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# Building a sponsor's equity through brand personality: perceptions of fans and rivals

Building a  
sponsor's  
equity

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of perceived fit and brand personality as means of building the brand equity of the sponsor in a basketball sponsorship setting both for team fans (fans) and fans of a rival team (rivals).

**Design/methodology/approach** – The sponsorship deal between Microsoft (X-BOX), a global software company, and Panathinaikos BC, a popular basketball team located in Athens, Greece, was selected for this examination. Empirical data were collected through self-administered questionnaires from 222 fans and 271 rivals. Structural equation modeling was run to test the research hypotheses.

**Findings** – Results provided evidence that brand personality mediates the effect of fans' perceived fit evaluations on brand equity variables. No mediation of brand personality was found for rivals, as perceived fit did not significantly affect either positively or negatively any of the brand equity variables for those study participants.

**Research limitations/implications** – The timing of data collection, which took place a short period after the sponsorship deal was announced, the low degree of rivalry reported as well as the fact that sponsorship activation initiatives were not taken into consideration are seen as limitations of this study. Suggestions for future research that would address each of these limitations are offered.

**Practical implications** – The study contributed theoretically to sport sponsorship literature by introducing the concept of brand personality as a means to enhance sponsors' brand equity in a basketball sponsorship setting for both team fans and rivals. Interesting managerial implications have emerged for marketing managers of both sponsors and sponsees.

**Originality/value** – This is one of the very few studies that propose a process by which sponsors can deal with rivals' negative associations, uncovering opportunities that may exist for companies in sponsoring competing teams.

**Keywords** Brand equity, Sport sponsorship, Brand personality, Perceived fit, Rival team

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Sponsorship has become a widely used marketing tool employed by businesses of varying size and scope as part of their brand building strategy. Global sponsorship spending was expected to rise by 4.5 percent in 2017 reaching \$62.8 billion, as reported by the International Event Group (IEG) (2017), the prevailing sponsorship organization. In all, 70 percent of the total sponsorship expenditure in 2016 was invested in the sport industry, rendering it the most popular sponsored property type (IEG, 2017). Indeed, sport sponsorship has attracted the interest of companies for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the characteristics of sport consumers. Sport consumers are diverse and passionate and are perceived to be more relaxed and potentially more receptive to the messages delivered by sponsoring companies (Mullin *et al.*, 2014). Based on that, sponsors expect that the strong affiliation that fans have with their favorite sport team will, by association, result in positive outcomes for their brand (Dalakas and Levin, 2005).

Previous sponsorship research has highlighted the return on sponsorship investment with reference to a variety of brand-related goals (e.g. Cornwell *et al.*, 2001; Donlan, 2014), purchase behavior toward sponsors' products and services (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2013;



Herrmann *et al.*, 2016; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016), and brand switching intentions (e.g. Parganas *et al.*, 2017). It is generally accepted that sponsorship benefits a sponsor's brand by increasing awareness levels, creating positive attitudes, and building brand loyalty (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001; Donlan, 2014; Grohs *et al.*, 2004; Jalleh *et al.*, 2002). More recent studies have dealt with the process through which sponsorship can result in tangible sponsorship goals (Biscaia *et al.*, 2013; Zaharia *et al.*, 2016).

While the formation of a sponsor's brand personality has also been explored as a sponsorship effect (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001; Deane *et al.*, 2003), there is not enough evidence of its role in influencing more tangible branding evaluations within the sport sponsorship context, such as higher perceived brand quality, brand engagement, and brand loyalty. Given that building brand personality, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty is a more difficult task for sponsors than raising awareness or strengthening their image (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001), the process by which these variables interact constitutes a significant topic for examination. Moreover, there is increasing evidence of the beneficial effects of sport sponsorship on brand-related sponsorship outcomes with regards to the fans of the sponsored team (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Donlan, 2014; Roy and Cornwell, 2003). However, research on other groups exposed to the sponsorship promotional activities, such as fans of the rival team, is still in early stages.

This research aims to address those gaps in the literature by exploring the role of perceived fit and brand personality as means of building the brand equity of the sponsor in a basketball sponsorship setting both for team fans (fans) and fans of a rival team (rivals).

The paper first puts forward a review of relevant sponsorship research, particularly literature on brand personality and brand-related sponsorship outcomes. In addition, the role of rivalry in sponsorship effectiveness is introduced as part of the literature review section. Then, the research setting and the methodology are described, along with the results of the study. Finally, this paper includes the discussion of the results and theoretical and managerial implications, while it reports its limitations with several propositions for future research.

## Literature review and hypotheses development

### *Brand personality*

People often associate brands with human personality traits and ascribe to them characteristics such as intelligent, cool, reliable, or honest (Aaker, 1997). Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). Literature suggests that consumers prefer products that are congruent with their own personality (Aaker, 1997) or with personality characteristics they desire to obtain (Helgeson and Supphellen, 2004). Brand personality is also seen as a tool by which companies can differentiate their products and achieve competitive advantage, even in a competitive marketplace, as it gives brands certain values difficult to be imitated by competitors (Aaker, 1996). These findings highlight the importance of building brand personality for companies, particularly one that is aligned with the profile and personality of the companies' target consumers.

Previous research underlines the importance of brands with strong equity for building higher revenue streams (Keller, 2001) and for shaping the perceptions of sport consumers in regards to purchase intention, brand loyalty, and purchase intentions in professional sport teams (Bauer *et al.*, 2005). As the sport sponsorship research evolves, a number of studies have focused on delineating the impact of sponsorship on sponsors' brand equity (Roy and Cornwell, 2003; Gwinner, 1997), employing Keller's customer-based equity framework. Keller's (2001) pointed out a four-step process for building strong brands, which begins with brand salience, move to brand performance and brand imaginary, then brand judgments and brand feelings and conclude with brand resonance. Each step is dependent on

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successfully succeeding the previous one and highly valued brand equity can be achieved by reaching the top of this pyramid (Keller, 2001). The top-level brand resonance reflects consumers' psychological bond with the brand and includes their loyalty and their engagement with the particular brand (Keller, 2001). The previous step, brand judgments, includes perceived quality, while the lower involves brand personality as part of brand imaginary (Keller, 2001). This process shows the sequence in which the variables of brand personality, perceived brand quality, brand engagement, and brand loyalty interact. The framework of consumer-based brand equity is adopted in this study by hypothesizing that the proposed sequential process will be confirmed by the tested model and that brand personality will emerge as a significant path through which sponsors will be able to transfer perceptions of high quality from the sponsored property to their brand, drive consumers to engage with their brand and ultimately become loyal to it.

Sport sponsorship provides a platform for companies to generate strong, favorable, and unique brand associations and to develop or alter and communicate their brand personality to sport consumers (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001; Donahay and Rosenberger, 2007; Speed and Thompson, 2000). This occurs because consumers attach social-symbolic and experiential meanings to sport brands which usually pass on to extension products (Apostolopoulou *et al.*, 2010) and sponsors. Furthermore, many sport brands have built strong brand image which, as Bauer *et al.* (2008) have empirically demonstrated, is very multifaceted and important for fostering fan loyalty. In a sponsorship context with strong activation strategies, fans tend to transfer perceived team brand attributes, benefits, attitudes to the sponsors' brand of their favorite team (Gwinner and Bennett, 2008). This process is also facilitated by the strong affiliation of sport consumers with the particular sponsored entity and their tendency to transfer the positive emotions they hold to the sponsor associated with their favorite sport team (Dalakas and Levin, 2005). There is plenty of evidence in the extant sport sponsorship literature supporting the dynamic of sponsorship to enhance sponsors' brand equity by creating brand associations (Donlan, 2014), improving perceived brand quality (Donlan, 2014; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2016), building brand loyalty (Donlan, 2014; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012), and increasing direct engagement between sport consumers and the sponsoring brand, particularly through technologically driven activation strategies (Meenaghan, 2013; Meenaghan *et al.*, 2013; Weeks *et al.*, 2008). Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that research that empirically measures sport fans engagement with the sponsor's brand is missing. The extent to which fans are keen to engage with the sponsor's brand is of high importance considering the various means of fan engagement, including but not limited to game attendance, media viewing (Funk and James, 2001), licensed product purchase (Pritchard and Funk, 2006), and positive word-of-mouth (Yoshida *et al.*, 2014).

Within the context of sport sponsorship, brand personality has gained attention by several researchers (Cornwell *et al.*, 2001; Deane *et al.*, 2003; Donahay and Rosenberger, 2007; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Lee and Cho, 2009). Those researchers have pointed to the increased effectiveness of a sponsorship when the brand personalities of sponsors and sponsees are congruent (Deane *et al.*, 2003; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Lee and Cho, 2009). More specifically, Donahay and Rosenberger (2007) identified factors that impact a sponsor's and sponsee's brand personality congruency, while Deane *et al.* (2003) suggested that through this congruency marketing managers of sponsoring companies are able to enhance their brand personality as they gain personality traits from the sponsoring entity. At this point it should be mentioned that there are no studies so far providing evidence of the role of sport sponsorship in enhancing sponsors' brand personality among fans and rivals of the sponsored team. In addition, the role of brand personality on essential variables of brand equity such as perceived brand quality, brand engagement and brand loyalty is still unexplored in the sport domain. The present study attempts to build on existing research by exploring the mediating role of brand personality in strengthening a sponsor's brand equity from the viewpoint of both fans and rivals.

*Sponsorship outcomes and the effects of perceived fit*

Sponsorship is more impactful when consumers perceive there is fit between the sponsor and the sponsored entity. High levels of perceived fit or congruence between the two properties lead to greater attention paid and more favorable attitudes and associations transferred to the sponsor (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002; Grohs and Reisinger, 2005; Speed and Thompson, 2000). When fans are passionate about their favorite sport team and perceive that the sponsor's values are congruent with their values, they become more favorable toward the specific sponsor (Speed and Thompson, 2000). Research by Papadimitriou *et al.* (2016) showed that spectators of the Athens Classic Marathon who thought there was fit between the event and its sponsor also perceived the brand quality of the sponsor to be higher. Furthermore, the role of perceived fit was significant in the process of brand loyalty building for two sponsors of the 2008 Summer Olympics held in Beijing, China (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). Collectively, these findings suggest that when there is fit between the sponsor and the sponsored entity, fans' perceptions of the sponsor's brand personality and brand quality as well as their levels of brand loyalty and brand engagement are expected to improve. The question explored in the present study is the extent to which fans' perceptions of fit between a team and their sponsor will drive them to assign positive personality characteristics to the sponsor's brand that will then lead to higher brand equity levels. The mediating role of a sponsor's brand personality in this process is still unexplored. Based on the above, we propose that:

*H1a.* Brand personality mediates the effect of perceived fit on fans' perceived brand quality evaluations.

*H1b.* Brand personality mediates the effect of perceived fit on fans' brand loyalty.

*H1c.* Brand personality mediates the effect of perceived fit on fans' brand engagement.

*The role of rivalry*

In the context of sport team sponsorship, a number of the consumers exposed to the sponsorship hold negative associations toward the sponsored property (Grohs *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, fans of sport teams commonly dislike and even hate the rival team (Branscombe and Wann, 1992). A question still in early stages of examination is the degree to which the negative associations that fans hold toward their rival team are transferred to that team's sponsors. To date there is some evidence in support of negative image transfer and negative attitudes toward the rival team's sponsors (Bergkvist, 2012; Dalakas and Levin, 2005). However, a clear understanding of the mechanism and the magnitude of this process are missing (Grohs *et al.*, 2015).

For this purpose, the present study will explore the role of brand personality in the process of brand equity building through sport sponsorship in team fans as well as fans of the rival team. The fact that a sponsor's brand personality improves when consumers transfer positive personality evaluations they hold about the event to the sponsor (Deane *et al.*, 2003) suggests that the opposite may also be happening, namely the transfer of less favorable or even negative evaluations about the sponsor's personality and consequently the sponsor's brand equity. Therefore, the following hypothesis will be examined:

*H2.* The mediating role of brand personality on the effect of perceived fit on the brand equity variables will be stronger in fans than in rivals.

**Research design and methodology***Setting and data collection*

Previous studies in sponsorship give prominence to quantitative methodology with the use of a questionnaire, large samples, and statistical analysis to explore the effects of sponsorship.

For the present research, we drew upon this literature (Dalakas and Levin, 2005; Donlan, 2014; Grohs *et al.*, 2015; Tsiotsou and Alexandris, 2009) and developed a similar methodological procedure that involved a survey administered to sport consumers. The present research used the sponsorship deal between Microsoft, a global software company, and Panathinaikos BC, a widely popular basketball team located in Athens, Greece, as its setting. With this sponsorship, which was announced in July 2015, Microsoft chose to promote their videogame console X-BOX. That product was the brand surveyed in the present research. Data collection was carried out from February until May 2016 using a self-administered questionnaire filled out by fans of the sponsored team (Panathinaikos BC) as well as fans of its rival team (Olympiakos BC). Data were collected in various public places that the target group of the product (i.e. young men) frequent, including the basketball teams' facilities. The final sample consisted of  $n = 493$  fans, including  $n = 222$  fans of the sponsored team and  $n = 271$  fans of the rival team. The majority of the respondents were men (75.1 percent) under 25 years of age (48.7 percent) or from 26 to 35 years old (32.3 percent). Almost 59 percent of study participants (58.6 percent) reported that they had obtained a post-secondary degree, 43.4 percent were employed and 35.9 percent were students (see Table I).

### *Instrument and measures*

All measures used for the purposes of the present study were adopted from existing literature and are being presented in detail in Table II. The research instrument involved measures for six variables, five of which were included in the measurement model (i.e. perceived fit, brand personality, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand engagement). All items were evaluated using a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree and

Variables	Fans ( $n = 222$ )		Rivals ( $n = 271$ )		Total ( $n = 493$ )	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	159	71.6	211	77.9	370	75.1
Female	56	25.2	53	19.6	109	22.1
Total	215	96.8	264	97.4	479	97.2
<i>Age</i>						
Up to 25	108	48.6	132	48.7	240	48.7
26-35	67	30.2	92	33.9	159	32.3
36-45	31	14	32	11.8	63	12.8
46-55	6	2.7	5	1.8	11	2.2
55+	2	0.9	1	0.4	3	0.6
Total	214	96.4	262	96.7	476	96.6
<i>Educational level</i>						
Primary	2	0.9	1	0.4	3	0.6
High school	58	26.1	57	21	115	23.3
College	116	52.3	173	63.8	289	58.6
Post-graduate	39	17.6	32	11.8	71	14.4
Total	215	96.8	263	97	478	97
<i>Employment status</i>						
Unemployed	17	7.7	24	8.9	41	8.3
Student	79	35.6	98	36.2	177	35.9
Employee	98	44.1	116	42.8	214	43.4
Self-employed	18	8.1	24	8.9	42	8.5
Homemaker	1	0.5	0	0	1	0.2
Total	213	95.9	262	96.7	475	96.3

**Table I.**  
Demographic profile  
of the sample

Constructs	Factor loadings	
	Fans	Rivals
<i>Brand personality</i>		
1. Leader	0.70	0.63
2. Cheerful	0.74	0.82
3. Exciting	0.82	0.86
4. Charming	0.84	0.87
5. Cool	0.84	0.87
6. Imaginative	0.81	0.76
7. User friendly	0.78	0.82
8. Up-to-date	0.80	0.78
9. Original	0.75	0.78
10. Intelligent	0.81	0.81
11. Contemporary	0.79	0.86
12. Unique	0.62	0.69
<i>Perceived fit</i>		
1. Dissimilar images/similar images	0.85	0.84
2. Low fit/high fit	0.91	0.87
3. Does not make sense/make sense	0.79	0.87
<i>Perceived brand quality</i>		
1. The likely quality of the product is extremely high	0.83	0.81
2. The likelihood that the product would be functional is very high	0.93	0.91
3. The likelihood that the product would be reliable is very high	0.93	0.97
<i>Brand engagement</i>		
1. I really like to talk about the product to others	0.93	0.86
2. I am always interested in learning more about the product	0.87	0.78
3. I am proud to have others know I use the product	0.87	0.84
4. I like to visit the product's Web site	0.82	0.86
5. Compared to other people I follow news about the product closely	0.77	0.79
6. I participate in chat rooms of the product	0.62	0.66
7. I choose to join a club centered on the product	0.63	0.63
<i>Brand loyalty</i>		
1. I consider myself to be loyal to the product	0.58	0.56
2. The product is my first choice, when I search for a product of this category	0.68	0.61
3. I will not buy other brands if the product is available at the store	0.66	0.57
4. I would love to recommend the product to my friends	0.94	0.96
5. I would love to encourage my friends to buy the product	0.95	0.96
6. I would love to say positive things about the product to other people	0.90	0.90
<b>Notes:</b> Fit indices: $\chi^2 = 2569.74$ ; $df = 1,215$ ; $\chi^2/df = 2,115$ ; $p < 0.000$ ; CFI = 0.95; IFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.034 with lower limit 0.032; upper limit.035; SRMR = 0.066		

**Table II.**  
Measures and  
confirmatory factor  
analysis results

7 = strongly agree with each respective statement. Two additional items were incorporated in the questionnaire, forcing respondents to select a specific number from a seven-point Likert scale to test their attention when answering. Questionnaires with incorrect answers to these two items were excluded from the database. The questionnaire was translated from English to Greek by three experts in both languages, following a back translation process, after which a comparison was done to identify possible differences. Also, a pilot test was carried out in a group of ten respondents to test the comprehensibility of the items.

Additionally, several actions were taken by the researchers in order to reduce social desirability bias effect coming from the strong affiliation of fans when responding in a questionnaire concerning their favorite or rival team, especially when answering in the arena. These actions included anonymity of respondents, self-administration, random

distribution of the questionnaire in the arena, the sport facilities of the teams' academies and other public places, and frequent reminders to respondents that researchers were conducting academic research (Nederhof, 1984, 1985; Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Wiseman, 1972).

*Perceived fit.* Three items from Becker-Olsen and Hill (2006) were adopted to measure the extent to which fans and rivals perceived there was fit between the sponsor and the sponsored team (i.e. dissimilar images/similar images, low fit/high fit, does not make sense/makes sense).

*Brand personality.* Brand personality was measured using items from Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale, which has been used broadly in the literature (e.g. Donahay and Rosenberger, 2007; Lin and Huang, 2012). Initially, the items were translated from English to Greek by two experts in both languages and then two young male consumers of videogames selected the items that could be used to describe the specific product. As a result, a 12-item scale was created that included the characteristics of leader, intelligent, charming, exciting, user friendly, unique, cool, contemporary, original, imaginative, up-to-date, and cheerful.

*Perceived brand quality.* To measure perceived quality three items were used from Yoo *et al.* (2000) (e.g. "The likelihood that the product would be reliable is very high").

*Brand loyalty.* Six items were used for measuring brand loyalty, three from Yoo and Donthu (2001) and three regarding word-of-mouth from Papadimitriou *et al.* (2013). Indicative examples are "The product is my first choice, when I search for a product of this category" and "I would love to recommend the product to my friends."

*Brand engagement.* Brand engagement was measured with seven items borrowed from Keller (2013) (e.g. "I am always interested in learning more about the product," "I participate in chat rooms of the product").

*Rivalry.* The sixth variable included in the questionnaire was used to measure rivalry, reflecting the extent to which fans feel joy with everything bad happening in their rival team environment. This variable was measured only in the sample of rival team fans through a four-item scale, which was borrowed from Dalakas and Melancon (2012, based on Gerbing and Anderson, 1988). In particular, the respondents were asked to express the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: "I will feel great joy if a company that sponsors the rival team goes out of business," "I will feel great joy if the owner of the rival team faces legal troubles," "I will feel great joy if a player of the rival team gets suspended for a year, even if the suspension was not completely deserved" and "I will feel great joy if the facility (stadium, arena) of the rival team suffers damage."

### Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the statistical programs SPSS and SPSS AMOS. First, the descriptive statistics and the correlations of the variables were estimated. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out to test the fit of the measurement model, using a number of indicators, as suggested by the literature (Hu and Bentler, 1999), such as  $\chi^2$ , degrees of freedom (df),  $\chi^2/df$ , *p*-value, comparative fit index (CFI), incremental fit indices (IFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with lower and upper limit, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Also, the reliability analysis was conducted with the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient followed by the construct reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and discriminant validity. Finally, structural equation modeling (SEM) was run to test the research hypotheses. In particular, for testing the mediation effects the procedure of bootstrapping with AMOS (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999) was run for the two sub-samples simultaneously. Bootstrapping is a re-sampling statistical technique, where cases from the total sample are randomly chosen to generate new samples, which are used for testing relationships between variables (Hayes, 2009; Kline, 2005). For the



purposes of the present study the sample was re-sampled 2,000 times and the analysis revealed results concerning the significance of the indirect, direct, and total effects for all the relationships tested for both groups of the sample (fans and rivals).

**Results**

*Descriptive statistics and latent variable correlations*

Table III shows the means and standard deviations for the two groups examined in the present study (fans and rivals). Overall, perceived fit between the sponsored team and the sponsor was evaluated higher by fans compared to rivals (4.18 vs 3.17). The same held true for all four variables of brand-related sponsorship outcomes (brand personality, perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand engagement). Interestingly, brand engagement was evaluated very low by both fans (1.91) and rivals (1.73), while rival team fans expressed low rivalry (2.38), showing that they do not actually hate their rival team. This finding may be attributed to the scale used and as such the results are not expected to be affected to a significant extent. All latent variable correlations for the two groups are shown in Table III.

*Measurement models*

For the purposes of the present study a model with two sub-samples (fans and rivals) was designed. Before testing the hypotheses, CFA was conducted to test the fit of the measurement models. The CFA was run simultaneously for each of the two sub-samples and extracted acceptable indicators that suggest good model fit according to the literature (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Table II shows the fit indicators  $\chi^2$ , df,  $\chi^2/df$ , *p*-value, CFI, IFI, RMSEA with lower and upper limit, and SRMR. Furthermore, Table II includes factor loadings for both groups under examination. Each construct was tested for reliability and validity. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient indicated high reliability for all six constructs (perceived fit, brand personality, perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand engagement and rivalry only in the group of rivals), as it ranged from 0.88 to 0.96 (see Table III). CR rates indicated that each set of measures represented the particular theoretical latent construct (Hair *et al.*, 2014). All rates were above 0.89 in both groups. The AVE was used to establish evidence for convergent and discriminant validity. All rates extracted were above 0.61, showing acceptable convergence in accordance with the recommended threshold (greater than 0.50) (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Discriminant validity is indicated when the squared multiple correlations for any two constructs are lower from the AVE values for each construct

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4
<i>Fans</i>									
1. Perceived fit	4.18	1.36	0.88	0.89	0.72	1			
2. Brand personality	4.14	1.29	0.95	0.95	0.61	0.30*	1		
3. Perceived quality	3.73	1.84	0.91	0.92	0.80	0.35*	0.64*	1	
4. Brand loyalty	2.66	1.41	0.92	0.91	0.64	0.38*	0.65*	0.67*	1
5. Brand engagement	1.91	1.22	0.93	0.92	0.63	0.34*	0.46*	0.45*	0.74*
<i>Rivals</i>									
1. Perceived fit	3.17	1.40	0.89	0.89	0.73	1			
2. Brand personality	3.82	1.34	0.96	0.95	0.64	0.07	1		
3. Perceived quality	3.44	1.73	0.90	0.93	0.81	0.11	0.60*	1	
4. Brand loyalty	2.38	1.29	0.91	0.90	0.61	0.05	0.59*	0.62*	1
5. Brand engagement	1.73	1.00	0.92	0.91	0.61	0.05	0.38*	0.44*	0.69*
6. Rivalry	2.38	1.66	0.88	–	–				

**Notes:** *M*, mean; *SD*, standard deviation;  $\alpha$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient; CR, composite reliability; AVE, average variance extracted. Seven-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. \**p* < 0.01

**Table III.** Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , composite reliability, average variance extracted and correlations for fans and rivals

(Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In the present study, discriminant validity was confirmed for all constructs, showing that each measure in the model is distinctive compared to the others in the instrument (Hair *et al.*, 2014).

*Structural model and hypothesis testing*

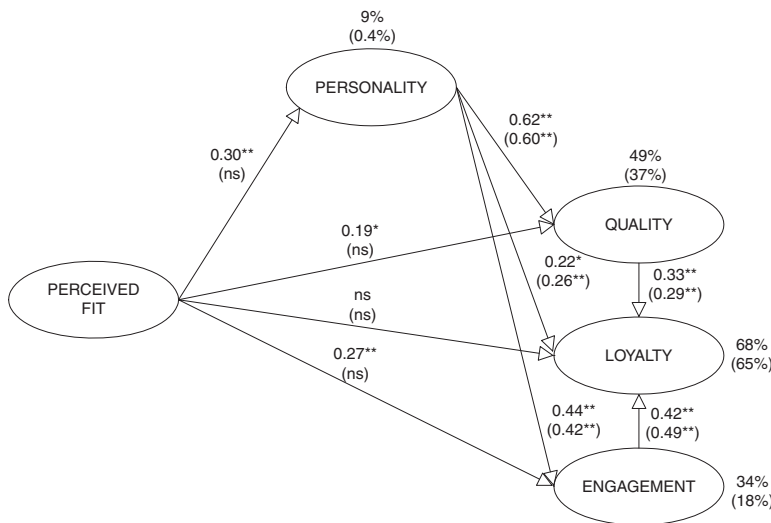
The structural model was run simultaneously for the two groups to test relationships between the examined variables. The results of the two models are presented in Table IV. The structural model demonstrated good fit, given the rates of the indices ( $\chi^2 = 1569.77$ ;  $df = 812$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.933$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ; CFI = 0.95; IFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.044 with lower limit = 0.040 and upper limit = 0.047 and SRMR = 0.08), proving the applicability of the model to both groups (fans and rivals).

A significant portion of brand loyalty was explained for both fans (68 percent) and rivals (65 percent) by variables included in the model (see Figure 1). In detail, fans' brand loyalty

	Fans	Rivals
Perceived fit → brand personality	0.30**	ns
Perceived fit → perceived brand quality	0.19*	ns
Perceived fit → brand loyalty	ns	ns
Perceived fit → brand engagement	0.27**	ns
Brand personality → perceived quality	0.62**	0.60**
Brand personality → brand loyalty	0.22*	0.26**
Brand personality → brand engagement	0.44**	0.42**
<i>Variance explained (R<sup>2</sup>)</i>		
Brand personality	9%	0.4%
Perceived brand quality	49%	37%
Brand loyalty	68%	65%
Brand engagement	34%	18%

Notes: \* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

**Table IV.** Standardized loadings and variance explained for fans and rivals



Notes: \* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1.** Structural model of fans and rivals (rivals in parenthesis)

was explained by perceived fit, brand personality, brand engagement, and perceived brand quality, while perceived fit did not contribute to the explanation of rivals' brand loyalty toward the sponsor. Similarly, fans' perceived brand quality (49 percent) and brand engagement (34 percent) were explained to a significant extent by perceived fit and brand personality. Rivals' perceived brand quality (37 percent) and brand engagement (18 percent) were explained only by brand personality. Concerning brand personality, it was explained only by fans' perceived fit (9 percent).

As shown in Figure 1, perceived fit between the sponsored team and the sponsor had a significant effect on fans' perceptions of brand personality ( $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.001$ ), perceived brand quality ( $\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$ ), and brand engagement ( $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$ ). However, the effect of perceived fit on fans' brand loyalty was not found to be significant. Perceived fit evaluations of the rival team fans did not have a significant effect on the sponsor's brand personality, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty or brand engagement. The results revealed a significant effect of brand personality on sponsor's perceived brand quality ( $\beta = 0.62, p < 0.001$ ), brand loyalty ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.01$ ), and brand engagement ( $\beta = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ) for fans. The same held true for the group of rivals (see Table IV).

The mediation effects were tested using bootstrapping with AMOS (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999), where the significance of indirect, direct, and total effect was tested for all relationships. With respect to fans, the findings revealed that brand personality positively and partially mediated the positive relationships between perceived fit and all variables of brand equity (brand loyalty, brand quality and brand engagement) (see Table V). It should be mentioned that in order to isolate and test the mediation effect on brand loyalty, the paths from perceived brand quality and brand engagement to brand loyalty were deleted. As shown in Table V, indirect effects in all relationships were significant, indicating the existence of mediation through brand personality. The findings showed partial (direct effects significant) and significant mediations (total effects significant) in all relationships. Thus, *H1a-H1c* were partially supported. On the other hand, no mediation effect was found in the group of rivals, in support of *H2* (see Table V).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of perceived fit and brand personality as means of building the brand equity of the sponsor in a basketball sponsorship setting. The relationships were tested for both fans of the team as well as fans of the rival team.

Empirical results demonstrate the strong effect of perceived fit in enhancing perceived brand quality and brand engagement among fans. In line with the literature, fans who perceive

	IE	DE	TE	Med.
<i>Fans</i>				
perceived fit → brand personality → perceived quality	0.29*	0.29*	0.58**	Partial
perceived fit → brand personality → brand loyalty	0.26**	0.31**	0.57**	Partial
perceived fit → brand personality → brand engagement	0.10**	0.19***	0.29***	Partial
<i>Rivals</i>				
perceived fit → brand personality → perceived quality	ns	ns	ns	No
perceived fit → brand personality → brand loyalty	ns	ns	ns	No
perceived fit → brand personality → brand engagement	ns	ns	ns	No
<i>H1a-H1c</i> : partially supported				
<i>H2</i> : supported				

**Table V.**  
Mediating role of  
brand personality

**Notes:** IE, indirect effect; DE, direct effect; TE, total effect; Med., mediation; ns, not significant. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

that their favorite team matches well with their sponsor express more favorable perceptions toward the sponsor (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002; Grohs and Reisinger, 2005; Speed and Thompson, 2000). An interesting outcome emerging from the analysis of the proposed relationships is that fans who perceive the fit between their favorite team and the sponsor to be high tend to ascribe personality characteristics to the sponsor's brand that subsequently lead to brand-related benefits, such as more positive evaluations of quality, brand loyalty and brand engagement. Consequently, it is obvious that brand personality in the basketball team sponsorship context can help produce significant positive outcomes for the sponsor. This finding extends previous research concerning the role of perceived fit in transferring more positive attitudes toward the sponsor (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002; Grohs and Reisinger, 2005; Speed and Thompson, 2000) and research on the effects of perceived fit on brand-related outcomes for the sponsor (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Papadimitriou *et al.*, 2016) by providing empirical support of the mediating role of a sponsor's brand personality in this process.

However, the findings of the study suggest that the perceived fit between the sponsor and the basketball team did not significantly affect any of the brand equity variables (brand personality, perceived brand quality, brand loyalty or brand engagement) for the sample of rivals. This finding is in contrast with previous research by Angell *et al.* (2016) who concluded that when the variables of perceived fit and prior attitudes toward the sponsor of the rival are strong, this leads to specific benefits for sponsors including interest in the brand, favorability and brand use. In addition, the results revealed that rival fans' perceptions of brand quality, brand loyalty, and brand engagement were explained only by brand personality, highlighting its significant effect on building brand equity, in accordance with previous research (Keller, 2001). Perceived fit between the sponsor and the rival sport team was low to drive rival fans to express positive brand characteristics. It is interesting that there was no negative effect in these particular relationships, contrary to previous research (Bergkvist, 2012; Dalakas and Levin, 2005) where negative attitudes toward the sponsor of the rival entity have been reported.

### **Theoretical and managerial implications**

The study contributes to the existing knowledge on sport sponsorship by introducing the concept of brand personality as a means of enhancing sponsors' brand equity in a basketball sponsorship setting. All relationships were tested for both fans of the sponsored team as well as fans of the rival team. With only one exception (Angell *et al.*, 2016), to our knowledge, this is the first study that explores the process by which sponsors can deal with rivals' negative associations and shows that opportunities exist for the sponsors with competing teams. Previous research is restricted to measuring only negative image transfer and attitudes toward the rival team sponsor's brand (Bergkvist, 2012; Dalakas and Levin, 2005; Grohs *et al.*, 2015).

From a theoretical point of view, this study makes the following contributions. First, brand personality emerged as a significant construct in the sport sponsorship context as it was found to partially mediate the relationship between perceived fit and the variables of the sponsor's brand equity (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Becker-Olsen and Simmons, 2002; Grohs and Reisinger, 2005; Speed and Thompson, 2000). This indicates that personality as a mediator may have a pivotal role in facilitating the transfer of positive effects from perceived fit to the sponsor's brand. Second, by identifying differences in variable relationships between fans and rivals, this study offered evidence for the importance of measuring the sponsorship effects in both samples. An interesting finding was that rivals gave less favorable brand evaluations for the sponsor of the rival team in agreement with previous findings that report negative image transfer and attitudes toward the sponsor of the rival team (Bergkvist, 2012; Dalakas and Levin, 2005). Furthermore, the results related to rivals uncovered the

predominant role of brand personality instead of perceived fit in producing moderate effects for the sponsor of the rival team. The third contribution is related to the concept of brand engagement, which is measured empirically for the first time in a sport sponsorship setting. The engagement of fans with a brand is well-established in the sport marketing literature and sport fans are considered highly engaged consumers (Funk and James, 2001; Pritchard and Funk, 2006; Yoshida *et al.*, 2014). The present study explains a significant percent of the engagement with the sponsor for both fans and rivals as a result of brand personality (fans and rivals) and perceived fit (fans). This finding emphasizes that fans tend to extend their engagement with their favorite team brand to their sponsoring brand and the same occurs for rivals when the sponsor has a strong brand personality.

From a practical point of view, the results provided useful evidence for marketing managers of both sponsors and sponsees. Based on the findings, the development of brand personality is crucial in order to produce stronger perceptions of quality and build loyalty and engagement among fans. In addition, it was indicated that a strong sponsor brand personality might prevent the transfer of rivals' negative brand associations deriving from a low perceived fit. For those reasons, sponsorship executives should design activation strategies to strengthen their brand personality (e.g. sales promotions, more visible signage, advertising, etc.) in order to differentiate their products. Activation activities can also prevent fans of the rival team from transferring negative associations to their brand. Additionally, team marketing managers should take into account not only levels of perceived fit but also the brand personality of the potential sponsor in order to boost the effectiveness of their partnerships. Finally, given that perceived fit between the sponsor and the sport team was found to be significant in the sub-sample of fans, it is important for both marketing managers of sponsors and sponsees to actively promote the fit of their brands in order to enhance positive brand outcomes. That way sponsors will increase their levels of brand equity, while sponsees will become more attractive to companies that perceive a sport team as willing to engage in promotional activities with their brand. For example, showing team players using the sponsor's products and services or creating opportunities for fans to engage with the sponsor directly through a social media contest can enhance perceptions of fit between the two properties and lead to greater returns on the sponsor's investment.

### Limitations and future research

Despite efforts to eliminate limitations from the present study, there are still some points that should be taken into consideration when reading the results. Specifically, the rival team fans were asked to express the degree of their dislike toward the rival team. Results showed a low degree of rivalry that may be attributed to the particular scale used, which expressed the extent to which fans feel joy with everything bad happening in their rival team environment. Thus, more research is highly encouraged which will test other scales measuring rivalry (e.g. Grohs *et al.*, 2015, based on Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005) and compare results. Moreover, data collection was carried out a short period of time after the sponsorship deal was announced, which may not have been long enough to affect the perceptions of both fans and rivals. A repeat data collection after a longer period of time may improve our understanding of the role that brand personality plays in strengthening sponsor outcomes.

Future research can apply this research design and methodology to different sport sponsorship settings, including other teams or events and other type of sponsors' products. For example, it is worth testing the mediating role of brand personality of less popular brands. Finally, an important aspect that was not taken into consideration in the present study was sponsorship activation or leveraging. Previous research suggests that active sponsors were able to gain from sponsorship the opportunity to achieve sustainable competitive advantage, something that was not feasible for the less active sponsors (Papadimitriou and Apostolopoulou, 2009). Given the importance of leveraging activities for sponsorship effectiveness, we propose that this factor is included in the model in a future research effort.

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