



# Controversial sports sponsorships: Effects of sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection on sponsored teams and external benefit perceptions

Alessandro M. Peluso<sup>a,\*</sup>, Cristian Rizzo<sup>a</sup>, Giovanni Pino<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management and Economics, University of Salento, Ecotekne Campus, Via per Monteroni, 73100 Lecce, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Business and Law, University of Portsmouth, Portland Street, PO1 3DE Portsmouth, UK

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## ABSTRACT

Controversial sports sponsorships—namely those in which the sponsoring company is involved in ethically questionable activities—is a relevant area of research. Currently, there is a limited understanding about how controversial sports sponsorships affect sponsored teams and their perceived impact on local communities (e.g., the home city experiencing a surge in popularity). This article presents two studies that examine the interplay between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection. The obtained results showed that a controversial sponsorship's lower moral appropriateness does not influence the propensity to support the team among consumers with higher levels of self-team connection, but it is critical for those with a lower self-team connection. When confronted with sponsors that are perceived as less morally appropriate, consumers with a lower self-team connection exhibit a lower propensity to support the sponsored teams and have a reduced perception that such teams might produce positive externalities for local communities.

## 1. Introduction

Among all marketing communication instruments, sponsorship is one of the most common in practice. Indeed, global sponsorship spending has grown consistently in the last five years (International Events Group, 2018): With an annual growth rate higher than 4%, total spending has exceeded USD 65 billion in 2018. Sports sponsorships encompass a substantial portion of this total spending: In North America, for instance, 70% of sponsorship investments involve sports (International Events Group, 2018). The fact that sports receive the most sponsorship investments (Dees, Bennett, & Villegas, 2008) is likely due to their wider visibility, audience, and media coverage compared to other activities (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Plewa, Carrillat, Mazodier, & Quester, 2016).

The literature typically understands sponsorship as an investment in an activity (whether in cash or in kind) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity (Meenaghan, 1991; Roy & Cornwell, 2003). Prior academic research has mainly focused on the effects of sponsorship in two domains: the sponsoring company itself, in terms of corporate image and reputation (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Grohs & Reisinger, 2014; Meenaghan, 2001; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2000); and the company's brands, in

terms of brand awareness (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Walliser, 2003), purchase intention and loyalty (Biscaia, Correla, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013; Sirgy, Lee, Johar, & Tidwell, 2008; Speed & Thompson, 2000), and word of mouth (Alexandris, Tsaousi, & James, 2007). While most empirical studies to date have investigated sponsorship from a sponsor's perspective, very little is known about how sponsorship affects consumers' perception of the sponsored activity. This gap is especially pronounced in the realm of sponsored sports entities (also known as sponsees). Thus, one useful way of advancing sponsorship research involves deepening our current understanding of how sports sponsorships might affect the sponsored entity (Toscani & Prendergast, 2018).

The present research contributes to this topic in two ways. First, it provides a better understanding of the potential consequences that await sports entities when they choose sponsorships with companies that consumers see as engaging in ethically questionable business. Presumably, such sponsorships might undermine the inherent principles and values of the activity being sponsored; thus, the sponsors themselves might be judged as morally inappropriate (e.g., it might reflect poorly on a sports team or event to be sponsored by a food company that produces or distributes unhealthy food products; Pegoraro, Burch, Frederick, & Vincent, 2014; see also Kelly, Baur,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [alessandro.peluso@unisalento.it](mailto:alessandro.peluso@unisalento.it) (A.M. Peluso), [cristian.rizzo@unisalento.it](mailto:cristian.rizzo@unisalento.it) (C. Rizzo), [giovanni.pino@port.ac.uk](mailto:giovanni.pino@port.ac.uk) (G. Pino).

Bauman, King, & Chapman, 2012). The present research builds on the general notion that consumers' reactions to a sponsored entity basically hinge on how they perceive both the sponsor and the sponsee (Crompton, 2014; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Ruth & Simonin, 2003; Walker, Hall, Todd, & Kent, 2011). As such, the research focuses on *sponsor moral appropriateness* (i.e., the degree to which a company seems ethically suitable for sponsoring a sports team; Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009; Kelly et al., 2012) and *self-team connection* (i.e., the extent to which an individual feels close to a sponsored team and identifies with it; see Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Across two studies, the research shows that these two factors jointly affect individuals' *propensity to support the team*: here understood as their tendency to perform positive and supportive behaviors toward the team, such as engaging in positive word of mouth (WOM) about the team (Swanson, Gwinner, Larson, & Janda, 2003), watching the team's games on TV (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008), or attending them live (Biscaia et al., 2013; Matsuoka, Chelladurai, & Harada, 2003; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). The two studies reveal that sponsor moral appropriateness is irrelevant to consumers who feel more intimately connected to a sponsored sports team, but critical for consumers with a lower self-team connection, as the latter are more inclined to support the sponsored sports team when the sponsor is appropriate (vs. inappropriate).

Second, the present research finds that the interplay between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection produces a positive spill-over effect in terms of perceived external benefits for the local community (e.g., attracting new investments to the team's home city and local territory, or enhancing the city's popularity; see Liu & Chen, 2007). Specifically, Study 2 shows that individuals with a lower self-team connection believe that a local team generates greater external benefits for the local community when the team's sponsor is morally appropriate (vs. inappropriate).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The subsequent section illustrates the phenomenon of controversial sponsorships. The article then proceeds with a theoretical development of the research hypotheses. Next, it details two empirical studies that found support for the proposed hypotheses. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of the results' theoretical and operational implications.

## 2. Controversial sports sponsorships

Companies often use sponsorships to improve their corporate image (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998; Grohs & Reisinger, 2014; Meenaghan, 2001; Rifon et al., 2000), as well as to increase brand awareness (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006; Walliser, 2003), brand liking, purchase intention, and loyalty (Biscaia et al., 2013; Sirgy et al., 2008; Speed & Thompson, 2000). Sponsoring companies achieve these objectives through an image transfer mechanism, whereby consumers transfer their positive perceptions about a sponsored entity to the sponsor amidst a sponsorship arrangement (Cornwell & Coote, 2005; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999).

This phenomenon is apparent in sports sponsorships, as individuals often have very positive perceptions of their favorite sports teams, which spill over to the sponsoring companies (Biscaia et al., 2013; Dees et al., 2008). From this perspective, the act of sponsoring sports teams may be especially appealing to companies involved in industries likely to threaten societal welfare: from alcohol and tobacco production (Crompton, 1993), to gambling, to unhealthy food and beverage production or distribution (e.g., fast foods), to the production and supply of energy derived from non-renewable sources (e.g., coal).

Yet, because the image transfer mechanism is potentially bidirectional (Toscani & Prendergast, 2018), consumers could possibly transfer their perceptions about the sponsor to the sponsored entity (e.g., Ruth & Simonin, 2003). However, current research and practice have put more emphasis on the potential effects for the sponsor associated with image transfer, leaving us with a limited understanding about this reverse

image transfer mechanism (Prendergast, Paliwal, & Mazodier, 2016). Nonetheless, there is some initial evidence that sponsorships from ethically questionable companies may entail serious psychological effects. For instance, exposure to sports sponsorships involving alcohol may increase alcohol consumption among people of different ages (i.e., schoolchildren, college students, and adults; see Brown, 2016; Kelly, Ireland, Alpert, & Mangan, 2014). Sponsorships by tobacco companies may have analogous negative effects on public health (Crompton, 1993; Jones, 2010)—to such an extent that several countries (e.g., the United States and the European Union) have strictly regulated this type of sponsorship (see the Tobacco Control Act by the U.S. Congress, 2009; and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive by the European Parliament, 2010). Similarly, sports sponsorships by betting companies may encourage compulsive gambling, especially among chronic gamblers (Hing, Lamont, Vitartas, & Fink, 2015).

There are similar concerns regarding sponsorships by unhealthy food and beverage companies (e.g., high-calorie snacks or high-sugar drinks), which are common in sports. Companies in these industries are among the top 20 sponsors in the United States (International Events Group, 2016), yet they are sometimes embroiled in ethical issues and have been accused of threatening public health (Whiteman, 2014). Indeed, exposure to sports sponsorships from these companies may increase the consumption of their unhealthy products and thereby contribute to the obesity epidemic (Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009). Consistent with this view, Kelly et al.'s (2012) survey of the sporting community's members (i.e., sporting officials and parents) found that most of them perceived sponsorships from unhealthy food and beverage companies as inappropriate for children's sports clubs; further, they supported the introduction of legal restrictions to this form of sponsorship.

Compared to the aforementioned topics, sports sponsorships by utilities and power companies have attracted relatively less research attention. Yet, these companies have sometimes garnered criticism, especially as the public increasingly perceives their activities as conflicting with the healthy values of sports. This is the case for some oil companies, such as ExxonMobil, which sponsored the Washington Nationals baseball team despite the skepticism of environmentally concerned fans (Crompton, 2014), or British Petroleum, which sponsored the London 2012 Olympic Games despite the public backlash stemming from the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster (Chard, Mallen, & Bradish, 2013).

Given the frequency of sports sponsorships by ethically questionable companies, it might be valuable to better understand their potential consequences for sponsored sports entities. Moreover, the controversial nature of certain sponsorships might generate additional spillovers on local communities: As the present research shows, this might be the case for utilities and power companies that sponsor sports teams where the latter's home city is also the host for those companies' power plants.

## 3. The present research

The present research investigates the potential effects of *sponsor moral appropriateness* and *self-team connection* – which respectively summarize consumers' perceptions about sponsors and sponsees – and how these factors might shape individuals' reactions to controversial sports sponsorships. Study 1 focused on potentially unhealthy food sponsorships, while Study 2 concentrated on power companies' sponsorships.

### 3.1. Sponsor moral appropriateness

Consumers evaluate the appropriateness of marketing initiatives by forming beliefs about companies' intended goals and the moral acceptability of their initiatives (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Thus, in the field of sports sponsorships, people may develop their own beliefs regarding why a certain company sponsors a sports entity (such as a

team) and whether the sponsorship initiative is morally appropriate or not (Woisetschläger, Backhaus, & Cornwell, 2017). In this way, individuals may develop their own judgment about *sponsor moral appropriateness*, that is, the degree to which they perceive a certain sponsor as ethically suitable for the sponsored activity (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Gwinner, Larson, & Swanson, 2009; Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

Consumers might be skeptical about controversial companies sponsoring sports teams, believing that such organizations exploit sports sponsorships to serve their own interests (e.g., improving corporate image) rather than support said teams. In this vein, consumers might consider such sponsorships as morally inappropriate (Pappu & Cornwell, 2014; Rifon et al., 2000). For instance, prior research has shown that many people consider alcohol, tobacco, and unhealthy fast food companies to be less appropriate sports sponsors than companies that sell sporting goods, sport drinks, and water (Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009).

It is worth noting that *sponsor moral appropriateness* is conceptually related to the well-known construct of *perceived sponsor-sponsee fit* (e.g., Dees et al., 2008; Olson, 2010; Speed & Thompson, 2000), yet they should be seen as distinct concepts. While *perceived sponsor-sponsee fit* refers to a general perception of compatibility or congruence between the sponsoring company and the sponsored entity (Gwinner & Bennett, 2008; Woisetschläger et al., 2017), *sponsor moral appropriateness* more specifically pertains to the perceived ethics implied in a company's decision to sponsor a sports entity. Thus, the latter might itself play an explanatory role in understanding sponsorship effects. Indeed, high levels of sponsor-sponsee fit might not always accompany high levels of moral sponsor appropriateness. To illustrate, people might perceive a good sponsorship fit between a betting company and a soccer team, as both entities deal with sport. However, people might deem the same sponsoring company as morally inappropriate if they perceive that it operates in a disputable business (see Davies, 2017, for a discussion on this example).

### 3.2. Self-team connection

*Self-team connection* refers to the degree to which individuals feel close to a sports team. This construct could be considered similar to the notion of *self-brand connection*, that is, the extent to which consumers develop a close relationship with a brand, identify with it, and incorporate it into their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2005). Indeed, sports teams could be thought of as brands with which individuals may develop a sense of connection and even identity. This latter situation, referred to as team-identification, regards those individuals who feel particularly close to their favorite team, and perceive the team's failings and successes as their own (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Wang, Cheng, Purwanto, & Erimurti, 2011).

Prior research on sports sponsorship has detected a positive relationship between individuals' feelings of connectedness with sports teams and their inclination to support them. Indeed, individuals with a higher sense of connectedness with their preferred teams are more inclined to support such teams regardless of their sports performance (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997). Likewise, scholars have found that individuals with higher levels of connectedness with their favorite teams are more likely to attend future games (Matsuoka et al., 2003; Yoshida et al., 2015) and purchase team-licensed merchandise (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Kwon & Armstrong, 2002).

In addition to providing further evidence for the aforementioned link, the present research proposes that sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection jointly affect individuals' propensity to support sponsored sports teams.

### 3.3. The interaction effect of sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection on propensity to support the team

The present research aims to demonstrate that sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection interact to influence individuals' propensity to support a team. This support may involve different behaviors, such as disseminating positive WOM about the team (Swanson et al., 2003), watching the team's games on TV (Bauer et al., 2008), and attending the team's games in person (Biscaia et al., 2013; Matsuoka et al., 2003; Yoshida et al., 2015).

Our reasoning is in line with Balance theory (Heider, 1958), which suggests that people seek to maintain a sense of mental balance regarding their own perceptions about related objects. According to this theory, when people have a positive perception about an object (e.g., a sports team) and a negative perception about another object that is linked to the former (e.g., the team's sponsor), they tend to feel a sense of imbalance (Nickell, Cornwell, & Johnston, 2011). Compelled by this feeling, people will likely be motivated to restore balance in different ways, depending on their sense of connectedness with the objects involved (Dalakas & Levin, 2005; Parker & Fink, 2010).

Based on this theory, we propose that, when consumers feel a higher sense of connectedness with a sports team, their perception about the team tends to be immune to potentially negative information about the team's sponsor. In such a case, the sponsoring company might benefit from the favorable perception that highly connected consumers hold about the team, likely due to an image transfer mechanism. Conversely, when consumers have lower levels of self-team connection, potentially negative information about the sponsor might adversely impact their perception of the team due to a reverse image transfer mechanism. In their different ways, both of these reactions may be able to restore a sense of balance by reducing the inconsistency between consumers' perceptions about the team and its sponsor.

Sponsorship research (Grohs, Reisinger, & Woisetschläger, 2015; Gwinner et al., 2009) indicates that consumers with higher levels of self-team connection have a heightened tendency to transfer their positive perceptions about the sponsee to the sponsor. Likewise, consumers who feel highly connected to a sponsored sports team tend to have more positive attitudes toward the sponsor than those who feel less connected (Biscaia et al., 2013; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). On the opposite end, consumers with a lower sense of connectedness to a sponsored team are less likely to transfer a positive image from the sponsored team to the sponsoring company (e.g., Gwinner et al., 2009). In such a case, a reverse image transfer might be more likely, whereby consumers with lower levels of self-team connection might dampen their evaluations of the sponsored team when confronted with negative information about the sponsor. Thus, companies that are perceived as morally controversial might adversely impact consumers' attitudes toward the sponsee (Ruth & Simonin, 2003) and hence their propensity to support the team.

Based on the above, we expect that sponsor moral appropriateness does not affect consumers' propensity to support the sponsored sports team when they have a high level of self-team connection; in this case, consumers might be insensitive to the potential ethical concerns associated with the sponsor. However, we expect those with a low level of self-team connection to be more sensitive to sponsor moral appropriateness. Specifically, we propose that such individuals will be more inclined to support the sponsored team when they perceive the sponsor as morally appropriate rather than inappropriate (see Fig. 1). Formally:

**H1.** Self-team connection moderates the effect of sponsor moral appropriateness on consumers' propensity to support the team. Specifically, sponsor moral appropriateness positively affects propensity to support the team at low levels of self-team connection, but not at high levels of self-team connection.

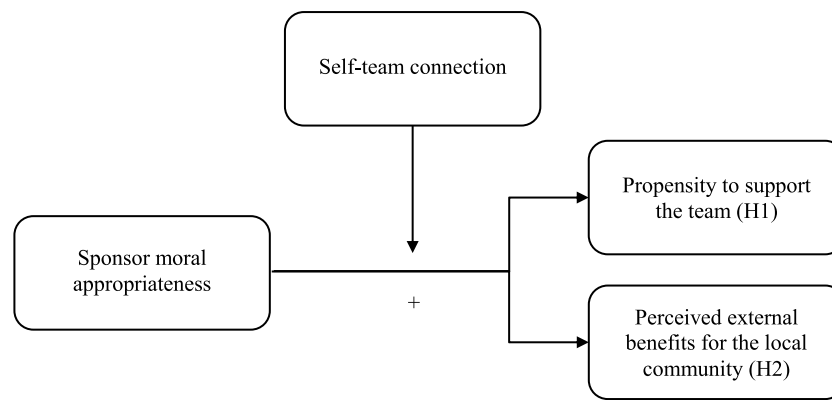


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

### 3.4. The interaction effect of sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection on external benefit for the local community

The present research proposes that sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection jointly influence the extent to which consumers believe that a local sports team may benefit their community. Indeed, the local community might be positively affected by the presence of a professional sports team in its home city, especially when said city is small or does not normally host major sporting events (e.g., Olympic Games). Sports teams not only increase residents' sense of pride and belonging toward the team's home city (Chalip, 2006; Smith, 2009); they may also increase the city's popularity (Brenicis & Ikkala, 2013) and possibly its ability to attract funds and investments for local development (Liu & Chen, 2007). Furthermore, people may associate the local sports team with the home city, thus transferring the perceptions they hold about the team to the city (Aiken & Campbell, 2013; Liu & Chen, 2007).

Consumers who hold positive predispositions toward a team might therefore perceive that the team can contribute to their local community's development. However, we expect that this perception may be unaffected by a sponsor's moral appropriateness when the consumers feel more connected to a sponsored sports team. Conversely, for those who feel less connected to the team, this perception of external benefits may vary as a function of the sponsor's moral appropriateness. Specifically, we hypothesize that consumers with lower levels of self-team connection might perceive greater external benefits for the local community when the sponsor is deemed morally appropriate (vs. inappropriate) (see Fig. 1). Formally:

**H2.** Self-team connection moderates the effect of sponsor moral appropriateness on the perceived external benefits of the team for the local community. Specifically, sponsor moral appropriateness positively affects perceived external benefits for the local community at low levels of self-team connection, but not at high levels of self-team connection.

## 4. Study 1

Study 1 tests H1: the moderating role of self-team connection in the relationship between sponsor moral appropriateness and propensity to support the team. The study employed a scenario-based procedure, which has been adopted in past studies on sponsorship (Parker & Fink, 2010; Plewa et al., 2016). Building on past research describing (fast) food companies as potentially controversial sports sponsors (Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009; Kelly et al., 2012), the present study used the scenario of a (fictional) sponsoring company that operates in the food industry.

### 4.1. Method

One hundred and thirty participants (46 females, 84 males;  $M_{Age} = 34.82$ ;  $SD_{Age} = 12.47$ ) were randomly recruited from an online paid pool of U.S. respondents (Prolific Academic) and randomly assigned to one of two conditions associated with two manipulated levels of sponsor moral appropriateness: low vs. high. Respondents first reported their general interest toward sports using a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = very much) and wrote the name of their favorite sport and team. Then, they completed a self-team connection scale adapted from Escalas and Bettman (2005). Specifically, they answered eight items, measured on a seven-point scale, that assessed the extent to which they felt connected to their favorite sports team (e.g., "I have a special connection to this team"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix A).

Next, respondents read a scenario that manipulated sponsor moral appropriateness. Specifically, they read that their favorite sports team had signed a sponsorship agreement with a (fictitious) new company (i.e., AG&C) operating in the food industry (see Appendix A). In the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition, the scenario indicated that the sponsoring company produced a vast assortment of ready-to-eat foods, mainly targeted at young people. The scenario also reported that the sponsoring company had been accused of contributing to the spread of obesity among young people, due to its products' extremely high content of sugar, fat, and preservatives. In the high sponsor moral appropriateness condition, the scenario indicated that the sponsoring company had invested substantial resources into the development of new products that were much healthier due to reduced amounts of sugar, fat, and preservatives. Afterward, respondents rated the moral appropriateness of the new sponsor using two items, which were adapted from prior research (Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009) and assessed on a seven-point scale (e.g., "How morally appropriate do you find AG&C as a new sponsor of your favorite sports team?"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; see Appendix A). We used this measure in the analysis to check that the manipulation affected sponsor moral appropriateness as intended.

We also assessed other constructs that might help explain the effect of the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation on the dependent variable. Specifically, respondents rated the degree of fit they perceived between the sponsor and the team using five items, which were adapted from Speed and Thompson (2000) and assessed on a seven-point scale (e.g., "AG&C and my favorite sports team fit together well"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Respondents also reported their attitude toward the sponsor using three items (e.g., "bad/good"; Parker & Fink, 2010), which were assessed on a seven-point scale. Furthermore, they rated the sponsor's perceived sincerity using three items, which were adapted from Speed and Thompson (2000) and assessed on a seven-point scale (e.g., "AG&C has the best interest of my



favorite sports team at heart”; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix A).

Afterward, we assessed propensity to support the team by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they would engage in a series of supportive behaviors—specifically, positive WOM (Yoshida, Gordon, Nakazawa, & Biscaia, 2014), game attendance (Matsuoka et al., 2003; Yoshida et al., 2015), and game watching (Bauer et al., 2008; Bauer, Sauer, & Exler, 2005). Respondents answered four items regarding the aforementioned behaviors, which were assessed on a seven-point scale (e.g., “To what extent would you talk positively about your favorite sports team to friends and/or colleagues?”, “How likely is it that you will attend a home game of your favorite sports team during the next three months?”; 1 = a little/very unlikely, 7 = greatly/very likely; see Appendix A). Finally, they reported their gender, age, and how often they played sports on a seven-point scale (1 = never, 7 = very often).

## 4.2. Results

### 4.2.1. Dimensionality and reliability checks

We first assessed the dimensionality and reliability of the self-team connection scale. A factor analysis showed that the eight items measuring self-team connection were unidimensional (factor loadings  $\geq 0.75$ ), while a reliability analysis using Cronbach's  $\alpha$  showed that those items were internally consistent ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ). Thus, we averaged those items to obtain a measure of the construct.

Next, we checked that the two items regarding sponsor moral appropriateness were positively correlated ( $r = 0.94, p < 0.001$ ); we then averaged those items to obtain a measure of this construct. We also ascertained unidimensionality and reliability for the five items that assessed perceived fit between the sponsor and the team (factor loadings  $\geq 0.87; \alpha = 0.95$ ), the three items assessing respondents' attitude toward the sponsor (factor loadings  $\geq 0.98; \alpha = 0.98$ ), and the three items measuring the sponsor's perceived sincerity (factor loadings  $\geq 0.90; \alpha = 0.92$ ). Therefore, we averaged the items employed to assess each of these three constructs to obtain measures of perceived sponsor-team fit, attitude toward the sponsor, and the sponsor's perceived sincerity.

Finally, we assessed unidimensionality and reliability for the four items that measured respondents' propensity to support the team (factor loadings  $\geq 0.44; \alpha = 0.65$ ). We averaged those items to obtain a measure of the construct. Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics (i.e., means and standard deviations), along with the bivariate correlations, for all these variables.

### 4.2.2. Manipulation checks

Respondents in the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition rated the sponsoring company as significantly less appropriate ( $M = 3.58, SD = 1.71$ ) than did those in the high sponsor moral appropriateness condition ( $M = 5.27, SD = 1.37$ ),  $F(1, 128) = 38.12, p < 0.001$ . Yet, the manipulation also affected respondents' perceived fit between the sponsor and the team, attitude toward the sponsor, and the sponsor's perceived sincerity. Indeed, respondents in the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition reported lower sponsor-team fit ratings ( $M = 2.71, SD = 1.55$ ) than those in the high sponsor moral

appropriateness condition ( $M = 4.44, SD = 1.35$ ),  $F(1, 128) = 45.92, p < 0.001$ . The former also reported a less positive attitude toward the sponsor ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.65$ ) than the latter ( $M = 5.14, SD = 1.43$ ),  $F(1, 128) = 52.64, p < 0.001$ . Finally, respondents in the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition reported lower ratings of perceived sponsor sincerity ( $M = 2.65, SD = 1.57$ ) than those in the high sponsor moral appropriateness condition ( $M = 3.97, SD = 1.68$ ),  $F(1, 128) = 21.48, p < 0.001$ .

### 4.2.3. Hypothesis testing

We conducted a regression analysis in which respondents' propensity to support their favorite team served as the dependent variable. This was expressed as a function of the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation (coded as  $-1$  for the low sponsor appropriateness condition and  $1$  for the high sponsor appropriateness condition), self-team connection (measured as a continuous variable and mean-centered), and their interaction.

The results summarized in Table 2 (Model 1) revealed a main effect of the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation on the dependent variable that was positive and significant ( $b = 0.19, p = 0.011$ ), indicating that respondents in the high sponsor moral appropriateness condition were more prone to supporting the team than those in the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition. There was also a main effect of self-team connection that was positive and significant ( $b = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher levels of self-team connection were associated with a higher propensity to support the team. Consistent with H1, there was a negative interaction effect between the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation and self-team connection that reached significance ( $b = -0.14, p = 0.008$ ). As the sponsor manipulation also affected perceived sponsor-team fit, attitude toward the sponsor, and the sponsor's perceived sincerity, we repeated the analysis by controlling for the potential effects of these three variables, as well as gender, age, and the extent to which respondents played sports. The obtained results excluded multicollinearity among independent variables, as variance inflation factors were below 5 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). More importantly, the results showed that the interaction effect between the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation and self-team connection remained negative and significant ( $b = -0.13, p = 0.013$ ; see Table 2, Model 2). Thus, it is unlikely that the validity of our findings was undermined by potential confounds.

To probe the nature of this interaction effect (see Fig. 2), we estimated the conditional effects for the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation at different levels of self-team connection using the SPSS PROCESS Macro by Hayes (2013). The results showed an effect of the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation on propensity to support the team that was positive and significant when the level of self-team connection was low ( $M - 1SD; b = 0.40, p < 0.001$ ). However, this effect was non-significant when the level of self-team connection was high ( $M + 1SD; b = -0.01, p = 0.94$ ), thus providing support for H1.

Overall, Study 1 provides support for the interplay between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection in shaping consumers' propensity to support their favorite team. Specifically, the obtained results indicate that the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation positively affects respondents' propensity to support their favorite team.

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between the variables measured in Study 1.

Variable	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Sponsor moral appropriateness	4.41	1.76	1.00					
2. Self-team connection	4.32	1.48	0.23**	1.00				
3. Perceived sponsor-team fit	3.56	1.69	0.76***	0.22*	1.00			
4. Attitude toward the sponsor	4.14	1.83	0.85***	0.16	0.85***	1.00		
5. Sponsor perceived sincerity	3.30	1.75	0.57***	0.29**	0.69***	0.64***	1.00	
6. Propensity to support the team	4.86	1.19	0.35***	0.66***	0.29**	0.28**	0.36***	1.00

$N = 130$ . \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 2**  
Results of the regression analysis conducted in Study 1.

Independent variable	Model 1 (Dependent variable: propensity to support the team)		Model 2 (Dependent variable: propensity to support the team)	
	b (SE)	t	b (SE)	t
(Constant)	4.87 (0.08)	64.76***	4.19 (0.34)	12.40***
Sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation	0.19 (0.08)	2.59*	0.13 (0.09)	1.45
Self-team connection (mean centered)	0.52 (0.05)	10.19***	0.47 (0.05)	8.75***
Sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation × self-team connection	−0.14 (0.05)	−2.69**	−0.13 (0.05)	−2.52*
Perceived sponsor-team fit			0.02 (0.09)	0.18
Attitude toward the sponsor			0.03 (0.08)	0.39
Sponsor perceived sincerity			0.05 (0.06)	0.87
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)			−0.01 (0.16)	−0.06
Age			−0.00 (0.01)	−0.51
Extent to which respondents played sports			0.12 (0.04)	2.71**
	$R^2 = 0.49$		$R^2 = 0.55$	

N = 130. \* p < 0.05; \*\* p < 0.01; \*\*\* p < 0.001.

Furthermore, this effect is moderated by self-team connection, such that consumers with a lower sense of self-team connection are more inclined to support the team when the sponsor is perceived as morally appropriate (vs. inappropriate). On the other hand, consumers with a higher sense of self-team connection are insensitive to sponsor moral appropriateness. The next study provides further empirical support for H1 while testing H2.

**5. Study 2**

Study 2 replicates Study 1 in the field and tests H2, which concerns the moderating role of self-team connection in the relationship between sponsor moral appropriateness and the team's perceived external benefits for the local community. The study focused on the real case of an Italian basketball team in Brindisi (Southern Italy) called *New Basket Brindisi*. As a small city of about 88,000 inhabitants, Brindisi has a limited number of sports teams. For this reason, New Basket Brindisi is the most important sports team in the city, as it regularly plays in the national first division (i.e., *Lega Basket Serie A*). The main sponsor of New Basket Brindisi is Enel, a multinational power company operating in Europe, America, Asia, and Africa. The firm owns a coal-fired thermolectric power plant a few miles from the city of Brindisi.

The presence of Enel's coal power plant near Brindisi and other municipalities in the area has raised controversies in the local community because of the polluting substances that the power plant may release into the environment (Russo & Verdiani, 2012). Indeed, local populations believe that Enel and its power plant have been contaminating the environment and causing health problems (Ravenda, 2016). Furthermore, some studies have investigated the detrimental effects that Enel's power plant has been exerting on public health (Mangia, Cervino, & Gianicolo, 2015) and biodiversity (Giangrande, Licciano, & Musco, 2005). Therefore, one could expect that Brindisi's inhabitants could consider Enel a controversial sponsor of New Basket Brindisi, insofar as the sponsoring company may financially support the local basketball team to compensate for citizens' concerns about the firm's environmental impact.

To test the proposed hypotheses, we quantitatively assessed the constructs of interest (i.e., sponsor moral appropriateness, self-team connection, propensity to support the team, and the team's perceived external benefits for the local community). In addition, we qualitatively explored whether respondents' perceptions about Enel's moral appropriateness as a sponsor of New Basket Brindisi reflected their concern about the environmental and health consequences deriving from the presence of Enel's power plant.

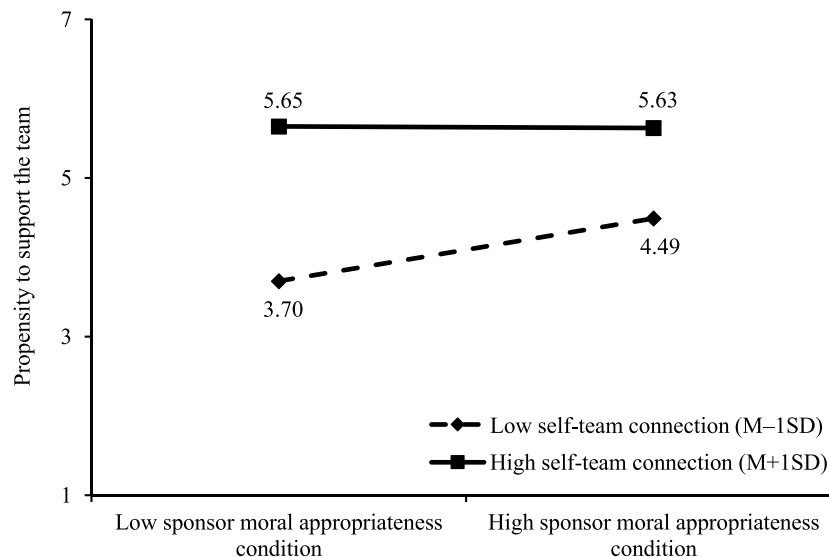


Fig. 2. Propensity to support the team as a function of the sponsor moral appropriateness manipulation and self-team connection (Study 1).

5.1. Method

In January 2016, we interviewed 200 respondents (73 females, 127 males;  $M_{Age} = 35.88, SD_{Age} = 13.21$ ): Half of them were recruited on the street in the city center of Brindisi, and the other half were recruited near the city basketball arena. We chose to recruit participants in different areas of the city to ensure enough variance in participants' responses regarding the constructs of interest. After checking that all respondents knew New Basket Brindisi, we asked them to complete the same self-team connection scale as was used in Study 1, as well as to rate the sponsor's degree of moral appropriateness using one item that was adapted from prior research (Danylchuk & MacIntosh, 2009) and assessed on a seven-point scale ("How morally appropriate is Enel as the main sponsor of the basketball team of Brindisi?"; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Contrary to Study 1, Study 2 also asked respondents to explain their rating score. As Danylchuk and MacIntosh (2009) suggested, the combination of the mono-item measure of sponsor appropriateness and an open-ended question facilitated a better understanding of respondents' perceptions about the sponsor.

Afterward, we assessed respondents' propensity to support New Basket Brindisi using the same four-item scale as in Study 1. As for the team's perceived external benefits for the local community, respondents indicated their degree of agreement with nine items, assessed on a seven-point scale. We developed these items based on interviews with two sport marketing experts and three local fans of the basketball team (e.g., "This team is a driving force for new investments in Brindisi"; 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix B). Finally, respondents reported their gender, age, and whether or not they played sports.

Because the survey was conducted in the field, we needed to develop a concise questionnaire in order to maintain respondents' motivation to answer. Therefore, we did not assess sponsor-team fit, attitude toward the sponsor, and the sponsor's perceived sincerity.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Qualitative exploration of respondents' perceptions of the sponsor

We explored respondents' perceptions about the sponsor by analyzing their answers to the open-ended question, which captured the reasons behind their responses to the single-item measure of sponsor moral appropriateness. Of the 200 participants, 130 (65%) answered the open-ended question. Of these, 52.3% appreciated the sponsorship for the financial support that Enel provided to New Basket Brindisi. One participant provided an emblematic response:

"Thanks to its financial support, this sponsor can help the local basketball team grow and make Brindisi an important city." (Female, age 25)

Conversely, 38.5% of the 130 respondents disliked the sponsorship and considered Enel to be an inappropriate sponsor, especially in light of the pollution and health problems caused by Enel's power plant. As one respondent noted:

"The coal power plant has harmful effects on health. Therefore, I see this sponsorship as a strategy of consciousness washing." (Male, age 31)

Furthermore, 7.7% of the 130 respondents provided ambiguous answers that incorporated both positive and negative perceptions. Those individuals wavered between appreciating Enel's financial support to New Basket Brindisi and being concerned about the environmental and health problems stemming from Enel's power plant. To quote one respondent:

"Enel helps the basketball team financially, but its coal power plant creates problems for public health." (Female, age 55)

The remaining 2 of the 130 respondents (1.5%) provided neutral and

generic answers to the open-ended question (e.g., "I am indifferent to it"). Furthermore, respondents who appreciated the sponsorship reported an average score on the sponsor moral appropriateness measure that was significantly higher ( $M = 6.16, SD = 1.05$ ) than that reported by respondents who disliked the sponsorship ( $M = 1.84, SD = 1.09$ ),  $F(1, 116) = 473.15, p < 0.001$ . Taken together, these results confirmed that Enel was perceived as a controversial sponsor of New Basket Brindisi. Moreover, it seems that our single-item measure of sponsor moral appropriateness adequately captured differences in the intended construct.

5.2.2. Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the items assessing the model's constructs, using the maximum likelihood estimation method. The measurement model included the single item assessing sponsor moral appropriateness, the eight items assessing self-team connection, the four items measuring respondents' propensity to support New Basket Brindisi, and the nine items assessing the team's perceived benefits for the local community. Such items served as observed indicators of the corresponding latent constructs.

The analysis returned adequate fit statistics:  $\chi^2(197) = 343.555, p < 0.001$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.974; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.940; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.061; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.037 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The standardized loading coefficients were  $> 0.70$  and significant at a 0.001 level; the composite reliability coefficients were  $> 0.90$ , and the average variance extracted indices were  $> 0.65$ . In light of such findings, the measurement model demonstrated a good level of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Further, the average variance extracted index calculated for each latent construct was greater than the squared correlations between that construct and the other latent constructs, thus ensuring an adequate level of discriminant validity for the measurement model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 3 reports the composite reliability coefficients, average variance extracted indices, and bivariate correlations between latent constructs.

5.2.3. Hypotheses testing

To test H1 and H2, we performed a structural equation modeling analysis, using the maximum likelihood estimation method, which allowed us to estimate the predicted effects simultaneously. We tested a single model in which propensity to support New Basket Brindisi and the team's perceived external benefits for the local community served as the dependent latent constructs. These constructs were expressed as a function of sponsor moral appropriateness, self-team connection, and their interaction, which served as independent latent constructs.

As the model included a latent interaction term between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection, we followed the double-mean-centering procedure suggested by Lin, Wen, Marsh, and Lin (2010). Specifically, we first mean-centered the single item assessing sponsor moral appropriateness and each of the eight items assessing self-team connection. The mean-centered item regarding sponsor

Table 3

Composite reliability coefficients, average variance extracted indices, and bivariate correlations between the latent constructs used in Study 2.

Latent construct	CR	AVE	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Sponsor moral appropriateness	n.a.	n.a.	1.00			
2. Self-team connection	0.98	0.86	0.24*	1.00		
3. Propensity to support the team	0.94	0.80	0.31**	0.89**	1.00	
4. Perceived external benefits for the local community	0.95	0.67	0.41**	0.57**	0.66**	1.00

N = 200. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. n.a. = not applicable (latent construct measured using a single indicator). \*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4**  
Results of the structural equation modeling analysis conducted in Study 2.

Independent latent construct	Single model with two dependent latent constructs			
	Dependent latent construct: propensity to support the team		Dependent latent construct: perceived external benefits for the local community	
	$\beta$	Critical ratio	$\beta$	Critical ratio
Sponsor moral appropriateness	0.10	2.81**	0.27	4.72***
Self-team connection	0.86	16.20***	0.46	7.49***
Sponsor moral appropriateness $\times$ self-team connection	-0.08	-2.37*	-0.27	-4.69***
Gender (0 = female, 1 = male)	-0.10	-2.98**	0.02	0.35
Age	0.02	0.48	0.01	0.19
Playing sport (0 = no, 1 = yes)	0.00	0.01	-0.04	-0.83
	$R^2 = 0.83$		$R^2 = 0.48$	

$N = 200$ .  $\chi^2(474) = 849.892$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.957; NFI = 0.908; RMSEA = 0.063; SRMR = 0.055. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

moral appropriateness and the eight mean-centered items regarding self-team connection served as observed indicators of the corresponding latent constructs. Second, we calculated eight product terms, multiplying the mean-centered item regarding sponsor moral appropriateness by each of the eight mean-centered items regarding self-team connection. Next, as per Lin et al.'s (2010) procedure, we mean-centered each of the eight product terms. The resulting mean-centered product terms served as observed indicators of a latent construct that represented the interaction term. The model also included respondents' gender, age, and whether or not they played sports, which were treated as observed variables and served as covariates.

The obtained results showed that the model fits the data quite well:  $\chi^2(474) = 849.892$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.957; NFI = 0.908; RMSEA = 0.063; SRMR = 0.055 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). Further, all the hypothesized relationships were significant and in the intended direction (see Table 4). Sponsor moral appropriateness was positively related to propensity to support the basketball team ( $\beta = 0.10$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ), indicating that a higher perceived appropriateness of Enel was associated with a higher propensity to support New Basket Brindisi. Self-team connection was also positively related to propensity to support the team ( $\beta = 0.86$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that a higher sense of connection with New Basket Brindisi was associated with a higher propensity to support the team. More importantly, and consistent with H1, the interaction term between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection was negatively related to the propensity to support New Basket Brindisi ( $\beta = -0.08$ ,  $p = 0.018$ ), thus replicating Study 1's results.

Meanwhile, sponsor moral appropriateness ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and self-team connection ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) were positively related to perceived benefits for the local community. In other words, higher levels of sponsor appropriateness and sense of connection with New Basket Brindisi were associated with greater perceptions that the team generates external benefits for the local community. Consistent with H2, there was also a negative and significant interaction effect between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection on perceived external benefits for the local community ( $\beta = -0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

To explore the nature of these two interaction effects, we averaged the scores obtained from the multi-item scales assessing the model's constructs to obtain aggregate measures. Using such measures, we estimated the conditional effects of sponsor moral appropriateness on each of the two dependent variables at different levels of self-team connection using the SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013). Consistent with H1, there was an effect of sponsor moral appropriateness on

propensity to support New Basket Brindisi that was positive and significant when the level of self-team connection was low ( $M - 1SD$ ;  $b = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, this effect was non-significant when the level of self-team connection was high ( $M + 1SD$ ;  $b = 0.03$ ,  $p = 0.60$ ) (see Fig. 3, Panel A). Similarly, the results showed an effect of sponsor moral appropriateness on the team's perceived benefits for the local community that was positive and significant when the level of self-team connection was low ( $M - 1SD$ ;  $b = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and non-significant when the level of self-team connection was high ( $M + 1SD$ ;  $b = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.83$ ) (see Fig. 3, Panel B).

Overall, Study 2 provides field evidence for the interplay between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection, which determines both the propensity to support the team and the perception of a team's potential benefits for the local community. Specifically, Study 2 shows that sponsor moral appropriateness is crucial for fostering both this propensity and this perception among consumers with a mild sense of connection to the team, whereas it seems irrelevant to those who experience a strong sense of self-team connection.

## 6. General discussion

The present research focused on controversial sports sponsorships, wherein the sponsoring companies are perceived to be involved in ethically questionable businesses that might adversely impact societal welfare—and, as such, clash with the typical values of sports. Past studies (e.g., Brown, 2016; Crompton, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014; Whiteman, 2014) have highlighted the ethical concerns that may arise from controversial companies (e.g., operating in the realms of unhealthy food, alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and polluting productions) associating their own images with sports activities through sponsorship. In doing so, they may be seen as inappropriate sponsors of sports teams. Our studies demonstrated that sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection interact to affect not only consumers' propensity to support the team, but also their perceptions about the team's external benefits for local communities. More specifically, we showed that sponsor moral appropriateness might be an irrelevant factor for consumers who feel strongly connected to sponsored sports teams, but a critical one for those who feel less connected. For these latter individuals, sponsor moral appropriateness fosters their propensity to support the team and their perception that the sponsored team generates positive benefits for the local community.

The obtained results were consistent across two studies, which used different data collection modes (i.e., online vs. in field), types of sponsoring company (i.e., fictitious food company vs. real power company), and experimental designs (i.e., sponsor moral appropriateness as manipulated vs. measured factor). This aspect confers robustness to our empirical findings, which have implications for theory and practice.

### 6.1. Implications

Our research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it shows that morally controversial sponsorships in professional sport may produce detrimental consequences for the sponsored teams. Building on Balance theory (Heider, 1958), we proposed and showed that, compared to sponsors perceived as morally appropriate, those that are perceived as inappropriate may reduce consumers' propensity to support the sponsored teams. Specifically, our results confirmed that these effects are more apparent among consumers with lower levels of self-team connection, likely due to a reverse image transfer mechanism through which such individuals transfer their negative impressions about the sponsoring company to the sponsored team (e.g., Ruth & Simonin, 2003). Our results also reinforce the idea that consumers with lower levels of self-team connection might be less emotionally involved with the sponsored team. Due to their lower emotional involvement, these individuals might be more inclined to evaluate the sponsorship



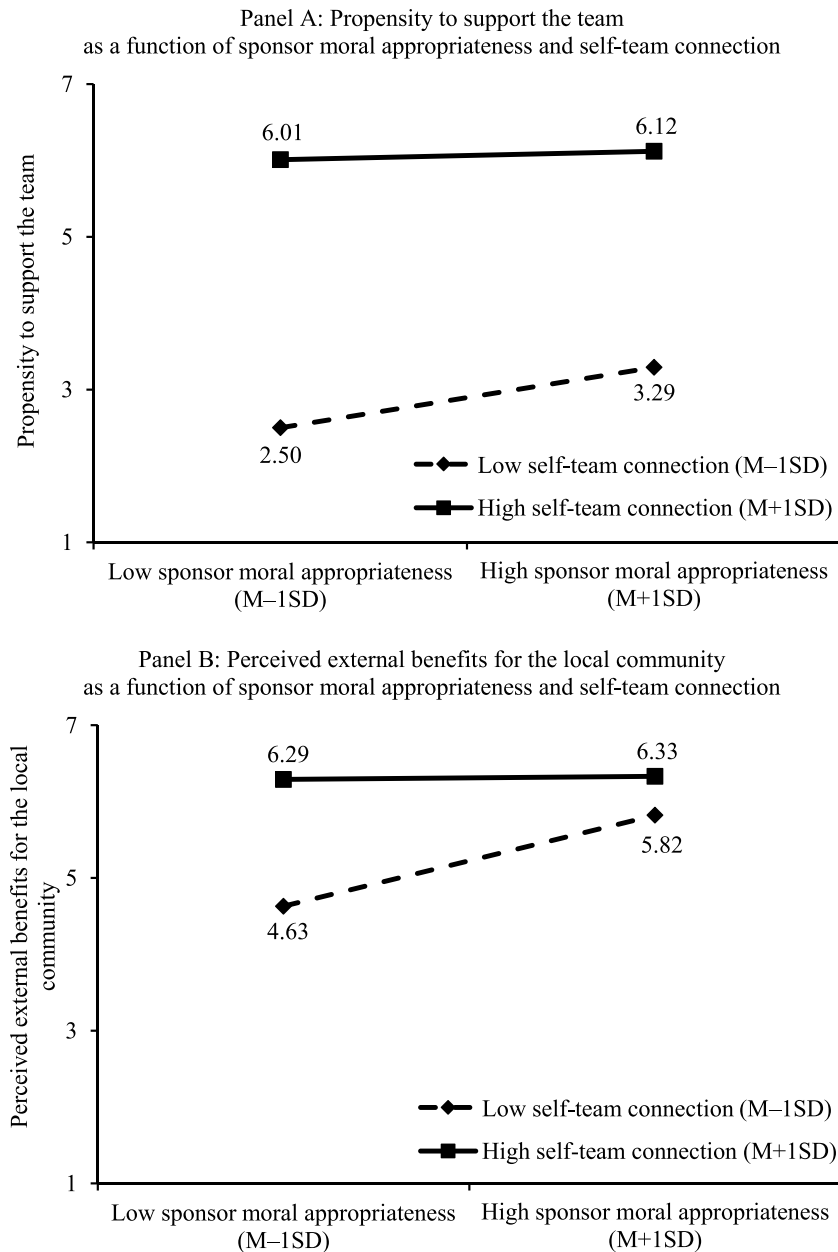


Fig. 3. Propensity to support the team and perceived external benefits for the local community as a function of sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection (Study 2).

more rationally, and thus more likely to make attributional inferences about a controversial company's self-serving motives for sponsoring the team. In contrast, consumers with a higher sense of self-team connection feel passionate about their favorite team and might automatically transfer their positive feelings about the team to its sponsor. Therefore, they might be insensitive to sponsor appropriateness and, by extension, to whether or not a sponsorship raises ethical controversies.

Second, the present research is the first to document a place-marketing function for the interplay between sponsor moral appropriateness and self-team connection. As such, our results have implications for sports event marketing. In line with the idea that consumers tend to associate a local sports team with its home city (Aiken & Campbell, 2013; Liu & Chen, 2007), a controversial sponsorship that associates a local team with a morally inappropriate sponsor might negatively impact the team's perceived external benefits for a local community, especially among consumers with a lower level of self-team connection.

Moreover, the present research has operational implications for

sports managers. First, our results suggest that managers could invest in activities aimed at increasing fans' sense of connectedness to a sports team. This is supported by the main effects that self-team connection exerted on propensity to support the team and perceptions about the team's external benefits for the local community. Second, managers should consider controversial sponsors with caution. In our two studies, the positive effect of sponsor moral appropriateness on propensity to support the team specifically emerged among respondents with a lower level of self-team connection. In other words, arranging sponsorship agreements with companies that might be engaged in ethically acceptable (vs. questionable) conduct might appeal to consumers who are not fervid fans of a sponsored team.

Third, and relatedly, our results suggest that avoiding controversial sponsors could be crucial to making the average citizen—who may feel a mild sense of connectedness to a local sports team—believe that the local team might generate added value for the local community. This finding has implications for city marketing, insofar as strategies aimed

to nurture professional sports teams and arrange sponsorship agreements with morally appropriate companies (e.g., companies that operate in environmentally sustainable businesses or contribute to public welfare) might generate positive externalities for local territories.

6.2. Limitations and future research

This research features three main limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, the results obtained from our two empirical studies were consistent across different sponsorship situations and different industries (food production, Study 1; power, Study 2). While this aspect ensures that our findings are not typical of a specific industry, we are nonetheless cautious about generalizing them beyond the two examined industries. Thus, future investigations should test whether our findings can be extended to other industries.

Second, Study 2 used a single item to assess sponsor moral appropriateness, which was combined with an open-ended question to ensure that the mono-item scale captured the construct reasonably well. However, future investigations could employ multi-item measures to obtain a more robust assessment of the construct.

Third, in sports, individuals are particularly inclined to develop intimate connections and identify with their favorite teams (e.g.,

Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Wang et al., 2011). However, this situation is not easily observable in other contexts, such as art or cultural events. Furthermore, sports sponsorships are typically perceived as having a more commercial orientation than other forms of sponsorship (Messner & Reinhard, 2012). Therefore, future studies could empirically assess whether our findings are replicable in other sponsorship contexts. In this way, scholars could explore whether the sponsorship context moderates the effects we observed in our two empirical studies.

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Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Questions and stimuli for Study 1

Measure of interest in sport

- Are you interested in sport? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much)

Favorite sport

- Please write in the space below the name of your favorite sport:

Favorite team

- Write in the space below the name of your favorite sports team:

Measure of self-team connection

- I have a special connection to this team
- I consider this team as a part of me
- I feel I have a personal connection with this team
- This team expresses a part of me
- I feel as if I had a deep relationship with this team
- I can identify with this team
- This team suits me well
- This team reflects who I am

Responses reported on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

Manipulation of sponsor moral appropriateness.

Scenario used in the low sponsor moral appropriateness condition



Imagine that your favorite sports team has signed a sponsorship agreement with AG&C, a new food company that has recently launched its products in the U.S. market.

AG&C produces a vast assortment of ready-to-eat foods, such as hot-dogs, pizzas, pasta, pop-corn, desserts, and a wide variety of snacks, and targets its products mainly to young people aged between 15 and 30.

In the last year, AG&C has been accused of contributing to the spread of obesity among young people, because of its products with an extremely high content of sugar, fat, and preservatives.

**Scenario used in the high sponsor moral appropriateness condition**

# AG&C

## The New Food Company

Imagine that your favorite sports team has signed a sponsorship agreement with AG&C, a new food company that has recently launched its products in the U.S. market.

AG&C produces a vast assortment of ready-to-eat foods, such as hot-dogs, pizzas, pasta, pop-corn, desserts, and a wide variety of snacks, and targets its products mainly to young people aged between 15 and 30.

In the last year, AG&C has invested a lot of resources in the development of new products that promise to be much healthier, thanks to a reduced content of sugar, fat, and preservatives.

**Manipulation check measure of sponsor moral appropriateness**

- How morally appropriate do you find AG&C as a new sponsor of your favorite sports team?
- How ethically suitable is AG&C for sponsoring your favorite sports team?

Responses reported on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

**Manipulation check measure of perceived fit between the sponsor and the team**

- AG&C and my favorite sports team fit together well
- It makes sense to me that AG&C sponsors my favorite sports team
- There is a logical connection between my favorite sports team and the new sponsor AG&C
- The image of my favorite sports team and the image of AG&C are similar
- AG&C and my favorite sports team stand for similar things

Responses reported on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

**Manipulation check measure of attitude toward the sponsor.**

My general impression of AG&C is:

- (1) Bad ... (7) Good
- (1) Negative ... (7) Positive
- (1) Unfavorable ... (7) Favorable

**Manipulation check measure of perceived sincerity of the sponsor**

- The main reason AG&C is sponsoring my favorite sports team is because it believes the team deserves support
- AG&C has the best interest of my favorite sports team at heart
- AG&C would probably support my favorite sports team even if it had a much lower profile

Responses reported on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

**Measure of propensity to support the team**

- To what extent would you talk positively about your favorite sports team to friends and colleagues? (1 = A little, 7 = Greatly)
- To what extent would you follow your favorite sports team's games (even in case of relegation of the team to a lower division)? (1 = A little, 7 = Greatly)
- How likely is it that you will attend a home game of your favorite sports team during the next three months? (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely)
- How likely is it that you will watch a game of your favorite sports team on TV or via the Internet during the next three months? (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely)

**Appendix B. Questions for Study 2****Screening question**

- Do you know the basketball team named “New Basket Brindisi”? (Yes/No)

**Measure of self-team connection**

- The same as in Study 1

**Measure of sponsor moral appropriateness**

- How morally appropriate is Enel as the main sponsor of the basketball team of Brindisi? (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much)

### Open-ended question on sponsor moral appropriateness

- Please could you explain, in the space below, the reason for your response on the previous question?

(No space limit was given to respondents to answer this question.)

#### Measure of propensity to support the team

- To what extent would you talk positively about this team to friends and colleagues? (1 = A little, 7 = Greatly)
- To what extent would you follow this team's games in case of relegation of the team from the top division to the second division? (1 = A little, 7 = Greatly)
- How likely is it that you will attend a home game of this team during the next three months? (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely)
- How likely is it that you will watch a game of this team on TV or via the Internet during the next three months? (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = Very likely)

#### Measure of perceived external benefit for the local community

- This team represents the Brindisi's excellence in sport
- This team represents a very important value for the city of Brindisi
- This team is a driving force for new investments in Brindisi
- This team enhances the citizens' sense of belonging to the city of Brindisi
- This team increases the popularity of Brindisi at both local and national levels
- Thys team is a symbol for the city of Brindisi
- This team considerably improves the reputation of Brindisi
- This team attracts visitors and tourists in Brindisi
- This team facilitates local development

Responses reported on a seven-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree).

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**Alessandro M. Peluso** is an Associate Professor of Business Management at the University of Salento, Lecce (Italy), where he teaches marketing and tourist destination marketing. His research activity mainly focuses on consumer behavior, sustainable consumption, and social communication. He has published three research monographs and several articles in international peer-reviewed journals, such as *European Journal of Marketing*, *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *Research Policy*. He is a member of the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) and the European Marketing Academy (EMAC).

**Cristian Rizzo** is a PhD candidate in Economics, Management and Quantitative Methods at the University of Salento, Lecce (Italy). His research activity mainly focuses on consumer psychology and sustainable consumption behavior. He has published several articles in international peer-reviewed journals, such as *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, and *Sustainability*.

**Giovanni Pino** is a Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Portsmouth, UK. His research activity mainly focuses on sustainable consumption behavior, marketing communications, and place marketing. He has published several articles in international peer-reviewed journals, such as *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Advertising Research*, *Marketing Letters*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *European Journal of Marketing*.