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Influence of Brand Image of a Sports Event on the Recommendation of Its Participants

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to test the psychometric properties and relationships of a model where, from brand congruence of a sport event, trust and commitment to it can be generated, influencing future behavior of participants and resulting in a higher recommendation also called Word of Mouth (hereinafter WOM). A quantitative approach has been carried out by means of a validated questionnaire with Likert-type responses, and data were analyzed with the EQS 6.4 software. The findings indicated that the model is adequate, and also confirm that from congruence, we can explain, at a theoretical level, 45% of trust, and in the same way, from the congruence and trust, we can explain 67% of the commitment with the brand. Finally, it is confirmed that trust and brand commitment significantly influence WOM, predicting it up to 51%. These conclusions provide implications to managers, to guide their marketing strategies more effectively and to know what is important to achieve the desired behaviors, which will favor the sustainability of the event and the generation of positive impacts in the host location. This research also provides original information in a context such as sporting events where the study of brand image is practically non-existent.

Keywords: marketing; brand; sports management; sports events; brand congruence; commitment; trust; recommendation; WOM; structural equation modeling

1. Introduction

Sport is a phenomenon in continuous evolution, where new mass sports events are emerging, and with it, the need to study certain aspects that allow organizations to manage their resources more effectively. In this sense, authors such as those of [1] mention that sports events are a phenomenon that attract the interest of organizations and researchers, and that it is interesting to study them, since the results may contribute to the improvement of the management and organization of these events. Marketing has proved to be an important tool for understanding consumer behavior in many areas [2,3] but there is practically no literature analyzing the brand image of an event and its influence on consumer behavior. Therefore, a proven tool such as brand analysis that could be very helpful in understanding and predicting future participant behavior is not being used in a context as strong as that of sporting events. Studies such as this one provide new information for sports event managers, verifying whether the relationships established in marketing in other contexts are also applicable to the context of sports events, so that they can work following branding strategies that we know are useful. In recent years, a more varied range of sporting events has been generated with a greater reach to different target audiences, allowing more people to see the opportunity to move from the role of spectator to participant. Sporting events are activities that not only imply sporting objectives,

but are also related to cultural and personal aspects and to the enjoyment of leisure time [4] having different peculiarities to other sporting activities. Furthermore, sporting events are a source of tourism promotion and economic income [5] both for the organizations and for the localities that host them with the intention of obtaining a better return on the investment made [6]. However, this phenomenon goes beyond tourism and the economic impact that it generates, and should also consider the social impact [7–10] and the socially responsible nature of the events [11]. Therefore, we have a constantly growing sector, such as sports events, which has been little analyzed from an area such as marketing, that has demonstrated the importance of understanding how we perceive brands in order to understand consumer behavior [12–14].

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Image, Brand Identity, and Corporate Brand Image or Corporate Image

This study deals with some aspects of brand image of a product, in particular of a sports event. However, besides defining and understanding what brand image is, we must understand the differentiation with the concepts of brand identity and corporate brand image (also called corporate image) since that lack of differentiation is the one that has generated more confusion over time. When we talk about brand image, we refer to the set of meanings that consumers perceive about a brand [15], which will determine its positioning [16,17] and will allow its differentiation in the competitive market, due to the associations it generates in the minds of consumers [18].

On a conceptual level, everything must start from a clear brand identity, which is a different concept from the corporate brand image [19]. The identity has to do with how the company intends to be perceived and will be related to the vision, mission, and values of the organization [20]. On the other hand, the corporate image or corporate brand image will be the general impression that consumers have in their mind about a company [21]. Logically, we will be closer to success in brand management when there is more similarity between brand identity and corporate image, since that will mean that people think about us what we wanted to show. Following this conceptual clarification, we must distinguish between brand image and corporate brand image or corporate image.

The corporate image is related to the image of the company, while the brand image is related to the brand or brands through which it advertises and sells its products [22]. Despite being different concepts, the corporate brand may match with the name and visual identity of the brand image, which is common in the field of sport and contributes to this confusion. Another differentiating element is that the corporate image will be aimed at a wide range of stakeholders, both internal and external [23], such as members of the organization, consumers, shareholders, media, and the general public, among others [24], and taking into account more purely corporate aspects such as the company's tradition and ideology [25], its ethics [26], or its social responsibility [27]. On the other hand, brand image will be especially oriented to current and potential consumers, and linked to the numerous aspects that can be perceived of a product, and that will influence consumer behavior.

2.2. Brand Congruence

As for the congruency variable, we can say that this aspect has to do with the degree of coincidence or fit that can exist between the perception of the brand image and the user's own image [28,29]. This congruence is related to the attachment to the brand [30] and to the identification of the consumers [31] so the higher the level of congruence that the brand achieves with the target audience, the greater the probability that the level of identification they feel with the event will increase. Along these lines, the authors of [32] establish that congruence is not only beneficial for improving user identification, but will also improve loyalty as a product of these influences. This idea is also supported by [33] who indicate that when a brand is consistent with the consumer's image, that consumer will have more satisfaction with the purchase, which will result in an improvement of future intentions. Similarly, when a user has good levels of congruence and feels more identified with the brand, he will

tend to be more loyal [34]. In the field of marketing, it is assumed that users are inclined to those brands that resemble us, in order to express our own identity or image [35], so brands must focus on their target to be more similar to them and get better levels of loyalty. In the study conducted by the authors of [36], the congruence between the different brand associations is studied, interpreting that if there is congruence between the brand associations, the attitudes produced will be positive, which would generate an increase in purchase intentions. Therefore, it is essential to manage the brand of the event by making an analysis of the target population, in order to be congruent with it and allow current and potential users to store product information [37] as well as to develop other elements of the brand that may be interesting for their future behaviors. Congruence has been shown to be an influential element in both generating trust [38,39] as well as generating commitment [40], which serves as a basis for proposing H1 and H2.

Hypothesis 1. *Congruence significantly influences brand trust.*

Hypothesis 2. *Brand congruence significantly predicts brand commitment.*

2.3. Brand Trust

The concept of brand trust, as well as other variables such as commitment, are born from relationship marketing, in its attempt to investigate appropriate strategies for customer loyalty [41]. This trust is related to the feeling that consumers perceive, which leads them to think that the brand, faced with a hypothetical problem that might arise, will try to solve it in the best way [42]. Therefore, in a way, this concept alludes to a feeling of security when interacting with the brand [43] so that trust will reduce the uncertainty that the user may perceive [44]. Authors such as [45] point out that, in addition to the actions we take, user experiences with other people or organizations will be important in generating trust. Within sports management, and in particular, the analysis of brand image, trust is one of the factors that is gaining special relevance [46,47]. This need to investigate variables such as brand trust is also an aspect to be improved in the field of sports events, in order to know to what extent it could serve for the prediction of variables such as loyalty to the event [48] and its recommendation, aspects that are already being analyzed in the field of sports services [49]. Therefore, given the benefits of knowing how trust-related processes work, and in accordance with the proposals of [50], research on brand trust should be a priority, so that managers can have relevant information when carrying out their strategies. This brand trust is an element that favors the generation of commitment to the brand [51] and also allows future intentions to improve both at a loyalty level, directly [52,53] or through the improvement of attitudes [49] as well as word of mouth [54]; therefore, H3 and H4 are proposed.

Hypothesis 3. *Brand trust predicts user commitment to the brand.*

Hypothesis 4. *Brand trust has a significant influence on recommendation.*

2.4. Brand Commitment

Commitment to a brand is understood as the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with it [55]. In this sense, the authors of [56] establish the existence of two types of commitment. On the one hand, we find a commitment that is calculated and understood as the need to maintain the relationship and outline strategies to do so, while, on the other hand, we find a more affective commitment, related to emotional motives linked to that relationship with the brand. There are studies that propose a perspective of exchange, which would include, for instance, stable relationships with partners; that is, sacrificing something in the short term in order to have a relationship that can lead to a stable relationship [57]. This is because these exchange actions give the client trust that both the functional

and affective benefits are much greater than the possible benefits of ending that relationship [56]. Therefore, emotional engagement is adapted to the figure of the client, in a sense of sympathy, where it meets other aspects such as identification and emotional attachment to the brand [58]. In this sense, it should be noted that a strong motivation should be generated to work on the emotional attachment and maintain the relationship, which will encourage consumers' commitment to the brand and their willingness to make sacrifices to obtain it [59]. In addition to these influences, commitment to the brand will decisively influence users' future intentions, improving the recommendation [60], which allow us to propose hypothesis 5:

Hypothesis 5. *User's commitment to the brand significantly influences their recommendation of the event.*

2.5. WOM

As for the recommendation or word of mouth, studies such as that of [61] detail that this aspect is growing, being an element that is receiving more attention from both managers and researchers. The term WOM refers to an informal communication to evaluate a good or service [62] that arises from a successful or unsatisfactory experience with a brand [63]. This recommendation has been shown to be an influential element in consumer behavior [64] since, for example, the fact that a consumer receives positive recommendations of a product allows him/her to create a positive expectation of the quality of that product [65]. Furthermore, this recommendation has been studied together with other variables, drawing conclusions such as the credibility perceived by the user [66] and the satisfaction and loyalty [67] that favor such recommendation. We also find studies such as the study [68] where the antecedents and moderators of the recommendation are analyzed, finding that aspects such as compromise, which is also analyzed in this study, are key. In the context of sporting events, satisfaction has been shown to be a significant predictor of future intentions to attend the event again [69–71]. Finally, regarding the analysis of brand image in relation to recommendation, there are studies that have analyzed the relationships that are established between variables such as perceived quality, credibility, and attitudes, as a background for loyalty that is a clear predictor of brand recommendation [72].

2.6. Structural Model and Hypothesis

Therefore, the general objective of this study is to test a structural equation model that, in addition to meeting the reliability, validity, and adjustment criteria required by this methodology, shows its ability to predict the intentions of its participants to recommend a sports event (see Figure 1). This model proposes five hypotheses that constitute the specific objectives of the research. On the one hand, it is intended to test whether the relationships established between congruence, trust, and commitment show a significant influence, constituting an antecedent to subsequently see whether trust and commitment are capable of significantly predicting the recommendation of the event, and if so, to what extent.

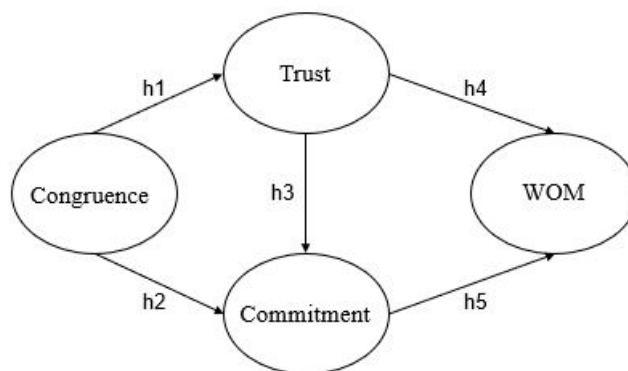


Figure 1. Structural model and hypothesis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

In order to achieve the objective of the study, quantitative research was carried out by means of a questionnaire that was administered to the finalist participants in the International Marathon of Pacasmayo-Peru, obtaining 240 answers from a total of 500 participants, out of which 195 were finally valid. Of the total sample, 63.6% were men ($n = 124$) and 36.4% were women ($n = 71$), aged between 18 and 65. In terms of age range, the majority of participants were between 31 and 45 years old, with 50% of the total, followed by 28% who were 30 years old or younger, and 22% who were over 46 years old, with an average age of participants of 38 years old. Regarding the employment situation of the participants, 168 had an employment relationship, representing 86.08%, followed by 18 participants who were students (9.28%), and finally 5 (2.58%) and 4 (2.06%) were unemployed and retired, respectively. Likewise, 167 of the participants had a university education, representing 86%, and 28 of them (14%) had a secondary education.

3.2. Instrument

For the data collection, a structured questionnaire was used, which was created online using the LimeSurvey software, so that the organizers could send an email to each of the participants of the event and they could respond to the survey online. In the questionnaire, we found three differentiated areas: The first two areas referred to their participation in popular races and their sports habits, while the third one was oriented to the collection of information about the socio-demographic aspects. As for the scales of measurement, validated scales existing in the scientific literature were used, which were adapted for the present study (see Table 1). More specifically, for the measurement of the recommendation, we used the one-dimensional scale of [73] consisting of 3 items, while for the study of congruence we used the scale of [74], consisting of a total of 4 items. On the other hand, in order to assess the commitment, both [75] and [76] scales were used, extracting 3 items and 2 items, respectively. Finally, for the collection of the information referring to trust, the items that formed it were extracted from [77,78], with a total of 2 items, 1 from each author. In all cases, the scales had a 5-point Likert answer option, where 1 indicated totally disagreeing with the statement and 5 indicated totally agreeing.

Table 1. Instrument.

Scale	Code	Item
Congruence	CG1	The image of this brand is consistent with my own self-image.
	CG2	Participating in this race reflects who I am.
	CG3	People similar to me participate in this race.
	CG4	The kind of person who participate in this race is very much like me.
Trust	BT1	The organizers really take care of my needs as a customer.
	BT2	I trust completely the organization.
	BT3	I feel that I completely trust this event.
Commitment	CM1	I feel emotionally attached to this race.
	CM2	This race has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
	CM3	I feel a strong sense of identification with this race.
	CM4	My relationship with this event is important for me.
	CM5	If this race were no longer to exist, this would be a significant loss for me.
WOM	W1	I will say positive things about this race to other people.
	W2	I will recommend this race to someone who seeks your advice.
	W2	I will encourage friends and relatives to participate in this race.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

The information collected through the questionnaire was analyzed by means of the structural equation modelling statistical program EQS, in its version 6.4. Firstly, the measurement model was analyzed by means of a confirmatory factor analysis, to check that the factors making up this model met the reliability and validity criteria recommended in the literature. Then, the analysis of the structural model was carried out to check whether and to what extent the proposed relationships were significant, in order to know to what extent the proposed model is capable of predicting the variables of interest.

4. Analysis of Results

4.1. Measurement Model

To create the measurement model, a confirmatory factor analysis was carried out. The fitting of the model ($S-B\chi^2 = 139.01$; $\chi^2 = 260.43$; $gl = 71$; $\chi^2/gl = 3.67$; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.91; Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI) = 0.94; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.95; Bollen's Fit Index (IFI) = 0.96) is adequate with fit indexes above the 0.90 criterion [79] and with a Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) value of 0.07, falling below 0.08 [80]. Regarding the reliability of the constructs that form the model (see Table 2), congruence (FC = 0.89; AVE = 0.68), trust (FC = 0.93; AVE = 0.86), commitment (FC = 0.96; AVE = 0.84) and WOM (FC = 0.92; AVE = 0.79) obtain satisfactory results, with composite reliability values above 0.70 [81] and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above 0.50 [82]. As for convergent validity, positive results were also obtained, since the loads of the items were higher than 0.60 [81], with significant T values in all cases, ranging from 10.59 to 26.20 and, therefore, exceeding the criterion of 1.96 established by [83].

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity.

Construct	Item	β	R ²	CR	AVE	Construct	Item	β	R ²	CR	AVE
Congruence	1	0.80	0.64	0.89	0.68	Commitment	7	0.87	0.76	0.96	0.84
	2	0.87	0.75				8	0.93	0.86		
	3	0.83	0.70				9	0.96	0.92		
	4	0.80	0.64				10	0.91	0.83		
Trust	5	0.92	0.85	0.93	0.86	WOM	11	0.72	0.52	0.92	0.79
	6	0.93	0.87				12	0.90	0.81		
							13	0.94	0.88		
							14	0.82	0.67		

Note: β : standardized beta coefficient; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average variance extracted.

Regarding discriminant validity (see Table 3), the values of the square root of AVE were higher than the values of the correlations between the different factors [82]. Furthermore, we also see that no correlation value between the different factors exceeds the 0.85 criterion [84]. For these reasons, we can assure that there is an adequate discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant validity.

	Congruence (F1)	Trust (F2)	Commitment (F3)	WOM (F4)
Congruence (F1)	0.82			
Trust (F2)	0.67	0.93		
Commitment (F3)	0.77	0.72	0.92	
WOM (F4)	0.64	0.64	0.67	0.89

Note: the diagonal shows the values of the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE).

4.2. Structural Model

As for the structural model, it was made up of four factors (see Figure 2). The first was congruence (F1), followed by trust (F2), commitment (F3), and WOM (F4). The set of hypotheses arises from the different relationships between these variables. These hypotheses establish that congruence (F1) significantly influenced trust (F2) (H1), while congruence (F1) also influenced commitment (F3) (H2). On the other hand, we see that trust (F2) had a significant influence on commitment (F3) (H3), as well as on recommendation (F4) (H4). Finally, we see that commitment to the brand (F3) significantly affected the recommendation (F4) (H5). In order to check whether the model was appropriate and, at the criteria established, its fit values were analyzed ($S-B\chi^2 = 142.49$; $\chi^2 = 265.78$; $gl = 72$; $\chi^2/gl = 3.69$; $NFI = 0.91$; $NNFI = 0.94$; $CFI = 0.95$; $IFI = 0.95$) showing indices above 0.90 [79] and a RMSEA value of 0.07 [80].

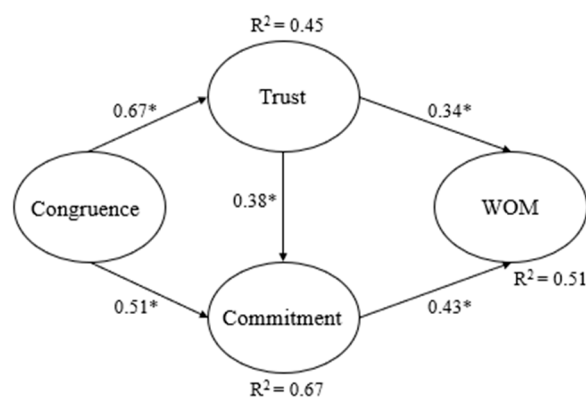


Figure 2. Causal relationship model. Note: * Significant value.

As for the relationships proposed in the structural model, all of them were significant (see Table 4), so we can say that congruence had a significant influence on trust ($\beta = 0.67$, $T = 10.40$) and on commitment ($\beta = 0.51$, $T = 5.50$), and trust was also shown to have a significant influence on commitment ($\beta = 0.38$, $T = 4.93$). Finally, both trust ($\beta = 0.34$, $T = 2.74$) and commitment ($\beta = 0.43$, $T = 4.05$) were found to have a significant influence on the WOM. As for the model's explanatory and predictive capacity, we see how congruence was able to explain 45% of the variance of trust, and that congruence, together with such trust, explained up to 67% of brand commitment. Finally, we see how trust and commitment were able to explain up to 51% of WOM variance.

Table 4. Results of the hypotheses.

Hypotheses	Standardized Coefficients β	T Value	Result
H1. Congruence \rightarrow Trust	0.67	10.40 *	Supported
H2. Congruence \rightarrow Commitment	0.51	5.50 *	Supported
H3. Trust \rightarrow Commitment	0.38	4.93 *	Supported
H4. Trust \rightarrow WOM	0.34	2.74 *	Supported
H5. Commitment \rightarrow WOM	0.43	4.05 *	Supported

Note: * Significant value of T-Statistic.

5. Discussion

The study of brand image and its relationship with consumer behavior is an aspect little studied in the literature related to sports events. Therefore, this research contributes to increase the literature in this sense, testing relationships between variables that have been contrasted in other contexts, and confirming that they are also relevant in the field of sports. Despite the fact that literature is scarce, we can find some studies, such as the one carried out by [85], in which the brand associations of sporting events were analyzed in order to better understand why consumers were involved in them.

In this sense, and due to the great technological evolution of recent years, the study of brand image and sports events has also been oriented, as in other areas, to the virtual environment. Therefore, the study of online strategies related to sports events [86] as well as the role of social media in the sports context [87–90] has become important. Regarding the confirmation of congruence as a starting point for the improvement of other aspects of the brand, there are publications that are consistent with this research, indicating that such congruence is an element that has an impact on aspects such as satisfaction or emotional commitment, as well as with brand trust and loyalty that consumers can develop towards it [38,91–94]. Congruence is a good starting point because it is one of the variables that can be managed from brand strategies, targeting advertising and brand actions to fit the target audience. In studies related to sports facilities, we find examples of studies that have analyzed the relationship between trust and commitment [95], understanding that the generation of higher levels of commitment will have a mediating effect for the achievement of better levels of loyalty [96]. On the other hand, if we focus on the effect of these variables on consumers' future intentions, we find contributions in which they analyze perceptions and repurchase intentions, verifying that variables such as congruence or trust significantly influence repurchase intentions, both directly and indirectly [39,97]. These aspects are consistent with what was observed in this study, so the results suggest that the relationships that have been studied and confirmed in marketing in other areas, where the study of consumer perceptions and behavior is more widespread, are also transferred to the sports context and, more specifically, to the case of sporting events. Therefore, this research is a contribution that helps to fill this gap in the study of brand in sporting events, establishing the basis for the relationships between brand variables and consumer behavior in this sporting context.

6. Conclusions

This study provides original information, since the study of brand image is very scarce in the context of sports in general and in sports events in particular. This research shows that the proposed model is suitable for measuring and relating the variables of interest, and also confirms the relationship between brand image and the prediction of consumer behavior, so that it can be used to establish a basis for demonstrating that the relationships that have been studied in other contexts are also applicable to the context of sporting events. The conclusions of the study are, firstly, that the results obtained allow us to confirm that the model proposed is valid and reliable for the measurement of the different variables and relationships. Furthermore, this model has shown that the proposed relationships have a significant influence, and that the model as a whole has a predictive capacity that allows it to explain the variance of the variables of interest by more than 45% in all cases. Regarding the relationships established between the different variables, we can confirm that the congruence with the event's brand has a significant influence on the trust that the users generate towards this brand, in the same way that this congruence together with trust are able to significantly predict the commitment that the participants will have with the event's brand. Finally, it has been proven that brand trust and commitment to the brand are variables that significantly explain the recommendation of the event by the participants. Therefore, event organizers must properly analyze the profile of their potential customers, as well as their needs and preferences, in order to guide marketing strategies so that the brand is as similar as possible to them, representing their interests and values, which will make them confident and committed to it, having more positive behaviors.

6.1. Managerial Implications

This type of research, which analyzes brand image in the context of sporting events, provides new and relevant information to sports managers, so that they can better understand how brand image variables are related and to what extent these relationships are influential in the consumer behavior of their product, in this case sporting events. This allows us to understand participants' behaviors as consumers and predict their future behaviors so we can better understand how to improve variables that are key to the success and sustainability of the event. Therefore, evidence is provided so

that managers have greater elements of assessment, and this allows them to carry out more effective strategies, with the intention of improving the recommendation of their event.

6.2. Practical/Social Implications

Understanding how the brand is perceived and how these perceptions influence participants' behavior is not only important for managers, but also for participants, since this greater knowledge on the part of the organizers allows them to orient the brand and the event so that it better coincides with their needs and preferences, so that participants will receive a better and much more adapted service. Moreover, improving the sustainability of sporting events also benefits the participants, who have a more varied offer to participate in them as well as for the host cities, since the celebration of these sporting events generates both an economic and a social impact in the area.

6.3. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

As for the limitations of the study, two main ones can be cited: On the one hand, we found the response rate, since, although the number of participants was sufficient and representative to carry out a study such as the one presented here, the intention was to obtain a larger sample. In this sense, despite the fact that incentives had been considered for those persons who were part of the study, the link to access the online survey had to be resent on several occasions in order to collect the final sample, perhaps influenced by the time of data collection since once the event is over it is more complicated to contact the participants and its result can affect the willingness to collaborate. On the other hand, the data correspond to a specific event, so it would be interesting to collect information from other similar events and also from other disciplines and locations, not only of country or city, but also about the type of event and the characteristics of the area (rural, coastal, metropolitan). This would allow to find out if the proposed relations are also fulfilled under those different conditions. Future research could include the above-mentioned aspects in order to solve the limitations and extract more generalizable results.

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