly raced distance by the majority of the respondents was 10 km, 73.4% ($n = 540$), with 26.6% ($n = 196$)

Procedure

A cross-sectional, self-administered survey was carried out during the "Scalabis Night Race," one of Portugal's most popular official national races, which registered 4,051 participants. The event included two race distances: 5 km and 10 km. To examine the relationship between sponsors and runners, the study



used real sponsor brands and a real sporting event (see Table 1). The race was supported by five regional and national sponsors: an automotive brand, a shopping center, a fuel company, a restaurant, and a food outlet.

The Scalabis Night Race was selected for this research based on three criteria: (1) it combines both leisure and competitive elements; (2) it has multiple co-sponsors on display at the start/finish point and along the race route, allowing the study methodology to be applied and brand recognition to be assessed; and (3) it attracts a substantial number of participants (over 4,000 runners). Data collection took place two days after the event, through an online survey. An email with a link to the questionnaire was sent to all runners who had provided their email address when registering for the race.

The survey was available for a two-week period on the SurveyMonkey platform, resulting in 736 valid responses, which corresponds to a 22% response rate. To avoid duplicate entries, the survey software restricted responses to one per IP address. The methodological approach followed was consistent with that used by Kim et al. (2010). To minimize the likelihood of common method bias in this research, several procedural remedies were implemented, following the recommendations of Podsakoff et al. (2003). Respondents were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers, and it was emphasized that there were no right or wrong responses, thereby reducing evaluation apprehension and social desirability effects. The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure clarity, simplicity, and neutrality of wording, avoiding ambiguous or double-barreled items. In addition, the independent and dependent variables were presented in separate sections of the survey, which helped reduce respondents' ability to infer relationships among constructs. Different response formats and scale anchors were also used to minimize pattern response bias.

Instrument

To translate and adapt the instruments from the original language into Portuguese, we applied the recommended methodological procedures (Vallerand, 1989). Participants completed a single questionnaire covering all the theoretical concepts under study (see Table 1).

Table 1. Variable definition and measurement

Variable/items	Scale
Running involvement (RI)	
Centrality	
A lot of my life is organized around running.	
Running has a central role in my life.	
A lot of my time is organized around running.	
Attraction	
Running is one of the most enjoyable activities for me.	
I have a lot of interest in running.	
Running is important to me.	
Altruistic sponsor motives (MOT)	
I feel that sponsor REPSOL of the race SCALABIS NIGHT RACE show a genuine interest in the races and its runners.	Three items: Adapted from (Smith et al., 2008; Speed & Thompson, 2000)
The main reason the sponsor REPSOL would be involved in the event SCALABIS NIGHT RACE is because the sponsor believes the event deserves support.	Seven-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7)
This sponsor REPSOL would be likely to have the best interests of the event SCALABIS NIGHT RACE at heart.	
Brand recognition (BR)	
Unaided awareness of the sponsor's name	
For the sponsors of the Scalabis Night Race races, check the brands/companies you recognize as sponsors: (tick with an X that you recognize and those you don't recognize: TABERNA DO QUINZENA; PEUGEOT; GALP; PASTELARIA BIJOU; COMÉRCIO DO CENTRO HISTÓRICO DE SANTARÉM; RESTAURANTE A GRELHA; VOLKSWAGEN; REPSOL; PASTELARIA PANITEJO; W SHOPPING)	Ten items: Adapted from (Biscaia et al., 2013) List of ten brands, being five false and five true
Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the event (PC)	
There is a logical connection between the event and the sponsor SCALABIS NIGHT RACE and REPSOL.	Four items: Adapted from (Speed & Thompson, 2000).
The sponsor REPSOL and the event SCALABIS NIGHT RACE fit together well.	Seven-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7)
The company REPSOL and the event SCALABIS NIGHT RACE stand for similar things.	
It makes sense to me that this company REPSOL sponsors this event SCALABIS NIGHT RACE.	
Attitude toward sponsor company (ATI)	
Thinking about REPSOL, please evaluate this company by selecting the point on each scale that best represents your attitude to the company.	Two items: Adapted from (Gwinner & Swason, 2003). Seven-point Semantic differential scale anchored by Negative (1) to Positive (7); Unsatisfactory (1) to Satisfactory (7)

Purchase intentions on sponsor's products (INT)	
I would be more likely to buy fuel of REPSOL over its competitors.	3 items: Adapted from (Biscaia et al., 2013; Madrigal, 2001).
Whenever possible, I try to buy products made by company REPSOL that sponsor the SCALABIS NIGHT RACE.	Seven-point Likert scale anchored by Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7)
I am likely to buy more products and services from REPSOL sponsoring SCALABIS NIGHT RACE.	
Running distance	One question
At the Scalabis Night Race sporting event, what was the race you attended? 5 km; 10 km	Running distance
Sex, Age, Marital status, Region, Education level	

Note: the variables MOT, PC, ATI, and INT were evaluated in the fuel sponsor brand.

Sponsorship awareness was evaluated using recognition measures, following approaches from previous research (Biscaia et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2008). Participants were presented with a list containing five actual sponsors and five non-sponsors and asked to identify the sponsoring brands. Their responses were scored on a scale from 0 to 10, according to the number of correct sponsor identifications.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations, were calculated for all variables under study. Following Kline's (2016) guidelines, a two-step procedure using maximum likelihood (ML) estimation in AMOS 23.0 was carried out: (1) a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the model's psychometric properties. At this stage, internal consistency was tested using composite reliability (Raykov, 1997), with values of .70 or higher considered acceptable. Convergent validity was evaluated through Average Variance Extracted (AVE), adopting .50 as the threshold (Hair et al., 2019). Discriminant validity was confirmed when the AVE for each construct was greater than the squared correlations between that construct and others (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). (2) Structural equation modeling (SEM) was then applied to test the hypothesized relationships among constructs. Model fit was evaluated using conventional indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Normalized Fit Index (NFI), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with a 90% confidence interval. Acceptable model fit was defined as CFI and NFI \geq .90, and SRMR and RMSEA \leq .08, consistent with recommendations (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2019).

Additionally, the direct effects of constructs on the outcome variable were examined following Hair et al. (2019). To test the significance of direct effects, a Bootstrap resampling procedure with 1,000 samples was conducted in AMOS 23.0, using bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. Effect sizes were classified as trivial (0–.19), small (.20–.49), medium (.50–.79), or large (.80 and above), in line with Cohen's (1992) guidelines.

Results

Preliminary analysis

No missing values or outliers (univariate or multivariate), nor violations from univariate distribution, were detected. Nonetheless, Mardia's coefficient from multivariate kurtosis exceeded the recommended value (>.5). Consequently, a Bootstrap Bollen-Stine (2000) was executed (Nevitt & Hancock, 2001). Moreover, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was calculated to check the collinearity diagnosis. Results indicated that all VIF values were less than 10, a recommended value suggested by Hair et al. (2019). Finally, a GPower 3.1 (Faul et al., 2009) was used to determine the required sample size, considering the following parameters: (effect size $f^2 = .1$; $\alpha = .05$; statistical power = .95 and five predictors) the required sample size was exceeded.

Measurement model

Means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations across all studied variables are presented in Table 2. The results of analysing the reliability of the factors using Cronbach's alpha were considered excellent for the factors Running involvement (RI) $\alpha = .952$ and Attitude toward sponsor company (ATI) $\alpha = .917$, very good for the factors Purchase intentions on sponsor's products (INT) $\alpha = .884$ and Perceived congruence between the sponsor and the event (PC) $\alpha = .836$ and acceptable for the factor Altruistic sponsor motives (MOT) $\alpha = .742$ (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The correlation patterns show that running involvement is positive and significantly associated with perceived congruence, attitude towards



sponsoring company and purchasing intention of sponsors' products, and that brand recognition is negative and significantly associated with perceived congruence. In its turn, attitude towards sponsoring company is positive and significantly associated with both perceived congruence and purchasing intention, and perceived congruence is positive and significantly associated with purchasing intention. The remaining bivariate correlations were not significant. Finally, it was possible to observe that all constructs presented an adjusted value of composite reliability ($>.70$) (Hair et al., 2019). The test of measurement model included running involvement, altruistic sponsor motives, brand recognition, perceived congruence, attitude towards sponsoring company and purchasing intention, and the results show that the measurement model fits to the data ($\chi^2=1026.964$ (137); SRMR=.059; B-Sp= $<.001$; RMSEA=.080 [90%CI=.076, .085]; TLI=.903; CFI=.918). Furthermore, the measurement model revealed that no problems in both convergent and discriminant validity were found, since the average variance extracted was greater than or equal to .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019), and the square correlations among all constructs were less than the AVE of each factor (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2. Descriptive and correlation analysis for all constructs and composite reliability

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RI	1	-	-	-	-	-
2. MOT	.22**	1	-	-	-	-
3. BR	-.002	-.18**	1	-	-	-
4. PC	.15**	.80**	-.17**	1	-	-
5. ATI	.13**	.73**	-.07	.65**	1	-
6. INT	.11*	.42**	-.07	.47**	.41**	1
Mean	3.35	3.83	7.02	2.72	4.10	2.41
SD	1.17	1.21	2.84	.974	1.08	1.36
CR	.94	.87	-	.86	.92	.89

Notes: RI= running involvement; MOT= motives; BR= brand recognition; PC= perceived congruence; AT= attitude; INT= purchase intention; CR= Composite reliability; SD= standard deviation; ** $p<.001$; * $p<.05$; ns= not significant.

Structural model - Hypotheses testing

The structural model showed a good fit to the data ($\chi^2=1126.70$ (142); $\chi^2/df=7.94$; SRMR=.080; B-Sp= $<.001$; RMSEA=.079 [90%CI=.074, .083]; TLI=.900; CFI=.910). The standardized direct effects are presented in Figure 1, from which it is possible to observe the following: (i) positive, significant and trivial effects between running involvement and altruistic sponsor motives ($\beta=.19$ [.097, .289], $p=.001$); (ii) positive, significant and trivial effects between perceived congruence and attitudes towards sponsoring company ($\beta=.27$ [.116, .425], $p=.002$); (iii) Furthermore positive, significant and medium effects between brand recognition and perceived congruence ($\beta=.70$ [.620, .7806], $p=.001$); (iv) positive, significant and large effects between altruistic sponsor motives and attitudes towards sponsoring company ($\beta=.46$ [.303, .617], $p=.002$) and (v) positive, significant and small effects between attitudes towards sponsoring company and purchasing intention on sponsors' products ($\beta=.39$ [.319, .469], $p=.001$). The direct effects between running involvement, brand recognition, perceived congruence and attitudes towards sponsoring company, as well as altruistic sponsor motives and perceived congruence, were not significant (i.e., confidence intervals include zero and $p>.05$). These results support H4, H5, H7, H8, H9, but not H1, H2, H3 and H6 hypotheses, see Table 3.

Table 3. Path estimates for the direct effects

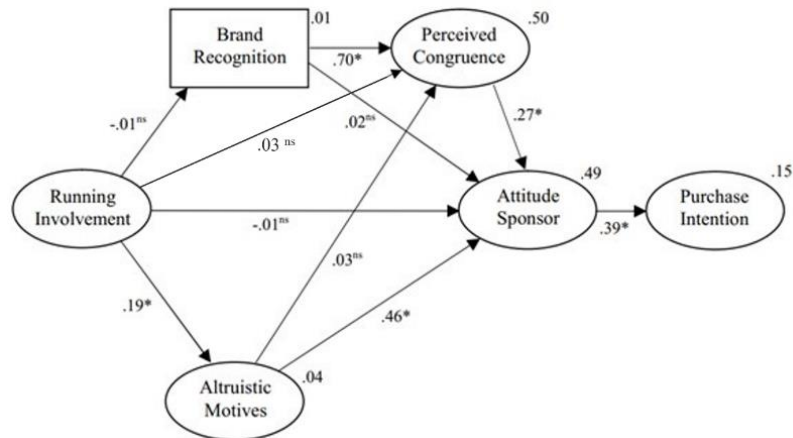
H	Path estimate	Confirmation	β
H1.	Running involvement \rightarrow Brand recognition sponsor	NO	-.01 ^{ns}
H2.	Running involvement \rightarrow Perceived congruence	NO	.03 ^{ns}
H3.	Running involvement \rightarrow Attitude towards sponsor company	NO	-.01 ^{ns}
H4.	Running involvement \rightarrow Altruistic sponsor motives	YES	.19**
H5.	Brand recognition sponsor \rightarrow Perceived congruence	YES	.70**
H6.	Altruistic sponsor motives \rightarrow Perceived congruence	NO	-.03 ^{ns}
H7.	Altruistic sponsor motives \rightarrow Attitude towards sponsor company	YES	.46*
H8.	Perceived congruence \rightarrow Attitude towards sponsor company	YES	.27*
H9.	Attitude towards sponsor company \rightarrow Purchase Intention	YES	.39**

Notes: ** $p<.001$; * $p<.05$; ns = not significant. Despite the positive bivariate (pairwise) correlations between RI and PC and between RI and ATI (Table 2), H2 and H3 were rejected, as the Structural Equation Model (SEM) observes all 'complete system' variables at the same time and considers the effects of the various predictors pointing to the same variable; The high value of χ^2/df may be associated with sample size, because χ^2 is sensitive to the sample. For this reason, in large samples, other fit indices were considered, such as CFI, TLI, and RMSEA.



The structural model used showed a total capacity in which the explained variation of the perceived congruence between the sponsor and the event was 50%, the attitude towards sponsoring company was 49%, and the purchasing intention of sponsors' products was 15%, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Standardized individual parameters – Hypothesized model



Discussion

The objective of the research was to test a model of runners' responses to sponsorship, to determine to what extent (i) activity (running) involvement influences brand recognition and altruistic motives in corporate sponsorship; (ii) the brand recognition predicts perceived congruence between the brand and running and attitudes towards the sponsoring company; (iii) attributions of altruistic motives influence the perceived congruence between the brand and running and attitudes towards the sponsoring company; (iv) the perceived congruence influences the attitudes towards the sponsoring company; and (v) the attitude towards the sponsoring company determines the intention of runners to buy sponsors' products.

The model showed an acceptable performance. The ability to explain the predictor constructs of the effects of sponsorship on runners, regarding the formation of perceived congruence between the brand and running, was 50%. It should be noted that the attitude towards the sponsoring company was explained in 49% of cases by the variables preceding it in the hypothetical model.

Running involvement

Running involvement did not have a significant, direct, positive effect on the sponsor's brand recognition. From an empirical point of view this result differs from the results found in the context of running, since Beaton et al. (2011) and Eagleman and Krohn (2012) found a direct and positive effect of involvement on sponsor recognition and between identification with running on sponsor recognition, respectively. However, it confirms other results, in different contexts (Bachleda et al., 2016; Koronios et al., 2022a; Koronios et al., 2022b). Possible explanations for these results can be supported by two elements. Firstly, the specific and distinct nature of running and runners, which differ from the reality of spectators and television viewers, who passively attend sports events, and are more disposed than runners to process sponsors' stimuli. Secondly, the fact that the sponsoring brands of running were mostly local brands and a high proportion (63.3%) of runners did not come from the region. From a theoretical point of view, a key construct in the Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion (ELM) (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) is the elaboration likelihood continuum on the central merits of a question or position, in our case, the sponsor brand. However, it appears that sponsor communications (advertisements and posters) may not be a central issue for runners with higher levels of involvement, because it seems that these runners are essentially more concerned about the race and their performance and less about sponsor communications on the race course.

Running involvement did not show any significant positive direct effects on attitudes towards the sponsoring company or on perceived congruence. In other words, there were no higher levels of attitude towards sponsoring companies among runners for whom running is an activity of great personal importance and central to their lives.

The judgements regarding the sponsoring company were not statistically significant and did not confirm Madrigal's (2001) proposal on the notion of evaluative consistency, according to which runners who are more involved in an activity tend to evaluate objects related to the activity that is central to their lives favourably in order to avoid the dissonance that affects this high level of involvement. This result can potentially be observed in terms of congruence theory (Jagre et al., 2001), when applied to the context of sponsorship, it can show that a sponsoring company that demonstrates genuine concern for the sporting event in which the runner is involved can be perceived as an ally of the highly committed runner, precisely because it supports an event in which it believes and which is important to it. Perhaps the levels of activation and genuine presence at the event venue did not occur, or this presence was not processed by the runners. Empirically speaking, the results obtained are not consistent with those observed in the running context (Eagleman & Krohn, 2012), by Son and Williams (2023) in the NBA, by (Koronios et al., 2022a) in basketball spectators, and by (Moharana et al., 2023) in football spectators. However, they confirm the discovery of Dreisbach et al. (2021), Evans and Eddy (2022), Koronios et al. (2024) and Koo and Lee (2019) who found that sports involvement spectators did not produce positive results on attitudes towards sponsors when sponsor-event congruence levels were reduced.

Regarding perceived congruence, the result can be explained by two factors. The first is associated with the nature of the race, in which the levels of attention and cognitive elaboration of the runners to the sponsors' communication channels may be reduced, which may lead to lower levels of perceived congruence. The second factor may stem from congruence theory (Jagre et al., 2001), such that it is not enough to support the event; it is necessary to fit with the event's objectives. The salience of the REPSOL brand traits (a fuel company – “polluting”) (mean = 2.72 on a 7-point scale) led to it being perceived as having low congruence with a race that promotes health and well-being.

The results obtained showed that running involvement had a significant, positive, direct effect on the altruistic sponsor's motives. The runners most involved in the race believe that sponsorship by a sponsoring company occurs for altruistic motives, associated with genuine interest in the race and the value of the event. This means that as the degree of involvement with running increases, runners are increasingly likely to develop inferences that lead to altruistic motives being attributed to the sponsoring company. These runners do not believe that running sponsorship is associated with commercial motives related to the interests of increasing profits and benefits of the sponsoring companies. The results confirm the conclusions of Deitz et al. (2012) and Kim et al. (2010) by studying triathletes and Son and Williams (2023) in NBA. The congruity theory (Jagre et al., 2001), when applied to the context of sponsorship, can show that a sponsoring company that shows genuine concern for the sporting event with which the runner is involved, and that provides the resources in proportion to the prestige of the event, can be perceived as an ally of the highly involved runner, precisely because it supports the event that is something in which he believes, and which, for him, is important.

Attribution of sponsor motives to sponsor

The results obtained in the context of sponsorship of running, through the hypothetical model specified, showed that the altruistic motives attributed by the runners to the sponsoring company did not have a direct, positive effect on the formation of the perceived congruence between the brand and running. One possible explanation for this may be related to two factors. The first is that these runners' objectives are focused on the race and their performance, and less on evaluating the sponsor's communications, which can lead to reduced congruence. The second may be associated with the characteristics of the REPSOL brand – a fuel company – considered “polluting” and poorly aligned with the aims of an outdoor race that promotes health and well-being. These characteristics may have led to the attribution of less altruistic motives and, consequently, to low perceived congruence.

The driver of effective sponsorship lies in altruistic sponsor motives. As has been found in other contexts of donations by companies, also in the sponsorship of athletics races, the favorable attitudinal response towards sponsoring companies was strongly influenced by the effects of altruistic sponsor motives.



However, there seems to be no complete congruence in the results. Globally, altruistic motives and sponsor sincerity have generally been found to have a positive relationship with high-level sponsorship effects (Dreisbach et al., 2021; Asada et al., 2023; Carrillat & Grohs, 2019; Kang & Matsuoka, 2022; Kim et al., 2010; Koronios et al., 2022a; Mohammadi et al., 2024; Olson, 2010; Koronios et al., 2024; Rifon et al., 2004; Silva, 2024; Speed & Thompson, 2000; Son & Williams, 2023). Other investigations have shown the opposite (Alexandris et al., 2007; Dean, 2002; Deitz et al., 2012). The significant influence of altruistic sponsor motives on attitudes towards sponsoring companies may be understood from the perspective of attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980). This result is very important because when applied to the context of sponsorship, it claims that consumers observe that companies are supporting a sporting activity or event with which they are involved, and therefore attribute positive motives to that and acknowledge gratitude to the company for the sponsorship it has provided.

Perceived congruence, attitudes towards the sponsoring company and intention to buy sponsors' products

The results showed that the perceived congruence between the brand and running had a considerable, positive and direct effect on attitudes towards sponsoring companies. In other words, the runners who perceived greater congruence between the company and running were those who showed the most favorable attitude towards the company. In the context of spectators of various sports (Bachleda et al., 2016; Dos-Santos et al., 2019; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Evans & Eddy, 2022; Han et al., 2013; Kim & Kim, 2018; Koronios et al., 2024; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Shin et al., 2018; Silva, 2024) and in the running context, we confirm the results obtained. Only one investigation has evaluated these variables: Papadimitriou et al. (2016) found the same results in volunteers, runners and spectators. In fact, the results obtained can be explained on the basis of the Jagre et al. (2001) theory of congruity, which states that the evaluation of an object is influenced by the presence of congruence with the existing frame of reference in human thought, so that the extreme incongruence between two objects requires extensive cognitive elaboration that leads the individual to frustration causing negative evaluations (Jagre et al., 2001). This result is very important because it shows the need for increased care in the selection process of the races chosen for sponsorship. Brand managers need to carefully choose the events they sponsor to make participants realise that there is a high degree of compatibility between the event and the sponsor. When runners see sponsors supporting their favourite activity, they develop a favourable attitude, which can lead to the purchase of their products as a gesture of goodwill or a way of repaying the sponsor's support for the activity (Parker & Fink, 2010).

The purchasing intention of sponsors' products was determined in significant ways by attitudes towards the sponsoring company. The results found in the race context confirm those verified in the only investigation to date evaluating the relationship between these two variables (Papadimitriou et al., 2016). From a theoretical point of view, Fishbein's attitude theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) may contribute to the understanding of the results obtained. In the context of sponsorship, the Fishbein's attitude theory defends the existence of a causal flow through the components of attitude (beliefs → affections → behavioral intentions). This is in agreement with the theory, since it has been shown that runners who have developed positive feelings and favorable attitudes towards sponsoring companies amplify this positive disposition through the formation of intentions to purchase their products (Alexandris et al., 2012; Bachleda et al., 2016; Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Evans & Eddy, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2018; Koo & Lee, 2019; Koronios et al., 2022a; Koronios et al., 2022b; Koronios et al., 2024, Madrigal, 2001; Nguyen & Vu, 2022; Silva, 2024; Speed & Thompson, 2000). This result is very important for sponsors because intention is the stage that precedes behaviour, which allows sponsors to achieve results.

Overall, the model revealed an acceptable fit to the data, reflected in the values expressed by the fit indices. As a whole, it achieved an explanatory level of 15% of the purchase intentions for the sponsoring company's products. Runners who are more likely to buy the sponsoring company's products are those who attribute more altruistic motives, perceive a higher level of congruence between the sponsor and the race, and have a more favorable attitude towards the sponsoring company. The variance explained by the model ($R^2 = 0.15$) reflects the complex and multifactorial nature of consumer behavior in sporting events. Although the results confirm the relevance of the hypotheses tested, the model constitutes a necessary simplification of reality. The reduced variance suggests that runners' purchase intentions may be influenced by a broader spectrum of variables not considered in this study, such as contextual factors

of running, individual psychological background, and socioeconomic variables, which make the phenomenon inherently less predictable.

Practical Applications

This study offers three important implications for the practice of sponsorship, especially for race organizers and companies that might consider sponsoring an athletics race as part of their marketing strategy.

First, companies should make efforts to promote in runners the idea that they have altruistic and activity-oriented motives - the driver of athletics race sponsorship effectiveness - through moderate levels of sponsorship, because this leads to higher levels of attitude towards sponsoring companies ($\beta=.46$, $p=.002$, Figure 1 and Table 3). Race organizers should consider this factor and, within the sponsorship agreements, seek to establish sponsorship activities oriented towards running with predominantly altruistic objectives. In this sense, (Cornwell et al., 2024) highlighted the need to reinforce the sponsored partnership relationships in a service-dominant logic and systems thinking and co-creation of greater value. For example, look for sponsorship activation activities that are genuine and centered on the interests of runners, such as a tool that can assess the level of wear on running shoes.

Second, the importance of perceived congruence has implications for the need for a well-founded and careful selection of the athletics races to be sponsored, and in turn, for the implementation of sponsorship strategies, with the objective of increasing the level of perceived congruence between running and the sponsoring company, through connections seen as logical (Cornwell, 1995) and obvious. Since perceived congruence is subjective, it encompasses the potential to develop perceptions of authenticity and congruence through appropriate activation actions. This recommendation is justified because it can be more difficult to increase positive attitudes towards the sponsoring company among runners who cannot understand the congruence between the company and the sports activity ($\beta=.27$, $p=.002$, Figure 1 and Table 3). For example, sponsor REPSOL could present itself as a company that cares about the environment and invests in solutions based on the circular economy, promoting the collection and recycling of plastic bottles resulting from refueling throughout the race.

Third, high levels of attitude towards sponsoring companies have led to higher levels of intention to buy sponsors' products, ($\beta=.39$, $p=.001$, Figure 1 and Table 3). The implications of these results will encourage managers of sponsoring companies to consider that the development of sales strategies should be preceded by an improvement in the attitude towards the company, and that the segment of runners with the highest level of involvement may be a priority for targeting; this may include the offer of various promotional activities at the race site, such as free tests, raffles or a hospitality tent, in which runners can relax and interact with each other. For example, it has been shown that positive perception of other participants' physical appearance stimulates cognitive and emotional engagement with the brand (Temerak & Winklhofer, 2023). For race organisers and sponsored organisations, the recommendation is to develop activities - strategic communication planning in relation to the public (Montserrat-Gauchi et al., 2020) and incentive programmes - to achieve the goal of raising the level of running involvement, especially for runners with lower levels of involvement (e.g., autograph sessions with famous runners and the team sponsor), to ensure a presence on the Internet and social networks which facilitate interactions between runners and develop runner involvement.

Limitations and future research

The brands used as stimuli in this research were real brands, with some level of familiarity amongst the runners. According to Roy (2010), this could lead some individuals to react to the measurement scale only based on the brand information they already had, rather than on the stimuli presented in the questionnaire. As this is a cross-sectional study, not excluding other potential explanations may limit causal inference. Brand recognition was measured as an overall score (0-10 for all sponsors), and H5 was tested in relation to constructs specific to the sponsor REPSOL, which may have created a weakness in terms of construct validity associated with H5. Another possible limitation is the fact that a convenience sample was used.

It is appropriate to test the effects of the model in two different environments: a) in an over-marketed environment where brand activation actions are perceived as excessive; and b) in a genuine and discreet environment. Because it has been shown (Schönberner & Woratschek, 2023), that sponsors' activations



can lead to positive or negative customer engagement behavior, depending on how sport consumers evaluate the activation. Considering that results have shown that CSR models in the sports sector are scarce, especially when it comes to finding out what athletes think (Fonseca et al., 2022), it becomes pertinent to change the sponsorship context and test the model in other mass participation individual sports such as cycling, canoeing or team sports such as football. Longitudinal projects can still be implemented to test post-sponsorship attitude changes.

Conclusions

In an effort to influence runners' attitudes, sponsor brands have engaged actively in involving themselves with race organizers hoping that runners' enthusiasm for their favorite activity would spread to themselves and their products. Current results allow us to highlight four main findings – the drivers: First, running involvement has played a role in the prediction of altruistic sponsors' motives, for sponsors, which in turn are also a significant predictor of the evaluation of the sponsors' attitudes towards them. Second, perceived altruistic motives are able to predict runners' attitudes towards sponsors. Third, even among more involved runners, with higher levels of recognition of sponsor brands and with altruistic motives attributed to perceived congruence, it did not reach significant levels, a fact that would have limited runners' attitudes and purchase intentions. Fourth, runners with higher levels of attitude towards sponsors show higher purchasing intentions. In sum, the sponsor's commitment is related to the opportunity for sponsoring companies to show runners an altruistic positioning, knowing that this is the driver of athletics race sponsorship effectiveness.

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