

Article

Congruence Effects on the Effectiveness of Sponsorship of Sport Event Websites: An Experimental Approach

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Abstract: Emerging online marketing strategies are an opportunity for the sport sponsorship industry as a way of complementing traditional methods. However, in-depth attention has not been given to the study of congruence effects on the effectiveness of sponsorship of sport event websites, and specifically to study the role and effects of sponsor logos. The main aim of this study was to evaluate the congruence effect of sponsor brands featured on the website of a sports event on sponsorship effectiveness in visual, attitude-related and behavioural terms, using an eye-tracker to monitor memory activation and changes in attitudes and intentions. In study 1, the role of congruence on website sponsorship was analysed, using real brands sponsoring the ninth edition of the “Mallorca 312” Cycletourist Tour (42 participants). In study 2, the congruence of fictitious brands was analysed on the effects of website sponsorship of the 37th edition of the MAPFRE (competitions brand name) Copa del Rey regatta (101 participants). Congruence is preferable to incongruence in sponsor brands, except when the sponsorship aims to boost a recall of new market brands. The results validate the importance of managing congruence levels in the online sponsorship of sports events due to the influence on sponsorship effectiveness and its impact on cognitive processing.

Keywords: sport sponsorship; congruence; attention; sponsorship effectiveness; eye-tracking; sports website; sports events; experimental method; visual attention; neuromarketing

1. Introduction

Until the emergence of social media, sponsorship was one of the marketing communication tools to have undergone the fastest boom in recent decades [1]. According to [2], this growth in sponsorship can be explained by the big advantages it offers, such as higher brand awareness, the potential to modify a brand image, more favourable attitudes to the sponsor brand and increased purchase intentions. In [3], sponsorship is defined as “the provision of assistance, either financial or in-kind, to an activity by a commercial organisation for the purpose or for achieving commercial objectives” [1] (p. 9). In an online context, [4] defines sponsorship as an organisation or person referenced in a logo, generally situated at the top of a sports event website.

With the development of sponsorship and its ensuing financial impacts, many academic studies have focused on it from a practical and a theoretical perspective, with particular attention to its effects [5]. More specifically, according to [1], one current research challenge is to assess its efficiency in digital contexts. Indeed, the Internet offers broad potential as a tool for online sponsorship [6], building engagement, attracting user attention and activating cognitive processes [6,7], encouraging users to buy a sports product or service [8]. Different authors have, therefore set out to analyse the efficiency of digital sponsorship [6] in brand communities [9] and on social networks [10]. Research into sponsorship

is also being conducted in the field of neuromarketing [11], using techniques like eye-tracking [12,13] thanks to the objective measures it provides in assessing efficiency [12]. However, as pointed out by [13], literature shows that this technique is still under used in online environments.

According to [14], the most commonly used measure of sport sponsorship effects was consumer attitudes to sponsored brands, with congruence being one of the variables that can generate a positive response to sponsorship [15]. Experimental studies of sponsorship effectiveness show that congruence between the sponsor and the event is fundamental in the image transfer process [16] and for positive effects at a cognitive, affective and behavioural level [17].

The main aim of the study presented here was to assess the congruence effects of the sponsor brands featured on a sports event website on sponsorship effectiveness in visual, attitude-related and behavioural intentions. To achieve these research goals, a neuromarketing approach was taken, based on the eye-tracking technique and self-administered questionnaires. The use of neuromarketing techniques, together with self-reported measures such as surveys, can help to add more significant support to the reliability and validity of neuro-marketing findings [18]. Two empirical studies were conducted under laboratory conditions with the cooperation of participants in two international sports events. Study 1 assessed the website sponsorship of the ninth edition of the “Mallorca 312” Cycletourist Tour and study 2 analysed the website sponsorship of the 37th edition of the MAPFRE Copa del Rey sailing regatta. The results confirm the importance of assessing for congruence in the online sponsorship of sports events since it affects consumers’ cognitive processing of the sponsor brands and their ensuing attitudes and behavioural intentions.

2. Background

2.1. Sponsorship Effectiveness

Congruity is the perception of fit between objects [19]. The congruity theory was initially employed in social psychology to examine memory formation and attitudes [20]. Congruity theory has been previously applied in research on brand strategy, advertising, and marketing communications [21]. Combining two objects with separate meanings provokes a congruity process, resulting in attitude change to sustain cognitive consistency and to maintain uniformity among different attitude objects [22].

In event sponsorship, the image congruence as a theoretical concept was widely used to understand of how sponsorships works [23]. The event sponsorship literature used multiple “congruity” terms, such as congruence between sponsoring the brand image and event image, fit or consistency [21]. In event sponsorship, congruity theory was initially proposed to examine whether the participants’ image of the sponsored event has consisted of the image of a sponsoring brand [24].

This research is primarily focused on evaluating the congruence effect of sponsoring brands featured on the website of a sports event on sponsorship effectiveness [13,22].

Academic attention has focused particularly on congruence in the field of sponsorship. For sponsorship to be deemed effective, this congruence or perceived fit between a sponsor brand and the sponsored event is one of the first conditions that must be met [25]. The concept of congruence is fundamental in understanding how sponsorship works [26]. According to [27], congruence occurs when there is a logical mental association between a sponsor and the sponsored event [28], whether this is due to shared functional attributes or because they have a similar image [29,30]. When consumers evaluate different objects, the perceived congruence between them will influence or modify their attitudes to them [22]; that is, when the image of an event and a sponsor brand are congruent, mental images are triggered that are held in memory and later associated with the sponsor brand and in the final instance, with purchase intentions [28,31].

Most research studies emphasise the fact that a high congruence will boost consumers’ recognition and recall of the sponsors [22], as well as improve the transfer of the sponsored event’s image to the sponsor brand [30,32], fostering a positive attitude to the sponsor brand and the brand’s credibility [33] and increasing purchase intentions [34]. However, some studies point to a certain controversy over the

effects of congruence on the cognitive process [22]. In [35], the authors found that incongruence between a sponsor and a sporting event stimulated the cognitive elaboration of the sponsorship. In other words, because the pair is unexpected, more attention is aroused. In a research study on the effects of congruence between an advertiser's product and a website, [36] pointed out that incongruence has a more favourable effect on recall. However, it generates a negative attitude to the sponsor. Meanwhile, [37] found that a minor degree of incongruence had a positive effect on the recognition of the sponsor by arousing more attention. In [38], it was concluded that incongruence boosted individuals' attention, leading to the greater elaboration of the sponsor's message. According to [39], studies of congruence provide a good theoretical framework for understanding the effects of online sponsorship. Although previous studies indicate that involvement and identification can both affect congruence [17], these variables were not assessed in this study, because the participants in a sporting event were thought to be highly involved and identified with the sport they do [40].

Hence, more in-depth research must be conducted into how online sponsorship affects the processing of messages and how congruence influences online users' attitudes and behaviours.

2.2. Visual Attention and Eye-Tracking

Sponsorship has become an invaluable tool for all businesses wishing to associate their brand with a certain set of values to improve or boost their image [41]. In [42], the authors point out that a brand image is based on a person's perceptions of the said brand and that these perceptions reflect the brand associations held in their memory. In analyses of the effectiveness of online sports sponsorship, it is fundamental to study whether cognitive associations are triggered between the sporting event and the sponsor brand. According to the mere exposure theory [43], repeated exposure to a stimulus is sufficient to induce recall. However, [44] stated that it is important to differentiate between exposure and the impact of the said exposure. That is why cognitive associations cannot be assessed without knowing whether user attention was paid to the sponsor brand.

When users browse the website of a sporting event, it is common to focus on certain structural features of the page in order to process this information and activate cognitive processes. Brand attention is a concept that refers to the cognitive capacity devoted to sports brands [45].

According to the selective attention theory [46], individuals assign their limited attentional resources according to their needs, and they select the information that is most relevant to them [47]. The elaboration likelihood model or ELM [48] is also applicable to digital sponsorship [4], since users who are involved with the online sponsor brand will process the message centrally and thus pay more attention [49], noting certain stimuli that will condition their attitudes and behaviours.

As for the recall, sponsorship awareness is a widely accepted concept in determining sponsorship effectiveness [50]. It refers to a consumer's ability to identify a brand as the sponsor of an event [51], leading to the recall and recollection of the said brand [5]. Hence, sponsorship awareness is the first stage in knowing whether sponsorship is any use [52], because for sponsorship to be effective, its target audience must first become aware of it, and they must develop a positive attitude to the brand, which then encourages them to purchase its goods [53].

Studies of sponsorship have traditionally focused on assessing its effects in terms of recall and recognition [5]. Recent research points to the need to analyse sponsorship effectiveness at a cognitive level by using objective neuroscientific techniques [12]. One of the applied extensions of neuroscience is neuromarketing, which uses neuroscientific techniques to understand the behaviour of humans in commercial transactions and different markets [54]. One of the best-known neuromarketing tools that measure neuronal activity outside the brain is eye-tracking (ET). ET is a low cost and easy to set up, a technique that provides insights into temporal processes, measuring eye movements and positions using eye trackers. ET allows neuro marketers to record gaze patterns and locations from neural activities to explain behaviour in response to viewing marketing stimulus, therefore better understanding what the test subjects perceived and how they react to the marketing information they

process [11]. *ET* plays a fundamental role in the assessments of sponsorship since eye movements are indicators of visual attention [54].

Breuer and Rumpf [55] used *ET* to analyse how spectators process sponsorship information in broadcasts of sports events. They found that the attention that was paid to sponsorship signage depended on the length and size of exposure and on the amount of cluttered visual surroundings. They also identified attention as being a driver of sponsorship recall. Subsequently, these same authors [55] noted that the colour of the sponsorship signage has a significant impact on spectator attention, when the contrast is modified or when bright colours are used. More recently, [12] concluded that the more exposure there is to sponsorship, the more attention the related brand receives. However, this exposure will make less of an impact in the case of highly involved individuals. Taking posters of sports events, [13] assessed the effect of congruence and placement on visual attention. They noted that sponsorship in the part of the poster where the action was concentrated drew more attention than a sponsorship at the bottom of it, regardless of the congruence level. The study failed to demonstrate that congruent sponsors receive more attention than incongruent ones, regardless of their location on the poster, unlike other studies [6]. Hence, there is a need to examine the positive relationship between visual attention and recall in terms of congruence levels. The following hypotheses were therefore proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1) *Congruent sponsorship boosts the visual attention received by the sponsor in comparison with incongruent sponsorship.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2) *Congruent sponsorship boosts sponsor recall more than incongruent sponsorship.*

2.3. Attitudes and Behavioural Intention

In Biscaia et al. [56], the authors defined an attitude as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour” (pg.291). Speed and Thompson [15] highlighted the fact that people who have a positive attitude to an event are more likely to develop favourable attitudes toward the sponsor. According to [42], the perceptions of a logo at a sporting event can create an association between the sponsor brand and the sponsored event, and this association can trigger an effective response by consumers if individuals consider the sponsorship to be beneficial to the sporting event [17]. The image transfer theory [57] describes how the image of an event is transferred to the image of the sponsor brand through sponsorship activities [22]. The aim of transferring the image is to spark off positive attitudes to the sponsor by associating it with an event that individuals value [58].

Many research studies point to the fact that congruence between a sponsor brand and a sporting event not only implies a stronger image transfer process [59], but also a positive attitude to the sponsor [33]. As for congruence in online contexts, in a study of online sponsorship leverage, [6] noted that websites that use sponsorship are more effective in fostering favourable attitudes to the sponsor, finding that a higher congruence between the sponsor brand and the sponsor leads to favourable attitudes.

The theory of reasoned action or *TRA* [60] and the theory of planned behaviour or *TPB* [61] postulate that consumer attitudes affect purchase intentions. In a sponsorship context, a positive attitude to an event helps to predict the purchase intentions of sponsored products [62]. Likewise, taking the two-directional way in which image transfer and attachment between a sponsor and an event can work [63], congruence will have a positive effect on an event’s image, encouraging individuals to take part in it yet again [64] or to revisit the destination where it is held [65]. Hence the following hypotheses were proposed:

Hypothesis 3 (H3) *Congruent sponsorship generates a positive attitude to the sponsor brand.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4) *Congruent sponsorship has a positive effect on the intention to purchase products/services by the sponsor.*

Hypothesis 5 (H5) *Congruent sponsorship boosts the likelihood that participation in a sporting event will be recommended by an individual.*

According to [31], the effects of sponsorship can vary depending on whether a fictitious or a real framework is used for a study, given that familiarity with a brand reflects an individual's level of experience of it, and this might not just affect the processing of information by consumers but also their evaluative responses in terms of their attitude, preferences and intentions. In the experiment that we conduct, an assessment was made with the effect of real versus fictitious brands, as outlined below.

3. Ethics

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the University of the Balearic Islands ethics committee. The participants provided written, informed consent to participate in this study before every study.

4. Study 1: An Assessment of Congruent Online Sponsorship of an International Cycle Tourism Event Using Real Brands

4.1. Pre-Test: Prior Selection of the Website Sponsor

A congruence test was conducted to choose the brands to use in the first experiment. The pre-test was divided into three stages: (1) a group of experts proposed fourteen real sponsor brands which were classified according to their level of congruence and helped to validate the scale proposed on the questionnaire. (2) Using an online self-administered questionnaire, 105 participants with prior experience of the sporting event were contacted to rate the level of congruence of the fourteen brands preselected during the previous stage. The brands were presented in pairs as in other studies [49]. The level of congruence was recorded using a seven-point Likert scale and three items, adapted from [28]. This scale rated the fit with functional or image-based similarities [30]. (3) Four brands were chosen for their congruence and incongruence (two from among the highest and lowest ratings, respectively) (see Table 1). These brands were later used in the experimental scenarios.

Table 1. Logos of the sponsor companies featured on the website versions of the event.

Level of Congruence	Brand Logo and Level of Congruence (7-Point Likert Scale)	Description and Purpose of the Company	Product Category
Brand 1—congruent	 ($M = 5.238$; $s.d. = 0.832$)	Giant combines ground-breaking technology with extensive manufacturing experience in the creation of products conceived to suit all kinds of cyclists.	Bicycle manufacturer
Brand 2—congruent	 ($M = 4.476$; $s.d. = 0.835$)	A travel agency for cyclists in Mallorca, offering guided tours.	Travel agency for cyclists
Brand 1—incongruent	 ($M = 2.476$; $s.d. = 1.274$)	A German beer created in 1753 with a premium international flavour.	Alcoholic drink
Brand 2—incongruent	 ($M = 3.952$; $s.d. = 1.994$)	The island of Taiwan, in the Pacific Ocean, is an ideal country for holidays of all kinds.	Tourism destination

Note: logos chosen from a total of fourteen.

4.2. Procedure and Measurements

The main aim of this study was to analyse the congruence effect of the sponsor brands on the effectiveness of online sponsorship of a sporting event. Effectiveness was considered in terms of visual attention (neural recording activity outside the brain using eye-tracking techniques [11]) and memory (recall); in affective terms through the attitude to the sponsor brand; and in conative terms by assessing the intention to purchase products by the sponsor brands and to recommend participation in the event.

The experiment was conducted using the yearly “Mallorca 312” Cycletourist Tour. Event participants were randomly contacted when they picked up their race number at the beginning of the sporting event. To maintain laboratory conditions, each participant was randomly exposed to one of six differently created experimental scenarios on six versions of the website for the sporting event, featuring paired combinations of the four preselected brands, and each experimental scenario showing the official website of the sporting event and a manipulated combination of sponsoring brands according to the different levels of congruence. For example, the experimental group one—G1, was shown the congruent brands Giant and Arrivo on both the header and footer of the website), (see Table 2).

Table 2. The sequence of the experimental design.

Experimental Group	Paired Sponsor Brands	Link
G1	G–A	https://goo.gl/ricMoe
G2	A–W	https://goo.gl/ZRz5zP
G3	G–W	https://goo.gl/JqB6MH
G4	G–T	https://goo.gl/4bFZW7
G5	A–T	https://goo.gl/UuHj3e
G6	W–T	https://goo.gl/hY9nWN

Note: the congruent brands are shown in bold (G = Giant, A = Arrivo, W = Warsteiner, T = Taiwan).

The sequence of steps followed in the experiment was as follows: (1) the participants were invited to sit in front of a computer configured to show the website of the sporting event. The task to be performed was explained to them. This consisted of finding an alphanumerical code inserted in the website for the event; (2) the ET was calibrated by fixing their eyes on eight points shown on the screen. All the information was displayed on a 24 inch screen in a controlled situation with ambient light; (3) for 25 s, the participants browsed the website freely; and (4) once they had finished browsing, they completed an online questionnaire presented (see https://economyadeempresa.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ehQtN0lmDa3D0uF) in different languages, where they were asked about the alphanumerical code, the recognition of the viewed brands, the congruence between the sponsor and the event, their attitude to the sponsor, their intention to recommend the sponsor brands, their intention to recommend participation in the event, and sociodemographic questions.

4.3. The Participants

The observations of 42 participants to the “Mallorca 312” Cycle tourist Tour were gathered (2018). The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 61 ($M_{\text{age}} = 45.10$; s.d. = 9.835), (87.55% men), an age bracket representative of the participants of previous editions of the event [66].

4.4. Dependent Variables

Sponsorship effectiveness was assessed in terms of visual attention, recall, attitudes and behavioural intentions. Firstly, to assess visual attention, eye activity was recorded during exposure to the experimental scenarios, since visual attention was considered to be an indicator that information about the sponsor was being processed [12]. For the study, the number of fixations (FN) and average fixation duration (TF) in milliseconds were taken as the dependent variables for each area of interest. The procedure was similar to that followed in other published studies [13,67]. To record these

measurements, an eye-tracker was used [68], sampling at 60 Hz, and these data were analysed non-parametrically based on the algorithm used by [69,70].

To measure sponsorship effectiveness in cognitive terms, an exercise involving the recall of the viewed brands was devised [71]. In the questionnaire, a list of the brands used in the pre-test was included, together with a series of fictitious ones, accompanied by an explanation of the purpose of each brand [72]. It is assumed to be a correct recognition when a participant in the experiment chose a brand in the questionnaire previously seen in the experimental web version. The congruence level was measured using a 7-point Likert scale with three items (1—totally disagree to 7—totally agree), adapted from [28]. To gather data on the subjects' attitude to the brand, a 7-point Likert scale with three items was used, also adapted from [28], although it was originally proposed by [73].

Content validity of the adapted scales was assessed using a pool of Spanish tourism researchers and experts ($n = 10$). Additionally, the judges were also asked to review each item for clarity. The items were modified as appropriate. Scale reliability and validity was also tested at the pre-test stage. In all cases, the items in each scale were positively correlated and loaded in a single factor, showing high convergence levels.

In order to register the intent to recommend purchases of products by the sponsor brands, a single-item 7-point Likert scale was used (1—not likely to buy anything to 7—very likely to buy something), adapted from [74]. Lastly, to assess the likelihood of recommending participation in the sporting event, a single-item 7-point Likert scale was used, adapted from [75,76].

4.5. Checks of Congruence Levels

To check whether the stimuli's manipulation caused different levels in the dependent variable (congruence), their manipulation was controlled for. The analysis of the items' correlation indicated loads in a single factor ($\alpha_{\text{congruence-brand1}} = 0.888$; $\alpha_{\text{congruence-brand2}} = 0.977$), ($\alpha_{\text{incongruence-brand1}} = 0.796$; $\alpha_{\text{incongruence-brand2}} = 0.949$). As expected, the selected brands had significantly different congruence levels (mid rank of the congruent brands = 10.57, mid rank of the incongruent brands = 4.43, Mann–Whitney test $p < 0.001$, $Z = -2.772$, $p < 0.001$) (see Table 3).

4.6. Results

To test $H1$, the average number of total fixations (TF) and median fixation duration (FD) were calculated for the participants exposed to each version of the website ($n_{\text{congruent}} = 7$, $n_{\text{Incongruent}} = 7$, $n_{\text{Mix}} = 28$). Table 3 shows a summary of the heat maps compiled with the eye-tracking software for three of the six scenarios. They followed an F-shaped dominant viewing pattern [77], which coincided with the sections containing relevant information about the event. However, differences in the TF were not observed when the different versions of the websites were compared ($TF_{\text{congruent}}$ mid ranks = 19.67; $TF_{\text{incongruent}}$ mid ranks = 13.79; TF_{mix} mid ranks = 19.63; Kruskal–Wallis H test = 1.742, $df = 2$, $p > 0.05$), and neither were significant differences found in the fixation durations in the areas of interest (FD) ($\chi^2(2) = 4.577$, $p > 0.05$; $FD_{\text{congruent}}$ mid ranks = 761.24, $FD_{\text{incongruent}}$ mid ranks = 742.46) (Median = 362.165, Kruskal–Wallis H test = 2.169, $d.f. = 2$, $p > 0.05$), hence rejecting $H1$.

To test $H2$, a chi-squared test was conducted. Thus, the results point to the existence of dependence between the type of congruence and the correct recognition of the viewed sponsor brands ($\chi^2(5) = 31.305$, $p < 0.001$). In Table 4, an association can be seen between the level of congruence and the correct recognition of the sponsor brands.

In the case of the website with the congruent logos, all the brands were correctly recognised. In contrast, when it came to the version with the incongruent logos, all the participants classified the brands incorrectly. As for the mixed scenarios, most of the individuals classified the viewed brands correctly, except for scenario G2, where sponsorship by an incongruent brand was shown first, followed by sponsorship by a congruent one (see Table 3). Consequently, $H2$ achieved sufficient empirical support, with evidence of a congruence effect on brand recognition.

Table 3. Grayscale attention maps, showing the average number of fixations (*TF*) and the duration (*FD*) for three of the six website scenarios. The mean congruence is shown on the right, assessed by the participants for each version of the website.

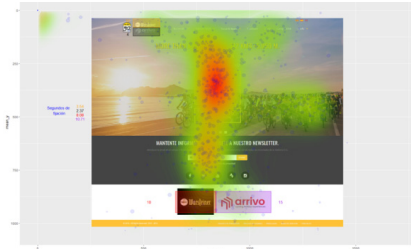
Scenario	Checks of Congruence
G1—Congruent (<i>n</i> = 7)	
	Giant ($M_{\text{congruence}} = 5.238$, <i>s.d.</i> = 0.832) Arrivo ($M_{\text{congruence}} = 4.476$, <i>s.d.</i> = 0.8357)
G6—Incongruent (<i>n</i> = 7)	
	Warsteiner ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 2.476$, <i>s.d.</i> = 1.274) Taiwan ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 3.952$, <i>s.d.</i> = 1.994);
G2—Example of one of the mixed versions (<i>n</i> = 7)	
	Warsteiner ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 3.666$, <i>s.d.</i> = 1.374); Arrivo ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 5.142$, <i>s.d.</i> = 0.939)

Table 4. Frequency of the viewed brands' recognition.

Website Scenario—Paired Brands	INCORRECT	CORRECT	
G1—Congruent—GA (con-con)	0	7 _a	7
G2—Mix-WA (inc- con)	5 _a	2 _b	7
G3—Mix-GW(con -inc)	1 _a	6 _a	7
G4—Mix-GT (con -inc)	0	7 _a	7
G5—Mix-AT (con-inc)	0	7 _a	7
G6—Incongruent—WT (inc-inc)	7 _a	0	7
Total	13	29	42

Note: (Giant—G, Arrivo—A, Warsteiner—W, Taiwan—T). Values in the same row that do not share the same sub-index are significantly different at a $p < 0.05$ in the two-sided test of equality of column proportions ($\chi^2(5) = 31.305$, $p < 0.001$). The boxes without sub-indexes were not included in the test. The congruent brands are shown in bold.

As for *H3*, the analyses point to a direct congruence effect on attitudes to the sponsor brand, since significant differences can be observed in comparisons of the differently paired versions of the website (Rank_{congruent} = 10.43, Rank_{incongruent} = 4.57, U-Mann-Whitney = 4, Wilcoxon $W = 32$, $Z = -2.655$, $p < 0.005$, two tails), supporting *H3*.

When it came to *H4*, the comparisons of the paired brands showed that congruence had a positive effect on the likely recommendation of products by the sponsor ($\text{Rank}_{\text{congruent}} = 9.64$; $\text{Rank}_{\text{incongruent}} = 5.36$; U-Mann–Whitney = 9.50, Wilcoxon $W = 37.5$, $Z = -1.993$, $p < 0.05$, two tails), and so *H4* obtained sufficient empirical support. As for *H5*, the results did not support the existence of a congruence effect on the likely recommendation of participation in the event (U-Mann–Whitney = 18, Wilcoxon $W = 46$, $Z = -0.911$, $p > 0.05$).

5. Study 2: An Assessment of Congruent Online Sponsorship with Fictitious Brands—An International Sailing Event

5.1. Prior Selection of the Sponsor—Pre-Test

A team of marketing experts who were familiar with the sailing regatta devised ten fictitious brands. Then, a preliminary test was conducted with 179 participants, aimed at testing the congruence of the brands proposed by the experts, following the same procedure as study 1. Lastly, the four sponsor brands that obtained the highest and lowest pre-test scores were chosen ($\alpha_{\text{congruence}} = 0.935$). Table 5 shows the selected brands, together with their congruence levels.

Table 5. A pre-test to select logos with a high or low congruence ($n = 179$).

Congruence Level	Brand Logo and Congruence Level (7-Point Likert Scale)	Company Description and Purpose
Congruent Brand 1—N	 ($X = 5.441$; $s.d. = 0.153$)	Navigieren is a company that develops and makes GPS devices for the naval sector in addition to nautical charts.
Congruent Brand 2—M	 ($X = 5.275$; $s.d. = 0.152$)	Founded in 1965, Motatsu is a leader in 4-stroke outboard motors for sailing enthusiasts.
Incongruent Brand 1—DS	 ($X = 2.328$; $s.d. = 0.142$)	The Dog Stop is a company dedicated to improving dogs' lives. It has a shop, and it offers all kinds of services for man's best friend.
Incongruent Brand 2—ML	 ($X = 2.275$; $s.d. = 0.141$)	MAMI LAC is a range of ready-to-eat children's food: the perfect combination for children aged from 6 months to 3 years old.

Note: N = Navigieren, M = Motatsu, DS = DogStop, ML = MamiLac.

5.2. The Participants and Stimuli

One hundred one individuals were randomly recruited from the participants in the 37th edition of the MAPFRE Copa del Rey regatta, in which 140 vessels had been entered of 25 different nationalities ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.79$; $s.d. = 13.585$), (67% men). Participation in the study was anonymous, and the subjects were randomly assigned to each version of the website. Three website scenarios were devised, featuring paired congruent brands, paired incongruent brands and a mixed version with one of each. The experimental conditions and measures that were used were the same as for study 1.

5.3. Measurements and Controlling for Manipulation

The congruence scale that was used revealed a high correlation among the items, with loading in a single factor ($\alpha = 0.949$), confirming the correct manipulation of the congruence levels (see Table 6).

Table 6. Congruence levels of the sponsor brands by website version.

Website Scenario			
Congruent (<i>N–M</i>) (<i>n</i> = 35) <i>M</i> (<i>s.d</i>)	Incongruent (<i>DS–ML</i>) (<i>n</i> = 33) <i>M</i> (<i>s.d</i>)	Mixed (<i>M–ML</i>) (<i>n</i> = 32) <i>M</i> (<i>s.d</i>)	ANOVA
$M_{\text{congruent}1} = 5.27_a$ (0.995)	$M_{\text{incongruent}1} = 2.57_b$ (1.143)	$M_{\text{congruent}2} = 4.94_a$ (0.863)	$F(2, 97) = 71.226, p < 0.001$
$M_{\text{congruent}2} = 5.49_a$ (0.991)	$M_{\text{incongruent}2} = 2.83_b$ (1.296)	$M_{\text{incongruent}2} = 2.60_b$ (1.140)	$F(2, 97) = 66.822, p < 0.005$

Note: vertical and horizontal values that do not share the same sub-index are significantly different at $p < 0.005$; (*N* = Navigieren, *M* = Motatsu, *DS* = DogStop, *ML* = MamiLac).

5.4. Results

When *H1* was tested, the results revealed an association between the total average number of fixations (*FN*) and the website's level of congruence ($X^2(198) = 728, p < 0.001$). Differences were also found in the *FN* depending on the version of the website ($F(2, 3637) = 6.436, p < 0.001$), with the version that featured the incongruent brands having a slightly higher number of fixations (*TF*) (9% higher ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 48.58 < M_{\text{incongruent}} = 52.83$, diff. = 4.245, *s.d.* = 1.204, *CI* (1.36, 7.13)). However, no differences were found in the website versions when the fixation duration (*TF*) was analysed ($F(2, 97) = 0.173, p > 0.05$). Hence, *H1* was partially supported, with the congruent brands having the highest number of fixations.

When *H2* was tested, the results revealed an association between the website version and brand recognition ($\chi^2(8) = 134,248, p < 0.001$). From an analysis of the total number of times that brands were recognised depending on the level of congruence, it was found that the congruent brands were recognised 9% more often. However, in the mixed scenario, the incongruent brand was recognised 20 out of 67 exposure times, and the congruent one was recognised 16 out of 66 times, thus representing a 6% difference (see Table 7). Hence, *H2* obtained partial support.

Table 7. Frequency of recognition.

Sponsor	Recognition Congruent (<i>n</i> = 35)	Recognition Incongruent (<i>n</i> = 34)	Recognition Mixed (<i>n</i> = 32)	No. Possible Exposure Times	% Correct Recognition
NAVIGIEREN (cong)	22	1	1	35	62.9
MOTATSU (cong)	18	2	16	66	51.5
MAMI LAC (incong)	1	16	20	67	53.7
DOG STOP (incong)	0	17	4	34	50
Total correct	40	33	36	202	54

Note: ($X^2(8) = 134.248, p < 0.001$).

Hypotheses 3, 4 and 5 each proposed the existence of a direct congruence effect: on attitudes to the brand, on the likelihood of purchasing products by the sponsor brands, and on the likelihood of the sports event's recommendation. In order to test them, an ANOVA for independent means was conducted, shown in Table 8.

Table 8. ANOVA—type of congruence—attitudes and recommendations.

Website Version	Sponsor	Attitude to the Brand <i>M (s.d.)</i>	Recommendation of Sponsors <i>M (s.d.)</i>	Likelihood of Recommending the Event <i>M (s.d.)</i>
Congruent	NAVIGIEREN—cong	4.27 (0.69)	4.89 (1.37)	5.97 (1.25)
	MOTATSU—cong	4.39 (0.76)		
Incongruent	MAMI LAC—inc	4.29 (0.84)	4.39 (2.04)	5.23 (1.76) ^A
	DOG STOP—inc	4.08 (0.91)		
Mixed	MOTATSU—cong	3.97 (0.94)	4.40 (1.65)	5.80 (1.83)
	MAMI LAC—inc	3.98 (0.81)		

Note: the dependent variables were measured using 7-point Likert scales, with 1 being the lowest value and 7 the highest. *M* = mean; *s.d.* = standard deviation. Vertically and according to the dependent variable, intersections not sharing the same sub-index were different at a $p < 0.05$ significance level.

Table 8 shows the congruence effect on the dependent variables: the attitude to the brand, the recommendation of products sold by the sponsor brand, and the likelihood of recommending the sporting event. The results showed no significant differences in the attitudes to the brand or in intended recommendations of sponsor products, and so *H3* and *H4* did not achieve empirical support.

Lastly, the participants who viewed the logos of the congruent sponsor brands were found to be more likely to recommend the event ($M_{\text{congruent}} = 5.97$; $S.D. = 1.25$) than the participants who viewed the version with the incongruent brands ($M_{\text{incongruent}} = 5.23$; $S.D. = 1.83$), and so *H5* received sufficient empirical support.

6. Discussion

There has been a growth in sport sponsorship and academic studies of its effects and effectiveness in recent decades [5]. However, in-depth attention has not been given to study the congruence effects on the effectiveness of sponsorship of sport event websites, and specifically to study the role, and effects of sponsor logos featured on websites [78,79].

The main aim of this study was to evaluate the congruence effect of sponsor brands featured on the website of a sports event on sponsorship effectiveness in visual, attitude-related and behavioural terms. Two empirical studies were conducted under laboratory conditions with the cooperation of participants in both sports events. In study 1, the role of congruence on website sponsorship was analysed, using real brands sponsoring the ninth edition of the “Mallorca 312” Cycletourist Tour. In study 2, the congruence of fictitious brands was analysed on the effects of website sponsorship of the 37th edition of the MAPFRE Copa del Rey regatta in order to isolate the effects of previous experience on the participants’ cognitive processes and to boost the internal validity and generalisation of the results [80].

In both studies, visual attention was measured using neuromarketing techniques [11]. In the visually related analysis of sponsorship effectiveness, in line with previous research studies [77], the eye-tracker results of both studies showed an F-shaped viewing pattern, which is typical of web browsing. This pattern indicates that their attention was mainly focused on relevant online information about the event for the participants.

As for the analysis of the areas of interest (AOI), where the sponsor brand logos were situated, in study 1, the results show that congruence did not affect the number of fixations or average duration. However, in study 2, it did have an effect on the number of fixations in the areas of interest, although differences were not found in the average fixation duration, in keeping with [13]. Given the obtained results, we cannot conclude that congruent sponsorship attracted more visual attention. This might be explained by the absence of distinguishing features able to differentiate the logos from the rest of the webpage, such as bright colours or animation. Specifically, attention to static ads or logos begins to decrease with repeated exposure [81]. The results show that visitors to the website require less time to process sponsorship information if they already know the sponsor, in line with sponsorship effectiveness research [82]. Following the limited cognitive capacity by [83], highly involved users

with the sponsored event will direct their attention to the sports event, in our case, to the relevant information about the event on the web and thus away from environmental stimuli such as sponsor logos [82].

In terms of recall, both studies confirmed the existence of a congruence effect on sponsor brand recognition. These conclusions also support the existence of positive confirmation bias in the recall of congruent brands used to sponsor sports events in the case of participants strongly identifying with their sport [72]. However, in the case of exposure to an unfamiliar brand, study 2 concludes that incongruence leads to a higher rate of recognition [36]. This is due to the individual's lack of awareness of the sponsor, hence involving greater cognitive elaboration and better recall [84].

When sponsorship effectiveness was assessed in terms of attitudes to the sponsor brand, study 1 showed a high positive congruence effect. Nonetheless, in study 2, no significant differences were found in attitudes to the sponsor brands, whether congruent or incongruent. This might be due to the lack of prior experience (lack of familiarity) with the brands devised for the experiment [31]. These conclusions suggest that for emotional activation to occur, more prolonged exposure is needed, and so a long-term evaluation must be made of the attitude-related effects of online sponsorship of sports events [85].

When behavioural intentions were assessed, in the case of study 1, a congruence effect was identified on the likelihood of recommended purchases of products sold by the real sponsor brands. These results support the idea that consumers who are strongly involved with the sport are more likely to show a greater purchase intent and desire to recommend products by the sponsor brands [86]. In study 2, the effects on purchase intentions were not supported because the brands were fictitious. This reveals the need for a certain minimum number of impacts before there is any change in a consumer's purchase intent [87], given that brand awareness influences attitudes to the sponsor and, in turn, this attitude predicts the intent to purchase sponsor products [56].

One important novelty of this study was the analysis of the influence of sponsorship congruence on recommended participation in a sporting event. In this case, contradictory results were achieved. In study 1, congruence had no effect on the likelihood of the event being recommended, in contrast with study 2, where this effect was observed. These differences might be due to the fact that this intent is determined by other variables that were not controlled for in this research study, such as prior positive experience, satisfaction or involvement in the sport or the destination image [88].

In short, in the studies that were conducted, the congruence of the sponsor brands featured on the websites of the sports events was observed to have an impact on sponsorship effectiveness in cognoscitive, attitude-related and behavioural intention terms [12]. As a result, when sponsor brand logos are shown on the website of an event, certain strategic precautions must be taken by the sponsors, the event organisers and the designers of the website interface. These results help to make decisions in business marketing practice [18].

Likewise, the results also support the need for differing strategies to be taken, depending on the required marketing aims. If the participants in a sporting event are strongly involved and identified with the sport and the aim of this marketing initiative is to boost awareness of a new market brand, then it is better to use incongruent brands for the event, since they have higher recall rates [36,37]. On the other hand, if they are branded with a certain history and other tools are also used within the marketing mix, perhaps the budget spent on online sponsorship should be reduced since there might be a positive confirmation bias in recognition of congruent brands [72].

If the aim is to improve attitudes toward a brand, website sponsorship with incongruent brands is recommended [36]. This recommendation is particularly valid in the case of well established brands because the obtained results show that new brands might need prolonged exposure in order to modify attitudes [85]. If the end goal is to boost the recommendation of products sold by the sponsor brands, the use of congruent versus incongruent brands is proposed [86]. If, on the other hand, the aim is to boost the recommendation of participation in the event, the results show no clear evidence of the type of sponsor brand to use.

7. Conclusions

Emerging online marketing strategies are an opportunity for the sport sponsorship industry. Many companies have opted for online sports sponsorship as a way of complementing traditional methods. Despite this, few studies have explored the effectiveness of online sports sponsorship and its cognitive, affective and behavioural effects. Consequently, companies run the risk of making the wrong decisions in online sponsorship initiatives. That is why this research study represents a significant step forward in this field due to the current shortage of empirical studies on the subject. For example, previous studies showed that familiarity and attention, in part, determine sponsor recall [89], this study simultaneously analysed the impact of congruence and familiarity on attention, recall, attitudes and intentions. Specifically, this study analyses the effectiveness of online sponsorship through self-administered questionnaires and eye-tracking techniques [11,18], a widely used method in digital circles suitable for analysing whether online users have paid attention to stimuli by sponsors.

The practical implications of the study are straightforward: (1) marketers should consider controlling for congruence in the sponsorship of online sports events, because not only does it affect the cognitive processing of the sponsor brands, but also the attitudes and intentions of online consumers; (2) the effect of congruence on the effectiveness of website sponsorship is more acute when brands are better established ones, as [90] suggest, with evidence that points to the presence of a positive bias in the recognition of congruent brands; (3) in terms of visual attention, congruent sponsorship attracts more attention. Therefore, in a recommendation for the event's web managers and the sponsors, they will have to place their logos in more visible areas of the website, i.e., close to the contents related to the event. It is recommended to experiment with attractive visual features (e.g., colour, movement, size); (4) in terms of recall, incongruent brands work better when the brands are not familiar; and (5) in terms of the emotional activation of sponsor brands, it is recommended to use congruent brands, to increase exposure for longer, which is useful when the brands are unfamiliar. Generally speaking, congruence is more preferable than incongruence in sponsor brands except when the aim of the sponsorship is to boost the recognition of new market brands when incongruence is proven to achieve better results.

In terms of sustainability outcomes, the sporting events are targeted at an environmentally friendly audience that enjoys outdoor activity and frequently visits the destination out of peak season. As a result, sports events as a tourist product contribute to reducing the pressure of tourism and presents benefits for the sustainability of the host destination.

One limitation of the study is the fact that only two sports events were selected. In addition, although objective neuromarketing measurement techniques were used to assess visual attention, equipment with a higher resolution should be used, together with observations over a longer browsing period. It is also advisable to control for prior knowledge of the viewed brands and the influence of variables with a previous effect on sponsorship effectiveness, such as the prior negative experience of the brands or the event.

As for future fields of research, the study should be repeated for other sports, and long-term effectiveness should be controlled for by replicating the studies before, during and at the end of the sport event. Similarly, as suggested in [91], other neuroscientific methods should be used, such as electroencephalogram (EEG) or functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) techniques, since these technologies offer a better insight into cognitive processing responses to website sponsorship stimuli [11,91]. Besides, future lines of research must take into account two crucial concepts in information science, such as chronic disposition and situational priming. Measuring both helps to understand changes in consumer responses to marketing strategies [92]. On the other hand, examining the sequence of promotional messages [90] or the appearance of sponsorship brand logos will help to improve the effectiveness of sports sponsorship on websites. Lastly, the destination image should be included in future research studies, since it can influence the recommendation of a sports event [93], like other variables that affect event participation, such as the push/pull motivations of the tourist destination where an event is held [94].

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