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Football Fan Engagement: Sponsorship Brand Value and Consumer Purchase Intentions

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Abstract

Purpose - This study aims to analyze the influence of football fans' involvement on sponsor brand equity and their purchase intention toward the sponsoring brand. To achieve this, we specified a structural model examining the relationships between engagement, brand equity, and fans' purchase intentions.

Design/methodology/approach - The data for this study was collected using a structured questionnaire. Three football teams from the city of Quito (Ecuador) that compete in the first division of Ecuadorian professional football were considered. For data collection, both personal interviews and a web link were used. The personal interviews were carried out directly with the fans of the three teams in the vicinity of the stadiums, prior to matches of the Ecuadorian League.

Findings - The study concluded that a greater involvement of fans with a football club positively influences both the valuation of the sponsoring brand and the intention to purchase the product/service of the sponsoring brand.

Originality - Most of the research in the literature has studied purchase intention towards the club brand, but not towards the sponsoring brand. The research, which is applied to the football industry, conceptually extends the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model by including the perspective of football fans' involvement with their clubs.

Practical implications - This work contributes to the literature on brand equity. On the one hand, from the companies' perspective, it is important for brand managers to realise that football fans constitute an especially significant section of the public to strengthen the brand and even to buy the products of the sponsoring brand. On the other hand, from the point of view of the clubs, it should be borne in mind that the involvement of the fans with the clubs constitutes a major factor in strengthening the sponsoring brands.

Keywords Brand value, Football, Fan involvement, Sponsorship, Purchase intention

1. Introduction

Sponsorship has evolved as a key component of the marketing mix, especially within the sports industry, where it enables brands to build visibility, foster emotional connections, and engage deeply with consumers (Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Mahmoudabadi *et al.*, 2019). Within sports, football is an arena where sponsorship can drive substantial brand loyalty and impact purchase intentions due to the strong emotional involvement fans have with their clubs (Westberg *et al.*, 2011). This research examines how football fan involvement in Latin America, particularly in Ecuador, influences sponsor brand equity and purchase intentions, providing insights to inform more effective sponsorship strategies.

While considerable research has been conducted on consumer purchase intentions towards club brands, there is a notable gap in understanding the influence of fan involvement on the equity of sponsoring brands (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). Recent studies have highlighted the need to explore the complex interactions between fan involvement and sponsor brand value, as these relationships can significantly impact sponsorship effectiveness (Biscaia *et al.*, 2016; Cobbs and Groza, 2022).

Additionally, previous research has often relied on outdated models that do not fully capture the contemporary landscape of sports sponsorships. By integrating recent developments in consumer behaviour and brand management theories, this study seeks to fill this gap and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how football fan involvement influences sponsoring brand equity (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020; Weimar *et al.*, 2022). Most of the research in the literature has studied purchase intention towards the club brand, but not towards the sponsoring brand (Shuv-Ami, 2016).

Football fans are characterised by a strong passion for their team and strong emotions. Wang and Kaplaniou (2013) and Weimar *et al.* (2022) both highlight the significant impact of emotions on fan behavior, with positive emotions leading to stronger purchase intentions towards sponsors and negative emotions resulting in angry reactions to sponsor-related content. Latin America's football culture offers a rich yet underexplored context for studying sponsorship dynamics. Football fans in the region often exhibit high emotional attachment to their clubs, creating unique conditions for examining how these attachments translate to sponsor brands. This setting provides theoretical and practical value, as fan behavior and brand loyalty in emerging markets like Ecuador are shaped by cultural and economic factors that differ significantly from Western contexts (Hofstede, 2001; Khanna and Palepu, 2010). Examining football sponsorships within Ecuador thus advances the literature by exploring how fan-club relationships influence brand equity, an area not fully addressed in existing sports marketing research.

While significant research has focused on brand loyalty towards clubs, the impact of fan engagement on the sponsoring brand's equity and purchase intentions remains a gap in the literature (Biscaia *et al.*, 2016; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). Our study addresses this gap by extending the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model to include fan involvement, thereby adding a new dimension to sports sponsorship analysis. We examine how fan involvement with a club influences their perceptions of sponsor brands, specifically in terms of brand equity elements such as awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and brand image.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: *How does the involvement of football fans with their clubs influence the brand equity of sponsoring brands and the purchase intentions of those brands' products or services?* By focusing on Ecuadorian fans, our research contributes a perspective from an underrepresented region in sports marketing literature, which can inform both theoretical frameworks and practical strategies for engaging fans in similar emerging markets.

This research is crucial because of its impact on the sports industry and its strategic value. The sports industry, particularly football, is a major sector where sponsorship plays a critical role in brand promotion and equity enhancement. Understanding how fan involvement affects these dynamics is vital for both clubs and sponsors.

In the following sections, we develop the theoretical framework, outline the methodology, and present the findings from our empirical analysis, which provide evidence for the critical role fan engagement plays in enhancing sponsor brand value and purchase intentions.

2. Theoretical framework and hypothesis development

2.1. Sponsorship in Sports Marketing

Sponsorship has become an essential strategy in sports marketing, enabling brands to connect with audiences through association with sports teams, events, and personalities. The primary goals of sports sponsorship are to boost brand visibility, enhance brand image, and foster consumer engagement (Cornwell and Kwon, 2020; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). Sponsorship in the sports industry leverages fans' emotional and psychological attachment to their teams, creating unique opportunities for brands to cultivate loyalty and encourage purchase intentions among consumers (Shuv-Ami, 2016).

Sports sponsorships are not merely financial transactions; they are strategic partnerships that enhance brand equity. Brands leverage the passion and loyalty of sports fans to create meaningful associations that transcend traditional advertising methods (Shakina *et al.*, 2020). The success of such sponsorships is often measured by the increase in brand equity elements, such as awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and overall brand image (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). Therefore, understanding the dynamics of sports sponsorships and their impact on brand equity is crucial for academics and marketing practitioners.

2.2. Sports Sponsorship and Brand Equity

Research shows that sponsorship can significantly influence various components of brand equity, including brand awareness, perceived quality, loyalty, and brand image (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). A well-aligned sponsorship generates positive brand associations that enhance consumers' perceptions and trust in the sponsoring brand (Olson and Thjomoe, 2011). Sponsorships that align with consumer interests, such as sports, strengthen the brand's market position and add value through enhanced brand loyalty (Biscaia, Correia, Yoshida, *et al.*, 2013).

Through sports, companies strengthen their competitive advantages and build brand value (Hindmarsh *et al.*, 2023; Wang, 2017). Researchers have reported that certain companies that have invested in sports sponsorship have received significant revenue growth (Andreini *et al.*, 2014; Blake *et al.*, 2019). This may be due to improved brand visibility and product consumption among participants (Kelly *et al.*, 2017). More recently, it has been confirmed that sports sponsorship can improve the value of the sponsoring brand (Kwon and Cornwell, 2020).

The literature shows that sponsorship exerts a positive effect on several brand equity characteristics such as brand image, trust, loyalty, and quality (DeGaris *et al.*, 2017; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Wang, 2017; Wang and Tang, 2018).

On the other hand, Shakina *et al* (2020) further emphasize the importance of emotions, showing that fans are more driven by emotions than economic reasoning, particularly when watching highly competitive matches or matches involving brand-teams. Pradhan *et al* (2020) and Demirel and Erdogmus (2016) both underscore the role of fan engagement and perceived sincerity in shaping attitudes towards sponsors, with a strong fan-brand personality congruence leading to more favorable attitudes. Biscaia *et al* (2012) and Abosag *et al* (2012) both highlight the importance of specific emotions, such as joy, in enhancing satisfaction and behavioral intentions, and the relationship between emotional attachment and brand perception. Lastly, Davies *et al* (2006) demonstrate the complexity of joint sponsorship arrangements, with ambivalent attitudes among supporters and no clear relationship between club support and brand preference.

Despite previous recommendations, there is a notable lack of research on the relationship between fans and sponsor brands, specifically how this impacts both the club's and sponsor's performance (Weimar *et al.*, 2022). There is a deficiency in empirical studies examining the relationship between club involvement, brand equity, and purchase retention, necessitating more case studies and diverse data sources retention (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020). Also, the majority of existing literature focuses on purchase intentions toward the club brand rather than the sponsoring brand (Shuv-Ami, 2016).

2.3. Fan Involvement in Sports Sponsorship

Fan involvement plays a critical role in the effectiveness of sports sponsorship. High levels of fan identification with a team can lead to greater awareness of and positive attitudes toward the sponsor brand (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, *et al.*, 2013). Fans who exhibit strong emotional ties to a sports team are more likely to view sponsor brands as favourable, translating their loyalty toward the team into brand loyalty (Shuv-Ami, 2016). In this study, we extend this understanding by examining how fan involvement with Ecuadorian football clubs influences sponsor brand equity and consumer purchase intentions.

Fans are one of the main assets of football teams. Fans do not only bring financial income to the club but are also part of the club's identity. In countries such as England, Spain, Italy, or Argentina there are numerous examples of football fans who have very strong links to the philosophy of the clubs. These ties are determined by their feelings and loyalty towards the club (Hedlund, 2014). Equally, football clubs can manage these bonds by creating social value or by meeting the expectations of the fans. All these factors shape the fans' involvement with the team.

The emotional relationship between the client and the subject being sponsored is one of the factors that contributes to the effectiveness of sponsorship (Holtermann, 2007). Companies must therefore consider the level of trust that exists between the sponsored subject and its followers. In the case of football, aspects such as affective loyalty to the club, the emotional value of the followers, the social value of the club, and the capacity of the club are all aspects closely associated with the involvement of fans in the club (Bauer *et al.*, 2008).

2.4. Identified Research Gap

The influence of sponsorship on brand equity has been extensively studied, with a focus on how sponsorships in sports impact brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and brand image (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Shuv-Ami, 2016). However, most existing research emphasizes consumer loyalty and purchase intentions toward the club brand rather than the sponsoring brand, creating a notable gap in understanding the sponsor's brand equity in the context of sports sponsorship (Biscaia *et al.*, 2016; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014).

Moreover, while several studies have explored the general impact of fan involvement on club loyalty, few have examined how fan engagement with a football club influences their attitudes and purchase intentions towards the sponsoring brand specifically (Cobbs and Groza, 2022). This gap is particularly pronounced in emerging markets, where cultural and social dynamics surrounding sports can significantly shape consumer behavior differently from Western markets (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020; Weimar *et al.*, 2022).

While considerable research has explored consumer attitudes toward team brands, there is limited knowledge regarding the direct impact of fan involvement on sponsor brand equity in emerging markets. Latin America, particularly, presents a unique context for sports sponsorship due to its passionate football culture and distinct consumer behavior, shaped by socio-economic factors (Rahman *et al.*, 2024). This underrepresentation of Latin America in sports marketing research points to a gap that this study aims to address. Specifically, we investigate how fan involvement affects perceptions of sponsor brands, contributing new insights to the field of sports sponsorship and brand equity.

In light of these gaps, this study contributes to the literature by extending the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model to incorporate fan involvement as a factor that enhances sponsoring brand equity and purchase intentions. By examining fan engagement, we add an emerging market perspective, broadening the understanding of sponsorship effectiveness across different cultural settings. This approach also enables us to propose actionable insights for sponsors targeting high-involvement sports fans, thereby advancing both theoretical and practical knowledge in sports marketing.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which highlights how brand value is perceived by consumers based on brand knowledge, associations, and experiences (Keller, 1993). The Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model is based on the customer's point of view. Customer-based models measure brand equity based on customer attitude and benefit towards a particular brand (Keller and Lehmann, 2006).

Research on CBBE in football has highlighted its significance in the industry. Bauer *et al* (2005) and Blumrodt *et al* (2012) both emphasize the importance of brand equity in the economic success of football clubs. Biscaia *et al* (2013; 2016) further explore the relationship between brand equity and fan club membership, with the latter identifying specific dimensions of brand equity that influence behavioral intentions.

This study is based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), complemented by the Image Transfer Theory (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016), to model the impact of football fan engagement on sponsoring

brand equity and purchase intentions. About stimulus, sponsorship activities serve as the stimulus, encompassing the brand's visibility, marketing communications, and association with the football club (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). On the other hand, brand equity components (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand image) represent the organism, reflecting the psychological reactions and evaluations fans form in response to sponsorship stimuli (Habachi *et al.*, 2024). These components indicate the internal cognitive and emotional processes that shape how fans perceive and value the sponsoring brand. Finally, the response is characterized by the behavioural intentions of fans, particularly their intention to purchase the sponsoring brand's products or services, demonstrating the influence of psychological reactions on consumer behaviour (Sherman *et al.*, 1997).

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model has been applied to various aspects of the sport industry. In the context of small-scale sporting events, emotional experiences positively impact functional value, tourist satisfaction, and destination loyalty (Jeong *et al.*, 2020). The model has also been used to study artistic entertainment experiences during live sporting events (Bo and Zhang, 2024). Additionally, the model has been applied to examine branding co-creation in social media brand communities (Kamboj *et al.*, 2018) or evaluate public service advertisements' effectiveness (Mishra *et al.*, 2022). In the case of football, the S-O-R theory has been applied to investigate the determinants of football fan loyalty (Rahman *et al.*, 2024).

The model proposed in our study is also based on the theory of image transfer (Abreu Novais and Arcodia, 2013). This theory claims that the attributes inherent to a sports team or event are transferred to the sponsoring brand (Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2016). Sports teams have their own personalities and attributes associated with their brand (Grohs, 2016). These factors are linked to the attitudes and behaviours of their fans due to their sense of identification with the team (Bagozzi *et al.*, 2012). Of great importance in this theory is the congruence between the sponsored team and the sponsoring brand. Congruence measures the 'fit' between the sponsor and the sponsored, according to consumer perceptions (Rifon *et al.*, 2004). In the sport domain, congruence theory is related to the fit between fans' involvement to the club and the purchase intention of the sponsoring brand. Some authors define involvement as the individual's perceived importance of an object based on needs, values and interests in the field of sports marketing (Beaton *et al.*, 2011; Bennett *et al.*, 2009; Ko *et al.*, 2008; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). Participation or involvement varies according to individual characteristics, situational factors and the characteristics of the product or stimulus (Zaichkowsky, 1985).

Literature shows some examples of articles that apply Image Transfer Theory to the sport industry. For instance, Gwinner and Eaton (1999) examine how consumers transfer images from sponsored events to sponsor brands, focusing on the mechanisms that facilitate this transfer. Also, other article explores how loyalty to a sports team affects perceptions of sponsors, emphasizing how image transfer from the team to the sponsor influences consumer attitudes and behaviours (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, *et al.*, 2013). Likewise, Kwon *et al.* (2016) investigate the role of perceived fit in image transfer between sports events and sponsor brands, highlighting the importance of congruence in successful sponsorship outcomes. On the other hand, Koenigstorfer *et al.* (2010) also

examine fan loyalty and how image transfer from sports clubs to sponsors can be influenced by team performance, particularly during challenging times.

By integrating Image Transfer Theory, we propose that the attributes and values associated with the football club are transferred to the sponsoring brand, enhancing brand equity components (Figure 1). This transfer is facilitated by fans' identification with the club, which intensifies the psychological impact of the sponsorship.

These issues are connected to the engagement. Recent research highlights the importance of strategic approaches to enhance engagement in sports and related activities. Studies have shown that self-determination theory-aligned strategies, such as reflective journaling and autonomy-driven tasks, can improve volunteer engagement in sport-for-development programs (Simms *et al.*, 2024). Sports-related extracurricular activities have been found to enhance school engagement by fostering positive social relationships (St-Amand *et al.*, 2017). Also, community-based projects involving partnerships between various organizations can increase physical activity opportunities for disadvantaged populations (Rosso and McGrath, 2017). In the same way, customer engagement in sports has been identified as a promising area for research and practice (McDonald *et al.*, 2022). In addition, social media strategies employed by alcohol brands sponsoring sports events have been shown to effectively engage consumers (Westberg *et al.*, 2018). All these aspects show the importance of sport strategies with commitment.

Most studies conclude that the effectiveness of sports sponsorship depends on the correlation between the values conveyed and perceived by the sponsor and the sponsored party (Tsordia *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, perceived congruence leads to an improvement in the attitude and perception of the sponsoring brand (Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, having a good fit between the two parties is important to achieve a higher degree of trust and identification with the sponsoring brand (Carlson *et al.*, 2008). In the field of football, researchers relate this congruence to club involvement. The literature shows that fans who identify themselves more with the team will become more aware of everything associated with their team, including their sponsors (Biscaia *et al.*, 2016; Cobbs and Groza, 2022; Gwinner and Swanson, 2003; Silva, 2022).

Similarly, this congruence is affected by the fan's attitude and perception of the sponsoring brand (Yoshida *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, the creation of brand equity is important to have a positive impact.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE FIGURE 1]

2.6. Hypotheses Development

Sponsorship in the sport industry is a multifaceted and critical component of both marketing strategies and event management (Cornwell, 2019). It serves as a significant revenue stream for sports organizations and a strategic investment for sponsors aiming to enhance brand visibility and achieve various organizational objectives (Meenaghan, 1998).

2.6.1. Perceived quality of the sponsoring brand

Perceived quality is one of the main constructs in the study of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). It can be considered a fundamental aspect of the creation of brand value. In addition, studies have shown that football fans in particular can develop strong emotional connections with sponsoring brands, especially if they view the sponsorship as benefiting their favourite team (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012). These emotional connections may further increase perceived brand quality, as fans may view the sponsoring brand more favourably due to its association with the team.

Since the first-order constructs defined in this study (perceived quality, brand awareness, loyalty, and brand image) are highly correlated, a reflective model has been utilised that follows the criteria of Jarvis *et al.* (2003) and Hair *et al.* (2013). Its fundamental characteristic is that a change in the second-order construct is reflected in a change in the first-order constructs. Furthermore, the measurement error is found in the first-order constructs. Based on that laid out above, the following hypothesis can be defined:

H1a. The greater the value of the sponsoring brand, the greater the perceived quality of the brand by fans.

2.6.2. Awareness of the sponsoring brand

Brand awareness is another key element in generating brand value. It can be defined as the potential capacity held by a consumer to recognise and/or remember the name of the brand. The communication initiative to be made by the company must be focused on striving to link their name to a series of attributes or characteristics that are attractive to the consumer (Aaker, 1991). When consumers recognise and remember a brand, they are more likely to consider it in their purchasing decisions. For instance, Biscaia *et al.* (2014) found that fans are more likely to recall sponsors whose logos are visible on team shirts, with season ticket holders showing higher recall rates. This can result in greater brand loyalty, which can increase brand equity (Hsu *et al.*, 2016).

Based on the comments laid out above, the following hypothesis can be defined:

H1b. The greater the value of the sponsoring brand, the greater its brand awareness.

2.6.3. Loyalty to the sponsoring brand

Brand loyalty is one of the components of brand equity that has received the most interest and study in the marketing literature. It can be conceived as the bond that a customer possesses with a brand (Aaker, 1991). Other authors have defined it as a commitment to repeated purchase behaviour over time, independent of situational influences and marketing endeavours that can cause behaviour change (Oliver, 2014). Biscaia *et al.* (2013) and Davies *et al.* (2006) delve into the relationship between loyalty and sponsorship awareness, with the former finding that attitudinal loyalty impacts attitude toward sponsors and purchase intentions, and the latter noting that joint sponsorships can lead to ambivalent attitudes.

Literature shows that brand equity positively influences consumer responses, including brand loyalty (Buil *et al.*, 2013). Strong brand equity leads to more favourable consumer responses and can explain excess behavioural loyalty beyond what is predicted by

standard models (Jung, 2015). Aaker (1996) argues that regular buyers present significant value, since they represent a high source of income for the company. Therefore, the concept of brand loyalty is a vital component of brand equity since it plays a direct and positive role.

Based on the above comments, the following hypothesis can be defined:

H1c. The greater the value of the sponsoring brand, the greater the brand loyalty.

2.6.4. Image of the sponsoring brand

The brand image presents a purely strategic nature since it is related to the customers' perception thereof. It is associated with factors such as the type of people affiliated with the brand, the type of personality and lifestyle attributed to the people who use the brand, and the brand that most stimulates consumers (Llorens, 2011). In the same way, the brand image provides three types of benefits to consumers in terms of various motivations: functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits (Park *et al.*, 1986).

Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.* (2019) and Brochado *et al.* (2018) both emphasize the importance of team success and congruence between the sponsor and the team in enhancing brand image. Koronios *et al.* (2016) further highlight the role of perceived image fit and sponsor image in influencing brand awareness and purchase intention. The brand image therefore adds significant value to the company's brand by facilitating the buyer's decision process, since it provides information almost automatically, thereby evoking memories and satisfactory experiences that positively affect buying behaviour. Brand equity can be manipulated by providing specific brand associations to consumers, which form brand images and attitudes (Faircloth *et al.*, 2001). Based on the above comments, the following hypothesis can therefore be defined:

H1d. The greater the value of the sponsoring brand, the greater the brand image.

2.6.5. Affective loyalty to the club

A common measure of loyalty in sponsorship studies is fan involvement (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, *et al.*, 2013; Rajabi *et al.*, 2020). Affective loyalty to the club can be considered as the emotional attachment of an individual to a specific sports team (Biscaia *et al.*, 2012). There is an idea that sports fans show greater loyalty to their teams than to other products (Richardson and O'Dwyer, 2003). As a consequence of this result, many teams dedicate major time and effort to the promotion of the loyalty of their fans.

Research on fan loyalty in sports consistently shows that involvement is a key precursor to affective loyalty towards clubs and teams. Involvement has been found to positively influence psychological commitment, which in turn affects attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Kyle *et al.*, 2003). Studies across various sports, including soccer, volleyball, and Australian Rules football, have demonstrated that higher levels of fan involvement predict greater loyalty (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Zetou *et al.*, 2013). Based on the above comments, the following hypothesis has been defined:

H2a. The greater the involvement of the fans, the greater the affective loyalty to the club.

2.6.6. Emotional value towards the club

Emotional value is a construct that represents an individual's emotional connection to an object or entity (Bagozzi *et al.*, 1999). In the context of the football club, emotional value is related to the emotions that fans experience when following their team (Filo *et al.*, 2008).

Research on the emotional value towards football clubs reveals a complex interplay of factors. Tiscini and Strologo (2016) hold that the value of a football company cannot be estimated only on the basis of expected financial results, but by the emotional value it generates among its fans. Research suggests that involvement plays a crucial role in developing emotional value towards sports clubs. Fan involvement with a sport predicts different aspects of fan emotional value to their favourite team (Nassis and Theodorakis, 2008).

Greater involvement towards the club can generate greater emotional value, since fans emotionally connected to a team tend to follow it more closely and actively support it (Funk and James, 2001). Given the above comments, the following hypothesis can be defined:

H2b. The greater the involvement of the fans, the greater the emotional value towards the club.

2.6.7. Social value of the club

The social value of the club can be understood as the prestige and recognition that an individual receives from being associated with a particular sports team (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). Football clubs play a significant role in their communities, with their corporate social responsibility initiatives impacting various social issues. Social influence is one of the most relevant motivations for consumers to engage with sponsoring brands (Machado *et al.*, 2020).

Research suggests that involvement in sport is associated with increased social connectedness (Hoye *et al.*, 2015). Understanding the factors influencing sport involvement and its social value can help promote participation and harness the benefits of sport for individuals and communities. Greater involvement in the club can lead to higher social value of the club can lead to, since fans may feel more motivated to follow and support the team in order to gain the recognition and social prestige associated with being a supporter thereof (Wann and Branscombe, 1993). Based on the above comments, the following hypothesis has been defined:

H2c. The greater the involvement of the fans, the greater the social value of the club.

2.6.8. Ability of the club

Both for the sports entity and for the improvement in the management of the value of the sponsoring brand, there is nothing better than the sporting success of the team (Llorens,

2011). Football club managers aim not only to achieve sporting success, but also to capture the attention and affection of spectators (Shuv-Ami, 2016).

Research suggests that involvement in sport clubs can have significant positive impacts on participants (Hoye, 2007). The club's ability to solve fans' problems and meet their expectations is of central importance in creating greater engagement (Pradhan *et al.*, 2020). Their passion, excitement, and involvement play a crucial role in event implementation and value creation. Likewise, the club's ability to draw the attention of its existing fans and to attract new fans is crucial, since great benefits can be obtained through merchandising, ticket sales, television rights, and other means.

As a consequence of this ability of the club to serve the fans, these fans experience greater satisfaction with the club. Based on the above comments, the following hypothesis can therefore be defined:

H2d. The greater the involvement of the fans, the greater the capacity of the club to take care of the fans.

2.6.9. Relationship between involvement, brand equity and purchase intentions

Studies have shown that fan involvement in the club can influence the value of the sponsoring brand (Wakefield *et al.*, 2007). Highly involved fans are more likely to be aware of the club's sponsors and to form positive attitudes towards them (Gwinner and Swanson, 2003). As a result, involvement with the club can enhance the value of the sponsoring brand by increasing awareness and the favourable perception of the brand among fans (Donlan, 2014).

H3. The involvement with the club is positively related to the value of the sponsoring brand.

Extensive research shows that brand equity significantly influences consumer purchase intentions, particularly in the context of sponsorships (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Yoo *et al.*, 2000). When a brand establishes strong equity—through elements like brand awareness, loyalty, perceived quality, and positive brand image—it cultivates a more favourable consumer perception, often translating into higher purchase intentions. This is especially relevant in sports sponsorship, where fans' positive association with the sponsoring brand can enhance their likelihood of purchasing its products or services, driven by their support for the team (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, *et al.*, 2013; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999). Based on this understanding, we hypothesize:

H4: The brand equity of the sponsoring brand positively influences purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand.

Based on the hypotheses proposed, the following theoretical model is put forward (Figure 2).

[INSERT ABOUT HERE FIGURE 2]

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and Procedure

To achieve the purpose of this research, data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The sample selection aimed to capture diverse perspectives on football fan engagement and brand perception in Ecuador.

Ecuador represents a unique context within Latin American sports marketing due to its strong football culture and high levels of fan engagement. As an emerging market with distinct social and economic dynamics, Ecuador provides an ideal setting for exploring how fan-club relationships influence sponsoring brand equity, especially given the underrepresentation of this region in sports marketing literature. Theoretical frameworks, such as the Cultural Dimensions Theory (Hofstede, 2001) and Contextualization Theory (Johns, 2006), underscore the importance of examining underrepresented contexts to enhance our understanding of consumer behaviour across diverse cultures. Thus, Ecuadorian football fans offer a valuable perspective on how cultural nuances shape brand equity outcomes within the sports sponsorship domain.

As an emerging market, Ecuador offers a distinct economic environment that differs from more studied Western contexts. Theoretical frameworks such as the Institutional Theory (North, 1990) and Emerging Market Theory (Khanna and Palepu, 2010) highlight the importance of understanding market-specific factors that influence business practices and consumer behaviour.

Theoretical selection criteria emphasize the importance of exploring underrepresented contexts to enrich the global understanding of research phenomena (Tsui, 2007). Ecuador, and Latin America more broadly, have been underexplored in the sports marketing literature, providing an opportunity to fill this gap and contribute new perspectives to the field. This approach aligns with the principles of Contextualization Theory (Johns, 2006), which advocates for studying phenomena in diverse contexts to build more comprehensive theories.

In summary, the choice of Ecuador as the research context is theoretically grounded in its cultural relevance, emerging market status, underrepresentation in existing literature, and the significant role of football in its society.

We specifically targeted fans of three major football teams in Quito, Ecuador, to ensure a diverse representation of fan bases. This diversity is crucial, as it allows for a comprehensive analysis across different levels of club features and fan involvement, thereby offering insights that are broadly applicable within the sports marketing domain. The choice of these teams was also motivated by their varied histories, fan demographics, and sponsorship profiles, which collectively contribute to a richer understanding of the dynamics between fan engagement and brand perception. This methodical approach to sample selection ensures that the study's findings are not only relevant but also reflective of the broader fan community in Ecuador, thereby enhancing the generalizability and applicability of the research outcomes.

Participants were selected based on their status as active supporters of one of these major football clubs in Ecuador. Recruitment was conducted through in-person interactions at stadiums and online outreach via social media platforms associated with a local football radio station. Participants were offered a chance to win signed football jerseys as an incentive for completing the survey.

A mixed-method approach was employed for survey distribution. In-person interviews were conducted by trained undergraduate students at stadiums before matches, using printed copies of the questionnaire. Simultaneously, an online version of the survey was distributed through a web link posted on social media channels to reach a broader audience.

The data collection process spanned four weeks, covering the duration of the football season when fan engagement was at its peak. A total of 301 valid responses were collected. Efforts were made to ensure data quality by training interviewers on standardized data collection procedures and conducting consistency checks on the data.

3.2. Measurement of the Constructs

The questionnaire was composed of first-order and second-order constructs. In this research, the second-order constructs were the involvement with the club and the brand equity of the sponsoring brand. The involvement with the club was made up of four first-order constructs: affective loyalty to the club, emotional value towards the club, social value towards the club, and satisfaction with the club. As for the value of the sponsoring brand, this was defined based on four first-order latent variables: perceived quality, brand awareness, loyalty to the sponsoring brand, and the image of the sponsoring brand. Both second-order constructs were specified through a reflective model. In this case, each first-order latent variable constitutes a reflection or manifestation of the second-order construct to which it is linked. In the same way, first-order constructs are highly correlated, since they are all reflections of the same second-order construct, and therefore specification through a reflective model is considered suitable (Bollen and Lennox, 1991).

To ensure methodological rigor, we employed well-established scales for measuring the constructs in our study. These scales have been validated in prior studies, reinforcing their reliability and relevance to this research. Table 1 provides an overview of these scales and their items:

Club Involvement. This construct encompasses four dimensions— affective loyalty, emotional value, social value, and satisfaction with the club—which capture the multifaceted nature of fan engagement. The items for these sub-dimensions were adapted from validated sources, including McMullan and Gilmore (2003) for affective loyalty, Moliner et al. (2007) and Sweeney and Soutar (2001) for emotional and social value, and Zaichkowsky (1985) for satisfaction. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and previous studies confirm their reliability and applicability in sports marketing research.

Sponsoring Brand Equity. Following the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) framework, we measured brand equity using four sub-dimensions: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand loyalty, and brand image. These items were drawn from Yoo et al. (2000) and Aaker and Álvarez Blanco (1995), which have been widely used and validated in brand equity research. These scales assess the cognitive and emotional connections fans form with the sponsor brand due to their team affiliation. Using a reflective model, each item is considered a manifestation of the higher-order construct of brand equity, consistent with established measurement theory (Bollen and Lennox, 1991).

Purchase Intention. To assess purchase intentions towards the sponsoring brand, we used a validated scale by Baek et al. (2010), which measures the likelihood that fans will buy the sponsoring brand's products based on their loyalty and emotional connection to the team. This construct is a direct indicator of sponsorship effectiveness, capturing the behavioural response driven by the sponsor-fan relationship.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE TABLE 1]

The model was specified, the AMOS software from IBM_SPSS was utilised to estimate the coefficients of the measurement model and those of the structural model.

4. Results

Since the data were obtained using a cross-sectional research design, through a questionnaire, the variance attributed to the measurement method, also known as common method bias (CMB), may bias the estimates of the relationships between the different constructs. Harman's single factor test was conducted to ensure the absence of common method bias (CMB). For this purpose, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed with all study variables but seeking to extract a single factor and carrying out the analysis without rotating the factors, as suggested by some authors (Jordan and Troth, 2020; Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The EFA results showed a total variance of 42.82%, lower than the 50% limit suggested by Podsakoff *et al* (2003). These results indicate that the variance attributable to the common method is in an acceptable range and therefore does not substantially influence the conclusions of the study.

From the sample of 301 football fans, it was found that 35.5% were followers of *Aucas*, 23.6% of *Independiente del Valle*, and 40.9% of *Liga de Quito*. Regarding gender, most of the interviewees were men (80.1%). With respect to age, most of the interviewees were young people between the ages of 18 and 30 (53.2%) or adults between the ages of 31 and 50 (35.2%). In relation to the level of studies, most of the interviewees had higher education or university studies (75.1%), or secondary studies or similar (18.9%). Finally, 79.9% of those interviewed were not official season-ticket holders of the aforementioned clubs.

Once the demographic characteristics of the interviewees were analysed, the estimation of the model could be carried out. To evaluate the measurement model, its reliability and validity were analysed (Table 2). In relation to the reliability of the items, it was observed that all the standardised factor loadings were greater than 0.707, and hence the shared variance between the construct and its indicators was greater than the error variance (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). On the other hand, the reliability of the constructs was evaluated by measuring Cronbach's α coefficient and the CR (composite reliability) coefficient (all the values obtained were greater than 0.7).

[INSERT ABOUT HERE TABLE 2]

Once the reliability of the measurement model had been evaluated, its validity could be evaluated. To this end, the convergent validity and discriminant validity were studied. In order to assess the convergent validity, it was verified that the mean variance extracted (AVE) of each construct was greater than 0.5, with which the construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair *et al.*, 2014;

McShane *et al.*, 2024). In Table 3, it can be observed that all the AVE values are greater than 0.5, and hence the convergent validity of the measurement model is verified.

On the other hand, the discriminant validity of each construct was analysed following the criteria of Barclay *et al.* (1995), whereby the square root of the AVE must be greater than the correlations with any other construct. In Table 3, it can be observed that all the correlations between constructs are lower than the square root of the AVE, except for that corresponding to the correlation between the brand image and the perceived quality of the brand, which is a figure very close to the square root of the AVE of both constructs. It can therefore be concluded that the measurement model enjoys discriminant validity.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE TABLE 3]

Once the reliability and validity of the measurement model had been verified, the evaluation of the structural model could be carried out. The evaluation of the quality of the structural model is based on its ability to predict endogenous constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2014). In Figure 3, it can be observed that the coefficient of determination of the endogenous or dependent constructs is greater than 0.3. On the other hand, in Table 4, it can be verified that all the coefficients between constructs are significant at a confidence level of 99.9%. This information can also be analysed using the critical ratio (CR). Values greater than 1.96 make it possible to ensure that the estimated coefficient is significantly different from zero. Given that the two previous conditions are met, it can be confirmed that the model enjoys nomological or predictive validity. In the same way, in said table, it can also be observed that all the hypotheses established in this work are accepted.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE TABLE 4]

[INSERT ABOUT HERE FIGURE 3]

The possible existence of multicollinearity between constructs was also studied to evaluate the structural model. Hair *et al.* (2017) recommend performing independent multiple regressions of the model studied, so that each endogenous variable is estimated in terms of the set of exogenous variables that explain it in the proposed model. In this case, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was calculated for the brand equity and purchase intention constructs. The values obtained were respectively 1.90 and 4.98, so they were between the minimum of 1 and maximum of 5, which are the thresholds to suggest the absence of multicollinearity problems between constructs.

Finally, a series of measurements has been obtained to determine the goodness of fit of the estimated model ($\chi^2/df=2.293$; GFI=0.907; AGFI=0.891; CFI=0.957; RMSEA=0.066; NFI=0.927; NNFI=0.950; SRMR=0.051). All the measurements show values within the limits that enable a suitable adjustment of the data to be affirmed (Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996; Hu and Bentler, 1995; Kline, 1996).

4.1. Multigroup assessment based on the club and subscriber variables

In this work, multigroup analysis has been carried out based on the followers of each club, since each club has a different sponsor and there may be a moderating effect both of the club/sponsor variable on the main relationships. Fan attention and response to sponsorship is affected by a range of variables, including fan involvement to the sporting

organisation. There is a positive relationship between the satisfaction levels of season-ticket holders and their orientation towards club sponsors' products and brands (Shaw and McDonald, 2006). For this reason, a multi-group analysis between season-ticket and non-season-ticket holders has been also carried out.

To this end, only the two main relationships of the model have been considered, which enables both the effect of involvement with the club on the value of the sponsoring brand and the effect of the latter on purchase intention to be studied (Hypotheses H3 and H4). In order to obtain the results, the tool developed by Gaskin (2016) has been employed, which evaluates the differences in critical ratios.

A study of factorial invariance was first carried out in order to verify whether the possible differences in the constructs are due to the differences between the groups. To this end, metric invariance, factorial invariance, and strict invariance have been studied. The comparison between the different nested models has been carried out using the maximum likelihood ratio test (χ^2/df). However, since this measure is highly sensitive to sample size, Cheung and Rensvold (2002) proposed choosing the increment of the CFI and the RMSEA to determine whether the compared models are equivalent. When the difference between the CFIs of the two models is less than 0.01, then it is considered that there is equivalence between the models and the next step of the analysis of invariance can be taken. In the event that the difference between the CFIs is greater than or equal to 0.01, then the less restrictive model is accepted, and the other model is rejected. In the case of RMSEA, values less than 0.015 indicate equivalence between models.

It can be observed that the metric and scalar invariance hold for both the team variable and the season-ticket holder variable, since the increases in CFI and RMSEA lie within the limits. However, strict invariance is not verified. In this case, partial invariance would be assumed (Dimitrov, 2010), although strict invariance tests have been recognised to be excessively restrictive (Bentler, 2006). Therefore, the responses are comparable between groups and a multigroup analysis is feasible.

Table 5 shows the results of the multigroup study. It can be verified that the relationships studied are significant when comparing the *Independiente del Valle* sample with that of *Aucas* or *Liga de Quito*, but no differences are shown in the relationships between *Aucas* and *Liga de Quito*. The variable that represents the followers of the clubs can therefore be assumed to moderate the relationship between involvement and the purchase value of the sponsoring brand, and the relationship between involvement and purchase intention.

[INSERT ABOUT HERE TABLE 5]

In the case of season-ticket holders versus those without season passes, no significant differences have been found in either hypothesis¹.

5. Discussions

The current study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of football fan involvement and its impact on the sponsoring brand's value, advancing the field of sports marketing by offering both theoretical and practical implications.

¹ The table has not been included in order not to alter the reading of the article.

One of the key findings of this study is the strong influence of fan involvement on the brand equity of sponsoring brands. This relationship underscores the importance of emotional and social connections in enhancing consumer perceptions of brand value. The study's results indicate that fans who are highly involved with their clubs perceive the sponsoring brand more positively, leading to increased brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and improved brand image. This comprehensive view of brand equity provides a more nuanced understanding of how sponsorships can effectively leverage fan engagement to strengthen brand positioning in a competitive marketplace.

The application of the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, extended with the dimension of fan involvement, offers a novel approach to examining brand-sponsorship relationships. This extension allows for a deeper exploration of the psychological processes underlying consumer behaviour in sports contexts, highlighting the importance of tailoring sponsorship strategies to align with fan identity and club affiliation.

There are numerous dimensions that can determine the value of the sponsoring brand. In the case of football, we have considered the four dimensions that have undergone the greatest acceptance in the literature and that best adapt to the needs of the study. In this case, the brand image ($\beta=0.997$), perceived quality ($\beta=0.982$), loyalty ($\beta=0.855$), and brand awareness ($\beta=0.806$) have been considered, all of which are consistent with the traditional model specified by Aaker (1996). Furthermore, in this case, the measurement of the value of the brand has been carried out following the consumer's approach, which is based on the premise that the value of the brand resides in the minds of consumers (Leone *et al.*, 2006).

Our study also found that a greater involvement of fans with clubs significantly influences the growth of the club's sponsoring brand value. This result is consistent with that reached by Meenaghan (2013) and Biscaia *et al* (2016). In general, the fans with the greatest involvement are those most committed to the club who tend to go to the stadiums and are usually informed about the club by keeping up to date with its news. A greater involvement leads the fans to show a greater emotional value towards the club ($\beta=0.979$) and means that the club has a high capacity to serve its fans ($\beta=0.953$) and that the club has good social behaviour, both with the fans and with its employees ($\beta=0.916$).

Another significant result of this work is that the value of the sponsoring brand is found to influence the purchase intention of football fans ($\beta=0.896$). This result is in line with that achieved in other studies, in which the improvement of the value of the sponsoring brand in sport affects the readiness of consumers to purchase products or services (Chien *et al.*, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2015).

In the same way, from this work it can also be deduced that the involvement towards the club indirectly influences the purchase intention towards the sponsoring brand. At a general level, there are studies in the literature that show that a greater involvement of consumers means a greater commitment to the brand (Mittal and Lee, 1989), that they are more loyal to the brand (Zaichkowsky, 1985), and that they play a major role in the purchase of products (Warrington and Shim, 2000). In the specific case of our study, we have concluded that a greater involvement of fans with a football club leads to a higher valuation of the sponsoring brand and, in turn, influences the intention to purchase the sponsoring brand's product/service.

On the other hand, the results of the multigroup analysis of this work also lead us to conclude that there are certain differences in the intensity of the relationships depending on the football clubs. However, no significant differences were found when a multigroup study was carried out between season-ticket holders and those without season tickets of the clubs. This may be because the fans of the selected teams have different socio-economic profiles and also that different sponsors are involved, although more research on this topic would be necessary.

Therefore, by way of a summary, it can be concluded that the results of this work enable several consequences to be deduced. On the one hand, clubs should strive to establish actions and strategies to increase the involvement of fans and followers with the club. A greater involvement of the fans would enable the clubs to attain greater leverage in reaching agreements with prestigious companies and institutions and could lead them to obtain a substantial income. On the other hand, companies and institutions should choose those football clubs with a major involvement of their fans and followers as their sponsorship destination since this would have a positive impact on the value of the brand and on purchase intention.

6. Conclusions

This study provides valuable insights into how football fan involvement influences sponsor brand equity and consumer purchase intentions. By integrating fan involvement into the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, we address an essential gap in the sports sponsorship literature. Traditionally, research has focused on the effects of sponsorship on club loyalty or the sponsoring brand in established markets. Our findings, however, contribute a new perspective by demonstrating that fan involvement can enhance sponsoring brand equity across four key dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand image.

This study also emphasizes the unique context of Ecuador, an emerging market in Latin America where football culture plays a significant role. Including this context broadens the global applicability of the CBBE model and adds cultural depth to sports marketing literature. Our focus on Ecuadorian fans provides a framework for understanding fan-driven brand equity in regions with similar market dynamics, contributing to broader theoretical frameworks highlighting the context's significance in consumer behaviour.

The results underscore the importance of emotional and social dimensions of fan involvement in building brand equity. Fans who feel a deep connection to their club are more likely to value and support the sponsoring brand. This insight highlights how sponsorships in sports can strategically align with fan identity, fostering brand loyalty and increasing purchase intentions through shared values and emotional bonds. Thus, our study expands the literature on sports marketing by demonstrating that fan involvement is not merely a function of club loyalty but also a mechanism for enhancing sponsor brand value.

While our study highlights important relationships between fan involvement and sponsoring brand equity dimensions (brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand image), it is essential to interpret these findings as correlational rather than causal. Due to the cross-sectional design, this research can identify associations between

fan engagement with a club and positive perceptions of the sponsoring brand; however, it does not establish causation. Our results suggest that higher fan involvement correlates with stronger sponsoring brand equity, likely influenced by shared values and emotional connections between fans and the club, which are reflected in perceptions of the sponsoring brand.

These correlational findings offer a valuable foundation for future studies, which may employ longitudinal or experimental designs to explore the directionality and potential causal mechanisms underlying fan involvement and brand equity relationships. Our study thus contributes an important perspective on the associations between these variables, adding to the literature on sports sponsorship and brand equity in emerging markets.

Overall, this research contributes to the development of sponsorship strategies in sports marketing, suggesting that brands can effectively leverage fan emotions to build stronger brand equity in both established and emerging markets. These findings provide a foundation for future studies to explore fan involvement's impact on brand equity across diverse cultural and economic settings, enhancing the theoretical and practical understanding of sponsorship in global sports markets.

6.1. Theoretical implications

The study advances theoretical knowledge by demonstrating how emotional and social dimensions of fan involvement contribute to brand equity, thus offering a more comprehensive framework for future research in sports marketing and sponsorship domains.

From a theoretical point of view, the results of this work are in line with other similar studies that have analysed the variables of involvement, brand value, and purchase intention (Cobbs and Groza, 2022; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Shuv-Ami, 2016, among others).

Involvement encourages fans to watch their football team more often, which exposes them to sponsor incentives. In this way, information processing is facilitated, with which the impact of the sponsoring brand is greatest on the most involved fans. This result is in line with that reached by Eddy and Cork (2019) regarding other types of sporting events, such as marathons. This result is consistent with that found by Pradhan *et al* (2020) in Indian football, which shows that fan engagement with clubs significantly contributes to the formation of a favourable attitude towards the sponsor brand.

Clubs with passionately involved fans present a potential opportunity to increase awareness of the sponsoring brand and promote a positive brand image, which results in greater brand equity. To this end, the clubs should carry out good financial, social, and sports management, since this can render the fans more involved with the club and they can then become a potential target for many major sponsoring brands.

As a consequence, a fan's experience of a football match can constitute a determining factor in their perception of the sponsoring brand. Following the reasoning of Biedenbach & Marell (2010), an individual's experience with the club and its matches is the result of how the fan interprets their interactions with the event and the perceived value of said interactions. This has the potential to influence their future attitudes and behaviour, and hence the value of the sponsoring brand may be strongly conditioned by such experiences.

The intensity of the involvement is another factor to be taken into account by football clubs. Major involvement with a football club can result in greater loyalty to the sponsoring brand and, as a consequence, plays a crucial role in improving its value. This result is in line with the ELM Model (Elaboration Likelihood Model) by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), which shows that when the interest of the subject is greater, then the central route of persuasion is used, which can develop deep cognitive thoughts. This causes fans with a high level of involvement to develop a greater need for knowledge regarding the sponsoring brand and, therefore, a stronger attitude towards it (Olson and Thjomoe, 2011).

6.2. Practical implications

The findings offer actionable insights for brands seeking to enhance their sponsorship effectiveness. By understanding the psychological underpinnings of fan involvement, brands can develop strategies that resonate more deeply with fans, fostering stronger brand loyalty and purchase intentions. Clubs can benefit from the design and execution of strategies to increase fan engagement (Crompton, 2004), which in turn can enhance sponsorship brand value (Pope and Voges, 2000).

This would require actions to increase the emotional and affective value of the fans. Such actions could include improving the stadium experience. Offering a unique and exciting stadium experience can make fans feel more connected to the team. This can include improvements to facilities, pre-match entertainment, access facilities and seating comfort. This will create unique and memorable experiences for fans (Neale and Funk, 2006).

Another action could be interaction on social media and digital platforms. Clubs can use social media and other digital platforms to interact more effectively with their fans by offering exclusive content. Fans' events could also be organised. Organising exclusive fan events, such as autograph sessions, player meet-and-greets and stadium tours, can increase the sense of belonging and loyalty to the team.

Finally, another action could be to establish loyalty and membership programmes. Developing loyalty programmes that offer benefits, merchandise discounts, priority ticketing or exclusive experiences for the most loyal members can encourage greater involvement.

Other important actions to increase the degree of fan involvement would be those that lead to a higher perceived prestige of the club. Within these actions, social and community responsibility activities could be developed to increase the social value of the club. Clubs that actively participate in community initiatives and social responsibility projects can strengthen their link to the local community, generating a sense of pride and belonging among fans.

Developing academies and nurturing local talent is another action that can increase the social value of the club. Investing in the development of young talent and promoting home-grown players can generate a stronger emotional connection between the fans and the team, as they see one of their own representing their colours.

Another important aspect is to promote equality and inclusion. Implementing policies that promote gender equality, minority inclusion and non-discrimination within the club and

its activities increases the social value of the club. It is also important to adopt and promote sustainable practices, such as waste reduction, resource efficiency and the implementation of renewable energy in the club's facilities. This can significantly improve the public image of the club and its relationship with the community.

Finally, the results obtained also confirm the fact that sponsorship activities can represent an opportunity not only for companies, but also for public institutions that seek to strengthen their image (Schlesinger *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, there are cases of public institutions that sponsor football teams in order to improve the image of certain geographical areas and/or to increase the attraction of tourists to said areas.

6.3. Limitations and future research lines

Although the results are valuable, there remain certain limitations that offer opportunities for future research. Firstly, the sample utilised in this study is limited to a specific set of football clubs, which could limit the generalisation of the results to other clubs or sports contexts. Future research could expand the sample not only to include clubs from different leagues, different levels of success, and different geographic locations, but also to investigate the applicability of the results to other sports.

Secondly, the study is based on cross-sectional data, which makes it difficult to establish causal relationships between variables. Future research could take a longitudinal approach to examine how these variables evolve over time and how they influence each other dynamically.

Third, the study focuses mainly on variables that have already been considered in the existing literature. Future research could explore other potentially relevant factors to gain a greater understanding thereof. Future research could also consider covariates and moderating variables such as brand attachment, brand attitude or club attachment, among others.

Finally, the memorable experiences of the fans can constitute a major factor in their perception of the sponsoring brand and their involvement with the club. The study of these experiences in future research is proposed, as is the application of this type of study to other sports and sponsoring brands.

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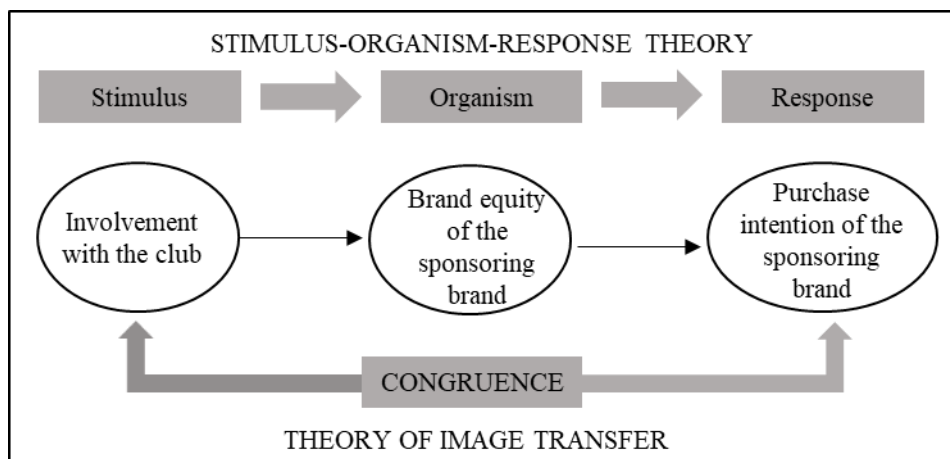


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study
Source: Authors own work

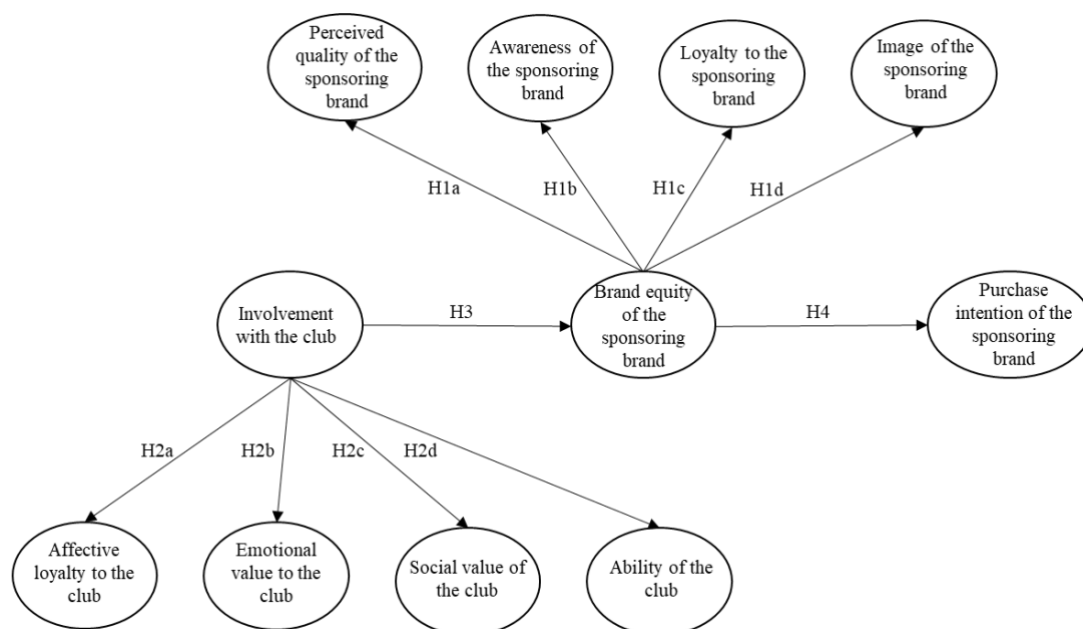


Fig. 2. Specification of the theoretical model

Source: Authors own work

Table 1. Latent variables and observable variables

Latent variable	Observable variable
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BQ	Perceived quality of the sponsoring brand (Martin and Brown, 1990)	BQ1. The quality of the sponsoring brand is high. BQ2. The probability that the sponsoring brand is functional is high. BQ3. The performance of this brand is probably superior to other brands.
BA	Awareness of the sponsoring brand (Yoo <i>et al.</i> , 2000; Yoo and Donthu, 2001)	BA1. I can recognise the sponsoring brand among other competing brands without a problem. BA2. I have heard of the sponsoring brand. BA3. It is not difficult for me to envisage the characteristics of the sponsoring brand.
BL	Loyalty to the sponsoring brand (Yoo and Donthu, 2001)	BL1. I consider myself loyal to this brand. BL2. The sponsoring brand would be my first choice. BL3. I don't buy other brands if the sponsoring brand is available.
BI	Image of the sponsoring brand (Aaker & Álvarez Blanco, 1995; Lassar <i>et al.</i> , 1995; Yoo <i>et al.</i> , 2000)	BI1. The intangible attributes of the sponsoring brand provide a sufficient reason for its purchase. BI2. The sponsoring brand is powerful. BI3. The sponsoring brand is attractive.
CL	Affective loyalty to the club (McMullan and Gilmore, 2003)	CL1. The team is something that interests me a lot. CL2. For me, the team is the best club I could be a fan of. CL3. I like being a fan of the team.
EV	Emotional value towards the club (Moliner <i>et al.</i> , 2007; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001)	EV1. The staff of the club give me positive feelings. EV2. The players and coaching staff give me positive feelings. EV3. I feel comfortable with the club.
SV	Social value of the club (Moliner <i>et al.</i> , 2007; Sweeney and Soutar, 2001)	SV1. The club has a reputation for engaging in good social behaviour. SV2. The club actively participates in social events. SV3. I consider that the club behaves ethically with its fans and its employees.
AC	Ability of the club (Zaichkowsky, 1985)	AC1. The club cares about the problems of its fans. AC2. The club meets my expectations. AC3. In general, I am satisfied with the club.
PI	Purchase intention towards the sponsoring brand (Baek <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	PI1. I would always try to buy this brand. PI2. I would seriously consider buying the sponsor's brand. PI3. It is highly likely that I will buy the sponsoring brand.

Source: Authors own work

Table 2. Standardised estimations for observable indicators, Cronbach's α values, convergent validity, and reliability assessment

Observable variable and its latent variable	λ	Cronbach's α	CR (Composite Reliability)	AVE (Average variance extracted)
Brand quality		0.897	0.898	0.746
BQ1 ← Brand quality	0.869			
BQ2 ← Brand quality	0.872			
BQ3 ← Brand quality	0.850			
Brand awareness		0.814	0.799	0.570
BA1 ← Brand awareness	0.818			
BA2 ← Brand awareness	0.724			
BA3 ← Brand awareness	0.719			
Brand loyalty		0.894	0.896	0.742
BL1 ← Brand loyalty	0.878			
BL2 ← Brand loyalty	0.884			
BL3 ← Brand loyalty	0.820			
Brand image		0.878	0.877	0.704
BI1 ← Brand image	0.884			
BI2 ← Brand image	0.771			
BI3 ← Brand image	0.858			
Affective loyalty to the club		0.945	0.946	0.855
CL1 ← Affective loyalty	0.860			
CL2 ← Affective loyalty	0.952			
CL3 ← Affective loyalty	0.959			
Emotional value towards the club		0.890	0.889	0.728
EV1 ← Emotional value	0.848			
EV2 ← Emotional value	0.849			
EV3 ← Emotional value	0.863			
Social value of the club		0.889	0.888	0.725
SV1 ← Social value	0.848			
SV2 ← Social value	0.794			
SV3 ← Social value	0.909			
Ability of the club		0.913	0.919	0.791
AC1 ← Ability of the club	0.848			
AC2 ← Ability of the club	0.923			
AC3 ← Ability of the club	0.896			
Purchase intention		0.937	0.938	0.834
PI1 ← Purchase intention	0.887			
PI2 ← Purchase intention	0.935			
PI3 ← Purchase intention	0.917			

Source: Authors own work

Table 3. Discriminant validity

	BQ	BA	BL	BI	CL	EV	SV	AC	PI
BQ	0.947								
BA	0.792	0.902							
BL	0.869	0.714	0.946						
BI	0.979	0.804	0.882	0.937					
CL	0.382	0.625	0.345	0.388	0.972				
EV	0.663	0.544	0.597	0.673	0.553	0.943			
SV	0.620	0.509	0.559	0.629	0.518	0.898	0.942		
AC	0.644	0.529	0.581	0.654	0.538	0.933	0.873	0.955	
PI	0.880	0.723	0.937	0.894	0.349	0.605	0.566	0.588	0.968

Note: BQ: Brand Quality; BA: Brand awareness; BL: Brand Loyalty; BI: Brand Image; CL: Club Loyalty; EV: Emotional Value; SV= Social Value; AC: Ability of the Club; PI: Purchase Intention.

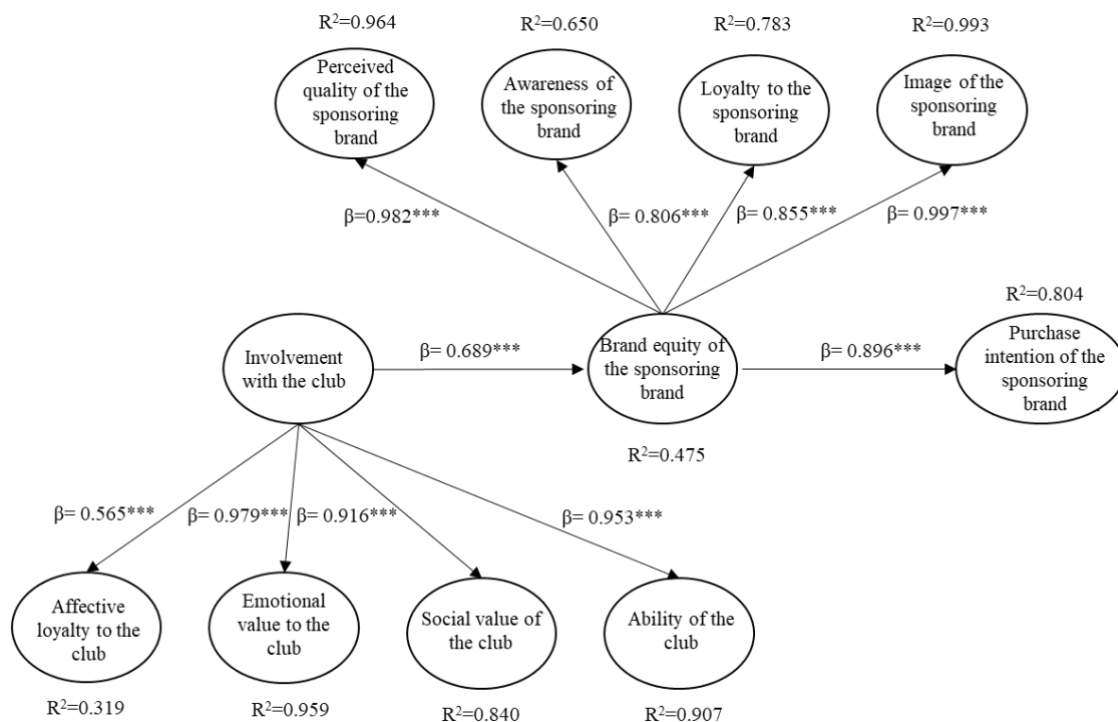
Source: Authors own work

Table 4. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Standardised β	SE	CR	p-value	Status
H1a: Brand equity \rightarrow Brand quality	0.982			***	Supported
H1b: Brand equity \rightarrow Brand awareness	0.806	0.054	13.811	***	Supported
H1c: Brand equity \rightarrow Brand loyalty	0.855	0.061	16.778	***	Supported
H1d: Brand equity \rightarrow Brand image	0.997	0.054	19.797	***	Supported
H2a: Involvement \rightarrow Affective loyalty	0.565			***	Supported
H2b: Involvement \rightarrow Emotional value	0.979	0.172	10.428	***	Supported
H2c: Involvement \rightarrow Social value	0.916	0.178	10.395	***	Supported
H2d: Involvement \rightarrow Ability of the club	0.953	0.168	10.448	***	Supported
H3: Involvement \rightarrow Brand equity	0.689	0.141	8.950	***	Supported
H4: Brand equity \rightarrow Purchase intention	0.896	0.061	17.402	***	Supported

SE= standard error; CR=critical ratio; ***Significance level < 0.001

Source: Authors own work



***Significance level < 0.001

Fig. 3. Estimated structural equation model

Source: Authors own work

Table 5. Multigroup assessment based on the club variable

	<i>Independiente del Valle</i>		<i>Aucas</i>		z-score
	Estimate	P	Estimate	P	
Brand equity of the sponsoring brand ← Involvement	0.713	0.000	1.184	0.000	-2.525**
Purchase intention ← Brand equity of the sponsoring brand	1.287	0.000	0.998	0.000	1.846*
	<i>Aucas</i>		<i>Liga de Quito</i>		z-score
	Estimate	P	Estimate	P	
Brand equity of the sponsoring brand ← Involvement	1.184	0.000	1.700	0.000	1.000
Purchase intention ← Brand equity of the sponsoring brand	0.998	0.000	0.933	0.000	-0.490
	<i>Independiente del Valle</i>		<i>Liga de Quito</i>		z-score
	Estimate	P	Estimate	P	
Brand equity of the sponsoring brand ← Involvement	0.713	0.000	1.700	0.000	2.003**
Purchase intention ← Brand equity of the sponsoring brand	1.287	0.000	0.933	0.000	-2.219**

Notes: *** p-value < 0.01; ** p-value < 0.05; * p-value < 0.10

Source: Authors own work