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To cite this article: Asieh Ghorbanian Rajabi, Guillaume Martinet, Sergey Altukhov & Guillaume Bodet (2022): Strengthening Sponsorship Fit: Testing for the Influence of Sponsor Category and National Culture, Journal of International Consumer Marketing, DOI: [10.1080/08961530.2022.2070901](https://doi.org/10.1080/08961530.2022.2070901)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08961530.2022.2070901>



Published online: 09 May 2022.



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## Strengthening Sponsorship Fit: Testing for the Influence of Sponsor Category and National Culture

Asieh Ghorbanian Rajabi<sup>a</sup> , Guillaume Martinent<sup>b</sup> , Sergey Altukhov<sup>c</sup> and Guillaume Bodet<sup>b</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify sponsorship-fit profiles of individuals regarding perception of sponsors of national volleyball teams in three countries and its effect on affective outcomes. We examined: (a) if sponsorship-fit profiles were similar for two sponsor categories (sport equipment/apparel companies and financial service companies) and in three countries (France, Iran and Russia); (b) whether individuals with distinct sponsorship-fit profiles differed in their attitudes toward sponsor and toward brand, (c) whether the relationships between sponsorship-fit profiles and attitudes toward sponsor and brand were similar between the two sponsor categories and the three countries; and (d) whether the scores of fit and attitude toward sponsors and brands differed across cultures and categories of sponsors. To investigate this, we collected data from 166 randomly selected student in France, 270 in Iran and 168 in Russia. The results of the cluster analyses revealed two or three sponsorship-fit profiles across the sponsor categories and countries: low, medium and high fit. Respondents had significantly different scores of fit and attitude toward sponsor and brand for the different sponsor categories and countries.

### KEYWORDS

Attitude; cluster analysis; national culture; schema congruity theory; sponsorship fit

### Introduction

Sponsorship involves a cash or in-kind fee paid to an entity (typically in sports, arts, entertainment or charitable causes) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential of that entity (IEG 2017a). Alongside direct marketing tools such as mass media advertising, there are a wide array of indirect marketing approaches, which include sponsorship (Cornwell et al. 2006). Sponsorship plays an increasingly important role in sport; it has proven strategic value, as the effective allocation of resources to sponsorship can sustain a team's continuous competitive advantage in the "market" (Koronios, Vrontis, and Thrassou 2021).

The fact that sponsors' objectives may be diverse and complex represents a barrier to a fully comprehensive evaluation of all the variables that may play a role in effective sponsorship (Cornwell and Kwon 2020). In one meta-analysis including 58,469 participants from 154 studies, Kim et al. (2015)

found that sponsor–sponsee fit and the degree of involvement individuals have with a sport are the most important factors on sponsorship outcomes (including attitudes toward a sponsor). Aside from factors categorized as antecedents, mediators and consequences, environmental factors can also alter the nature and intensity of sponsorship relationships. Culture is one of these factors, and it can play a key role in sponsorship marketing efforts (Keshkar et al. 2019).

For numerous brands, sport sponsorship is a critical part of international marketing campaigns (Koronios, Vrontis, and Thrassou 2021). Koronios et al. (2020) and Koronios, Vrontis, and Thrassou (2021) have suggested that a multinational study (including culturally diverse countries) could provide valuable insights into sport sponsorship in the contemporary context. To date, studies conducting multi-country comparisons of consumer responses to sponsorships have been limited. Yet the rapidly

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increasing use of sponsorship globally highlights the need to better understand the influence that culture, and particularly national culture, can have on sponsorship. A cross-cultural analysis can be a valuable tool for identifying and examining the role of culture on key sponsorship variables (e.g., consumers' perceived fit, attitudes toward sponsors and brands) as well as on the relationships between such key theoretical variables (Dalakas and Kropp 2002).

While some studies have used a multidimensional conceptualization of sponsorship fit (e.g., Fortunato 2013; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley 2010), to the best of our knowledge, none have examined the influence of sponsor category and culture on fit. A challenge for researchers who have examined sponsorship fit and its key correlates has been to capture the multidimensionality of the construct. Previous studies have mainly examined each aspect of sponsorship fit individually (Rajabi et al. 2020; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley 2010). This allowed these researchers to explore how each characteristic of fit relates independently to theoretically relevant variables. However, it is equally important to consider that distinct facets of fit can coexist within an individual to a varying degree. A multidimensional approach to fit can identify distinct naturally occurring sponsorship-fit profiles that characterize subgroups of individuals.

In this study, we adopted such a framework, in which the coexistence of several aspects of fit was used to generate sponsorship-fit profiles to provide further insights about the fit construct. As attitudes and perceptions can vary across both cultures and sponsor categories, a cross-cultural analysis was conducted for two types of sponsor to identify: (a) differences in fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands across cultures and sponsor categories (Dalakas and Kropp 2002); and (b) whether the relationships between fit and attitudes toward sponsor and brand were similar across the two sponsor categories and the three countries.

## Literature review

### *Sponsorship-fit profiles*

A key to a consumer's response to sponsorship is the perceived congruence between the sponsor

and the sponsee (Roy and Cornwell 2004). For example, for companies whose products are related to sports, sports sponsorship is a potentially interesting option for investment (Melovic et al. 2019). Fortunato (2013) conceptualized fit as congruence, or the similarity between a sponsor and a sport entity. It is widely accepted that sponsor-sponsee fit is an important factor in achieving sponsorship success (Kim et al. 2015; Roy and Cornwell 2004). Studies have shown the effects of several variables on the construct of fit. For example, the level of fan identification plays a significant role. Dreisbach et al. (2021) showed that high fan identification results in increased perceived fit, and Gwinner and Swanson (2003) established that high team identification influences sponsor loyalty and higher sponsorship outcomes. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that high identifiers buy a sponsor's products despite a team's performance (Madrigal 2001). Studies have also found evidence of the effect of fit on brand loyalty, one of the ultimate goals of marketing objectives (Mazodier and Merunka 2012).

As a whole, studies about fit in sports settings has mainly focused on bivariate relationships between the different aspects of fit and other theoretically relevant variables (e.g., Dahlén et al. 2008; Rajabi et al. 2020; Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley 2010). Yet this may overlook the complex and multivariate nature of fit. Different aspects of fit (visibility, slogan, mission, color, target market, promotion, geography, involvement and explicitness) are likely to operate in conjunction with each other. This is difficult to reveal if these aspects are examined discretely, in isolation from one another, without considering the systemic nature of the fit construct. Rather than considering fit as the accretion of these various aspects, a profile approach considers that they can coexist within an individual to a varying degree (Cece, Guillet-Descas, and Martinent 2019). In this perspective, person-centered (e.g., cluster analysis) and variable-centered (e.g., structural equation modeling [SEM] analysis) strategies represent complementary rather than competing approaches (Martinent and Nicolas 2017). We chose to examine the relationships between the study variables using both approaches in order to identify prototypical subgroups of individuals

with particular configurations of the different aspects of fit and to unpack the complex associations with key sponsorship outcomes. Attitudes toward sponsors and brands were selected as these seem particularly relevant within a sponsorship context. Since a consumer transfers his/her own cognitive, symbolic, and affective content to an object (Ferrand and Pages 1999), a sponsor might expect an attitude to be conveyed from the entity to its brand (Crimmins and Horn 1996; D'Astous and Bitz 1995).

Social psychology uses congruity theory to examine topics such as memory, affect, attitude formation and change (Hao et al. 2013). In terms of sponsorship, several studies have found that congruent sponsors result in better attitudes toward brands than incongruent sponsors (Kim et al. 2015; Roy and Cornwell 2004). These results suggest that congruency bias could be a strong indicator for success in terms of market prominence. Consistent with the congruity theory, Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley (2010) found that a congruent sponsor led to positive attitudes toward sponsors and brands. In contrast, other studies have demonstrated that a medium fit (Mandler 1982) or even a low fit (Dahlén et al. 2008) can be more effective. According to Mandler's schema congruity theory (1982), it is sometimes possible for a medium level of incongruence to lead to a more positive evaluation compared to a highly congruent context. For example, Dahlén et al. (2008) suggested that incongruence might raise sponsorship effectiveness by reaching parts of desired target audiences who read thematically incongruent magazines. It will probably work through trying to resolve the incongruity by them and as a result, they will find the advertisement more convincing.

Studies on sponsor–sponsee fit have found that promoting an association in consumers' minds enhances sponsorship effectiveness (Cornwell et al. 2006), as attitudes play a role in shaping behavior. In turn, people consider their general opinions and behavior while making up their minds about situationally explicit attitudes (Koronios et al. 2022). Mitchell and Olson (1981, 318) have defined attitude as an “individual's internal evaluation of the brand.” This definition, as Spears and Singh (2004) suggested, contains

two important characteristics: that an attitude (a) is centered or directed at an object (in this case a brand) and (b) is evaluative in nature. Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley (2010) argue that fit is significantly related to attitude toward the sponsor and brand, and also that attitude toward sponsorship is a mediating variable between fit and attitude toward the brand. Olson (2010) found that neither sponsor or object involvement significantly predicted sponsorship attitude in the sports context –fit was the most important factor in predicting attitude toward the sponsor. So differences in sponsorship efficacy can be attributed to sponsor–sponsee fit, the intended message of the sponsor, and/or the target market they aim to reach (Lin and Bruning 2020). As fit moderates consumer responses, a sponsor should thus consider these factors to choose an entity with an appropriate fit, increasing the possibility of converting sponsorship into a more authentic and engaging relationship (Kim et al. 2015).

To date there is scant literature on fit profiles. For this study, we used the schema congruity theory (Jagre, Watson, and Watson 2001) and empirical evidence (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006) regarding the relationships between fit and sponsorship outcomes to make the following general fit profile hypotheses:

- (1a) Individuals with a fit profile characterized by high scores on the perception of different aspects of fit would report the highest levels of positive attitudes toward sponsors and brands.
- (1b) A fit profile characterized by high scores on the perception of the different aspects of fit would be higher for the French compared to Iranians and Russians.
- (1c) A fit profile characterized by high scores on the perception of the different aspects of fit would be higher for sport equipment/apparel companies compared to financial services companies.

## Culture

Hofstede (2003) defined culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from

another. In this definition, the mind represents thinking, feeling and acting, with consequences on beliefs, attitudes and skills. Hofstede presented evidence of cultural differences based on survey data using carefully matched samples from a large number of nations (Figure 1). Pu and James (2017) have mentioned geographical location as a situational variable impacting sponsorship outcomes. As several studies provide evidence for the role of geography in determining marketing outcomes (Andrews et al. 2016; Meyners et al. 2017), we examined the effect of living in a

particular country (France, Iran or Russia) on consumers' perceptions of fit, attitude toward sponsor and brand, as well as on the relationships between these.

Culture is one of the most complex facets in human life and plays a special role in sports marketing (Keshkar et al. 2019). Although some studies have not shown any effect of culture on attitudes toward sponsorship (e.g., Barreda-Tarrazona et al. 2014), others have found a significant effect (e.g., Dalakas and Kropp 2002). In the latter authors' comparative study,

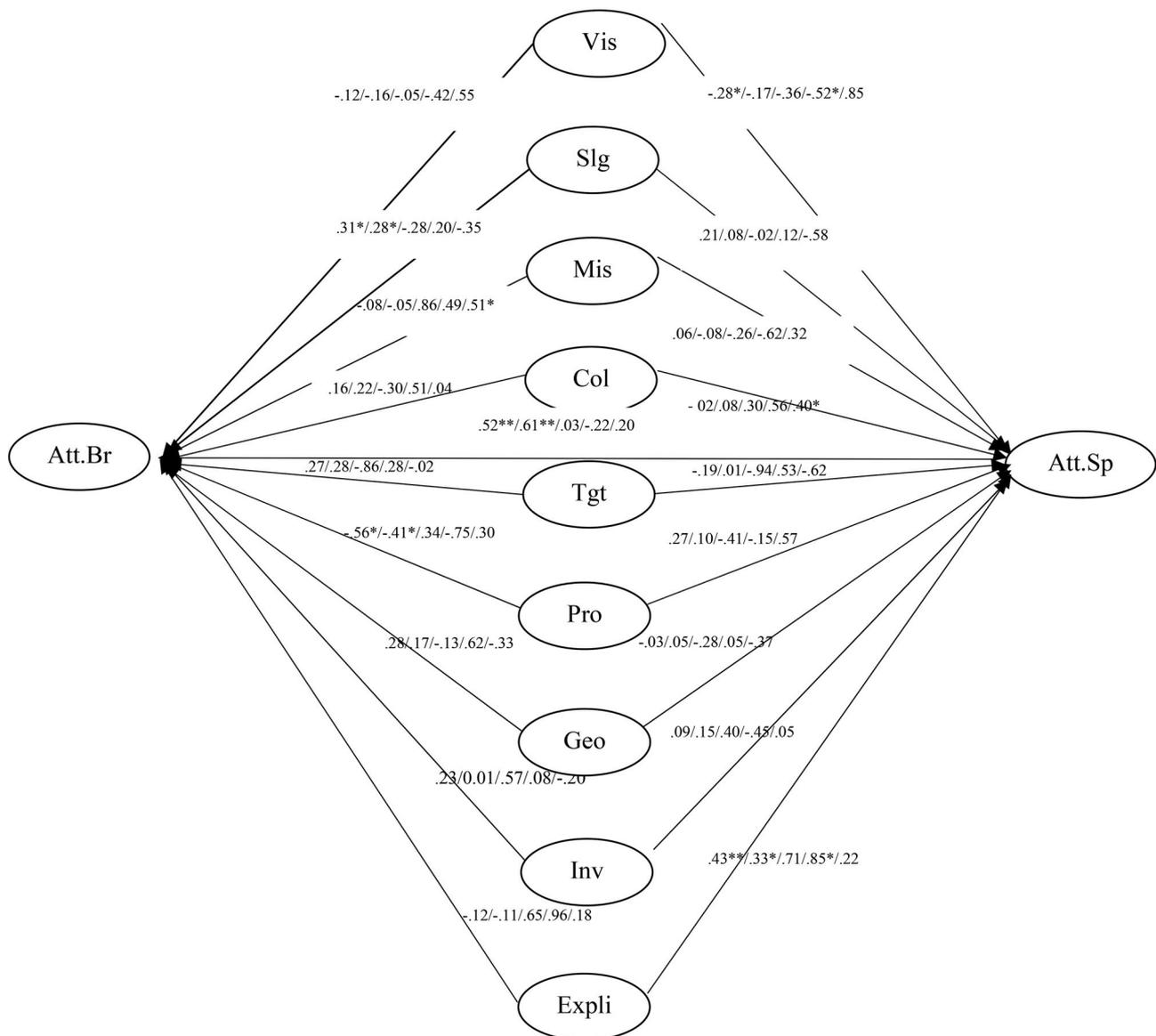


Figure 1. Structural equation modeling testing the prediction of attitude toward sponsors and brands by the specific dimensions of fit. Notes. Vis = visibility; Slg = slogan; Mis = mission; Col = color; Tgt = target market; Pro = promotion; Geo = geographical; Inv = involvement; Exp = explicitness; Att.Sp = attitude toward sponsor, Att.Br = attitude toward brand. \*  $p < .05$ . Numbers are related to Errea, Generali, Merooj, Day bank and VTB bank respectively.

they evaluated consumer attitudes toward sports sponsorships in southern Europe (Greece), North America (USA), and East Asia (Korea). The results showed that North American respondents had the most positive attitudes about buying from sponsors. The authors explained that Greek and Korean fans' resistance to sponsorship might be due to a lack of experience of it. Given these results, the authors called for further multi-country studies about attitudes toward sponsorship, particularly in Asian and European countries.

Following this, Barreda-Tarrazona et al. (2014) compared the influence of culture on fit in the context of the Olympics across several countries. Participants considered the sponsorship of four categories of products, and while the results indicated that cultural aspects had some effect on the perception of congruence, it did not affect interest, favourability or use of a sponsor's products. Most studies have examined one country for sponsorship effectiveness, but this may vary across borders (Olsen 2010). Hakala, Svensson, and Vincze (2012) measured attitudinal aspects of brand equity and revealed different attitudes toward brands between three European countries and the United States in line with their cultural differences. The fit between entities involves a set of cultural perceptions related to beliefs and values (Merz, He, and Alden 2008), and it could thus be supposed that cultural context plays a role on sponsor–sponsee fit. Chih-Hung et al. (2011) examined sponsorship in two Asian countries – Taiwan, a Confucian country, and Indonesia, a country with a sizeable Islamic market – and found that the culture impacted the relationships between the study variables. For example, team identification had a significant role in sponsor credibility in Indonesia, while in the case of Taiwan, the effect of perceived fit on sponsor credibility was significant.

Taras, Kirkman, and Steel (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of 598 studies to examine Hofstede's four cultural values (power distance, individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance) on relevant outcomes in different organizations, finding that cultural values were significantly related to emotions, which in turn had effects on attitude, and consequently behavior (Taras, Kirkman, and Steel 2010). Of particular importance in the

context of our study, there is some evidence showing both different and shared cultural values between the countries we examined (Iran, France and Russia). For example, Robinson et al. (2016) examined what young people admired in adults in four countries, showing differences in these variables between Russian and Iranian young people. Autonomy and assertiveness were the most prevalent topics in Russia, while religion and spirituality were the most prevalent topics in Iran. France and Russia are considered as high in terms of power-distance and uncertainty avoidance (see Figure 1) based on the rationale that they search to minimize risk and prefer testimonials, which they think make advertisements clearer and more trustworthy (De Mooij 1998). Based on these studies and research conducted by Dalakas and Kropp (2002), we formulated the following hypotheses regarding the impact of culture on fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands:

- (2a) French people would report significantly higher scores of perception of fit compared to Iranians and Russians.
- (2b) French people would report significantly higher scores of attitudes toward sponsors and brands compared to Iranians and Russians.

### ***Type of sponsor***

Sponsorship acts as a marketing tool, and several factors such as sponsor category influence its success (Pearsall 2009). Hickman (2015) argued that the prevalence, nature and relative effectiveness of sponsorships vary according to the type of sponsor, but research that measures sponsorship outcomes according to sponsor type is rare. Of the categories with the highest sponsorship revenues, 12 of the top 16 are financial companies, including banks and insurance companies (Hickman 2015). In an examination of nine sports team sponsors from different categories, Hickman (2015) considered two (a sporting goods retailer and a sports drinks manufacturer) as sponsors with high fit. Yet of the nine sponsor categories, only the sporting goods retailer did not show a higher share of wallet from highly identified fans with a favorable disposition toward

sponsors, indicating that fit does not explain everything.

In contrast, Evans, Shapiro, and Brown (2020) considered three sports sponsors based on low, medium and high fit levels and found that respondents correctly recalled sponsors with low, medium and high fit 23%, 59% and 97% of the time, respectively (Evans, Shapiro, and Brown 2020). The aspects of image, purchase and geographical fit played a significant role in recalling sponsors. Although they examined sponsorship effectiveness between different sponsor categories, they only used sponsor credibility for measuring this, which is one of the cognitive effects of sponsorship (Kim et al. 2015). Madrigal (2001) and Kim et al. (2015) have both mentioned that using only cognitive aspects for measuring sponsorship effectiveness is not sufficient, and other aspects of sponsorship, such as attitudes, should be considered. According to the relatedness heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman 1973), the greater the probability that two objects belong to a given category (e.g., volleyball teams and sports products), the greater the probability that consumers simultaneously categorize these objects in the memory and thus recall them at the same time. Relatedness refers to the perceived natural association by consumers between sponsor and sponsee (Wakefield, Becker-Olsen, and Cornwell 2007).

Traditionally in sponsorship, most sponsors have been category-based brands, but today service companies (such as financial services) are increasingly official partners of events. Both services and category-based companies have the potential to be successful sponsors; however, this depends strongly on their communication with sponsees to encourage them to activate their sponsorship (Bai et al. 2021). IEG (2017b) reported that between 2014 and 2016, financial services (including banks and insurance companies) had significantly increased their sponsorship activities seeking to grow their portfolio. They aimed to increase engagement from fans through contextually relevant social content. For example, total social impressions and video views of MLB Memory Bank (sponsor of Major League Baseball (MLB)) were more than double in 2016 in comparison to 2015 (IEG 2017b). Insurance companies at all levels (national, regional and local)

have started using sponsorship in the goal of offering added value, differentiation and accessibility in one-on-one engagement opportunities. Sport had the biggest share of this sponsorship spending (57%) (IEG 2017c). In terms of category-based brands, the aim of sports apparel companies in sponsorship is promoting brand positioning, driving retail traffic, and creating licensed merchandise (IEG 2014). We examined these two types of sponsor category – financial services and sports equipment/apparel – acting as sponsors of three highly-ranked national volleyball teams. Based on previous studies (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Tversky and Kahneman 1973; Wakefield, Becker-Olsen, and Cornwell 2007), we hypothesized that:

- (3a) Individuals would report significantly higher scores for fit and attitudes toward sport equipment/apparel sponsors in comparison to financial services sponsors.
- (3b) The effect of culture and of sponsor category would be dependent on one another and would not act independently on the aspects of fit and attitude toward sponsor and brand.

## Method

### Contexts studied

To test our hypotheses, we selected a single sport – volleyball – and focused on the sponsors of the national teams from three countries. Based on the rankings on the website of the International Volleyball Federation (*Fédération Internationale de Volleyball*: FIVB), France, Iran and Russia were all in the top ten national men's volleyball teams over the last five years (2016–20), allowing a relevant comparison while minimizing bias related to sporting results. Based on Hofstede's national cultural characteristics scale (Figure 1), these three countries differed in most aspects (except masculinity). Although Hofstede (1984) advised that using country as an indicator of national culture should be considered with caution, he nevertheless supported this approach. In this perspective, nation can be used as a proxy for culture, as the people who live in a country largely share the same language, religion, history, understanding of institutional systems, and sense of

identity. Soares, Farhangmehr, and Shoham (2007) argued that although Hofstede's scale has some drawbacks, it provides a simple, practical and operational shortcut to the integration of culture in studies.

Because of the French, Russian and Iranian men's volleyball teams' sporting performance on the world stage, many companies were interested in sponsoring them. For each country, we chose two of each team's sponsors (in 2017, when the data was collected), one sport equipment/apparel company (Errea in France, Merooj in Iran and Mikasa in Russia) and one financial service company (the insurance company Generali in France, Day Bank in Iran and VTB Bank in Russia).

### **Participants and procedure**

For companies contemplating sports sponsorships in Europe or Asia, as a first step, sponsors may wish to target their efforts at a younger market. Younger fans may be more accepting of the association of sports with sponsorships because they are more accustomed to this arrangement (Dalakas and Kropp 2002). In our study, participants were undergraduate students from the three countries. The method we used to select the students was simple random sampling. In marketing research, this method, especially with a relatively homogeneous sample such as a student sample, is relatively common. A study of 84 marketing research articles published between 2008–2016 showed that the majority of these had used simple random sampling (Sarstedt et al. 2018).

The research was conducted in accordance with international ethical guidelines. Student participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Questionnaires were distributed before or after classes in three universities. A total of 170 French, 300 Iranian and 170 Russian undergraduate students were recruited to respond to the survey. Of the questionnaires returned, 4 French, 30 Iranian and 2 Russian questionnaires had incomplete observations and were discarded, resulting in 166 participants in the French sample (54 females and 112 males;  $Mage = 20.43 \pm 1.97$  years), 270 participants in the Iranian sample (118 females and 152 males;  $Mage = 22.86 \pm 3.69$  years),

and 168 participants in the Russian sample (85 females and 83 males;  $Mage = 32.11 \pm 10.60$  years).

The statistical approach of SEM analysis has several advantages: it is useful for non-experimental data; all possible indicators can be simultaneously entered; and it minimizes correlated measurement errors (Baron and Kenny 1986). Regarding the required sample size for the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis, we took into account a meta-analysis by Westland (2010) that showed that 80% of the examined research articles had used a smaller sample size than the lower threshold, and that this represented an issue regarding the credibility of research conclusions. Thus, we used an a priori sample size calculation for the structural equation models. In specifying the number of observed and latent variables in the model, the anticipated effect size, and the desired probability and statistical power levels, this calculation provided the required sample size to detect the specified effect, as well as the minimum sample size required given the structural complexity of the model (Westland 2010). We used 0.3 for the anticipated effect size (considering 0.1 small and 0.5 large), 0.8 as the desired statistical power level, with 11 latent variables (including 9 parameters for fit and attitude toward sponsors and brands), 33 observed variables (three items per latent variable) and 0.05 for the probability level. The calculation determined a required sample size of 195 to detect effect and of 200 given the model structure. For the Iranian sample (270 respondents), this recommendation was met; for the French (166 respondents) and Russian samples (168 respondents), it was less but close to the recommended sample size for the analysis.

In marketing studies, factor and cluster analyses to determine consumer segmentation are widely used (Brunner and Siegrist 2011; Park et al. 2011; Müllensiefen, Hennig, and Howells 2018). Many marketing researchers use clustering algorithms such as K-means and hierarchical clustering to conduct market segmentation (Arunachalam and Kumar 2018), and we also opted for these methods in this study. Researchers use these methods to gain knowledge about how, when and where to advertise, and also to determine target markets or apply different scenarios

to analyze consumers' cognitive, affective and behavioral intentions toward sponsors' products or services.

To the best of our knowledge there is no rule of thumb concerning the required sample size for cluster analyses; however, previous sports sponsorship studies have used a sample of almost 150 participants, with ten variables used for creating the profiles (e.g., Martinent and Decret 2015). As such, the sample size of our study is likely to be acceptable to compute cluster analyses. Aside from complexities related to total sample size, profiles with few participants (e.g., less than 5% of the total sample) may be difficult to interpret or validate. This is an important issue to consider when selecting the number of profiles in cluster analyses (Martinent and Nicolas 2017).

In terms of our choice of sponsors, for the financial services category, we chose Day Bank, a sponsor of Iran's men's volleyball team based on the rationale that Generali (an insurance company) and VTB Bank were sponsors in the same category for the French and Russian teams respectively. For the sports equipment/apparel category, we chose Errea (an Italian company), a sponsor of the French team, and Mikasa (a Japanese company), a sponsor of the Russian team. In Iran, due to sanctions, international companies cannot sponsor sports teams, so the Iranian brand Merooj, a sponsor of the Iranian team, was chosen (although Merooj is not just a local brand; Asian and African wrestlers have also been sponsored by this brand).

We asked each respondent in each country to evaluate the two sponsors of their national volleyball team separately. As the design of this study required corresponding sponsor brands in the three examined countries, only the two categories of sport equipment/apparel and financial service companies were selected. Chi-square tests showed that there were significant differences across the three countries in terms of watching the national volleyball team on TV (chi-square = 200.26,  $P < 0.01$ ) and following it in the media (chi-square = 157.13,  $P < 0.01$ ). Iranians reported watching the national volleyball team on TV and following it in the media more than the French and Russians (Table 1).

### Measurement of fit

French, Persian (Rajabi et al. 2020) and Russian language versions of the sponsorship-fit questionnaire used by Zdravkovic, Magnusson, and Stanley (2010) were used to measure the perceptions of the different aspects of fit. Nine three-item subscales were used to measure visibility, slogan, mission, color, target, promotion, geography, involvement and explicitness.<sup>1</sup> The Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) scale (three items) was used to measure attitudes toward the sponsors and brands. For all the questionnaires, we used a Likert-type scale to measure responses with values ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree). Although some researchers have used a pretest to measure attitude toward sponsors to control for brand attitude effects, Mazodier and Merunka (2012) and Woisetschläger and Michaelis (2012) argue that the advantage of using a pretest for controlling prior attitudes is counteracted by their possible change over time. The translation of the questionnaires into the three languages was conducted according to a standardized back-translation procedure.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was divided into four stages. First, the reliability of the fit and attitude scores for each of the six sponsors was analyzed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability ( $\rho$ ) values. A  $\rho$  value or  $\alpha$  value of .70 or greater indicates an acceptable reliability of scores (Martinent, Guillet-Descas, and Moiret 2015).

Second, to increase our confidence in the stability of the cluster result (Martinent and Decret 2015), hierarchical and nonhierarchical cluster analyses were conducted on the standardized fit scores independently for each of the six sponsors. Hierarchical cluster analyses (Ward's linkage with squared Euclidian distance) were conducted to determine the number of clusters for each sponsor. Then, k-means clustering analyses were performed by specifying the most appropriate cluster result from hierarchical cluster analyses (Martinent and Decret 2015). Next, we independently performed for each of the six sponsors a series of ANOVAs with cluster memberships as

**Table 1.** The country effect on watching the national volleyball team, following the sport in the media and memberships of sponsorship fit profiles.

	France	Iran	Russia	Total
<b>Watching volleyball</b>				
Never	57	12	20	89
Rarely	44	22	58	124
Sometimes	41	61	43	145
Often	15	98	36	149
Very often	4	77	11	92
Total	161	270	168	599
<b>Following in media</b>				
Never	67	7	30	104
Rarely	38	40	44	122
Sometimes	38	87	49	174
Often	14	98	35	147
Very often	4	37	10	51
Total	161	269	168	598
<b>Fit profile</b>				
Low fit	101	74	182	357
Medium fit	33	180	0	213
High fit	198	286	154	638
Total	332	540	336	1208

independent variables and scores of fit, attitude toward sponsors and toward brands as dependant variables. Partial eta-squared ( $\eta^2$ ) tests provided an index of effect sizes. The impacts of national culture and sponsor categories on membership of clusters were examined using chi-square tests.

Third, we conducted SEM for each sponsor using a wide range of goodness-of-fit values: the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and its confidence interval (90% CI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the chi-square test of model fit (Marsh et al. 2005). We defined a good fit as a CFI and TLI greater than .95 and RMSEA and SRMR smaller than .05; and an acceptable fit as a CFI and TLI greater than .90 and RMSEA and SRMR smaller than .08. The Akaike information criterion (AIC), Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and adjusted BIC (ABIC) were used for comparison with other models (MacCallum and Austin 2000) (Table 2). The measurement models comprised 11 latent variables (i.e., 9 aspects of fit, attitude toward sponsors and attitude toward brands) and 33 observed variables (3 items per latent variable). The resulting SEM models were used to examine the relationships between the study variables for each sponsor and for each country (Figure 2), in particular: (a) whether fit (independent variables) significantly influenced attitude toward sponsors (dependant variable), and (b) whether

fit and attitude toward sponsors (independent variables) significantly predicted attitude toward brand (dependent variable).

Fourth, we examined the main effects of national culture and type of sponsor on the scores of fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands using a MANOVA and subsequent ANOVAs. We also tested the interaction effect between culture and sponsor category on the scores of fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands.

## Results

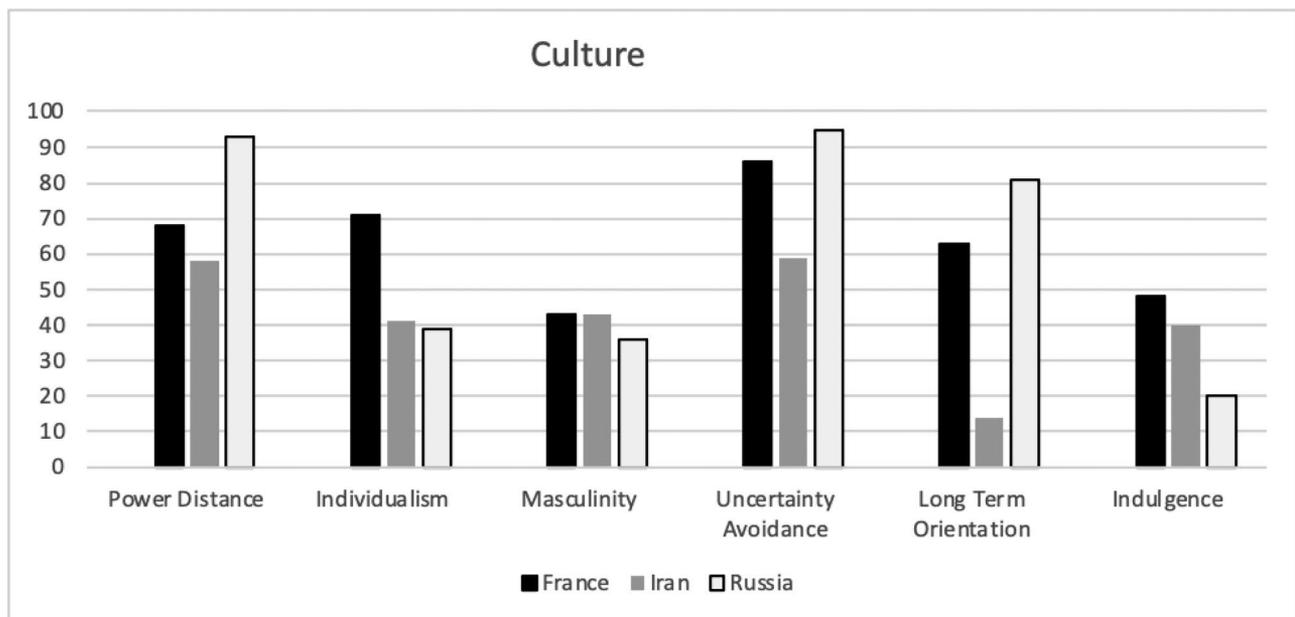
### *Reliability of the scores of fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands*

The alpha coefficients ranged from .62 to .96 (Table 3). Some researchers have found that Cronbach's alpha tends to increase with an increase in the number of scale items (e.g., Clark and Watson 1995), leading some to suggest a cutoff value of .60 for subscales of four items or less (e.g., Hair et al. 1998). Other researchers prefer the use of the raw mean inter-item correlation as a statistical marker of internal consistency. For this, a rule of thumb is offered by Clark and Watson (1995), who recommend that the average inter-item correlation fall in the range of .15-.50. The mean inter-item correlations for all the variables examined in our study were in the .15-.50 range. To further assess the internal reliability of the fit

**Table 2.** Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability value for fit and attitudes per sponsor.

	Fit aspects	A	$\rho$
Errea (France)	Visibility	0.92	0.92
	Slogan	0.87	0.91
	Mission	0.84	0.85
	Color	0.85	0.85
	Target market	0.84	0.85
	Promotion	0.76	0.77
	Geography	0.89	0.89
	Involvement	0.83	0.84
	Explicitness	0.89	0.89
	Attitude toward sponsor	0.87	0.88
	Attitude toward brand	0.90	0.82
	Generali (France)	Visibility	0.90
Slogan		0.84	0.84
Mission		0.83	0.84
Color		0.83	0.83
Target market		0.80	0.81
Promotion		0.72	0.73
Geography		0.88	0.88
Involvement		0.77	0.78
Explicitness		0.87	0.88
Attitude toward sponsor		0.86	0.87
Attitude toward brand		0.89	0.90
Merooj (Iran)		Visibility	0.78
	Slogan	0.78	0.79
	Mission	0.74	0.74
	Color	0.70	0.70
	Target market	0.72	0.73
	Promotion	0.68	0.68
	Geography	0.66	0.67
	Involvement	0.62	0.62
	Explicitness	0.70	0.71
	Attitude toward sponsor	0.75	0.76
	Attitude toward brand	0.74	0.74
	Day Bank (Iran)	Visibility	0.84
Slogan		0.83	0.84
Mission		0.79	0.80
Color		0.78	0.78
Target market		0.73	0.74
Promotion		0.76	0.76
Geography		0.77	0.78
Involvement		0.75	0.75
Explicitness		0.78	0.79
Attitude toward sponsor		0.74	0.73
Attitude toward brand		0.75	0.77
Mikasa (Russia)		Visibility	0.78
	Slogan	0.88	
	Mission	0.92	
	Color	0.89	
	Target market	0.82	
	Promotion	0.84	
	Geography	0.88	
	Involvement	0.89	
	Explicitness	0.91	
	Attitude toward sponsor	0.93	
	Attitude toward brand	0.92	
	VTB Bank (Russia)	Visibility	0.74
Slogan		0.94	0.94
Mission		0.94	0.95
Color		0.86	0.86
Target market		0.90	0.90
Promotion		0.89	0.89
Geography		0.95	0.94
Involvement		0.88	0.89
Explicitness		0.94	0.94
Attitude toward sponsor		0.91	0.91
Attitude toward brand		0.96	0.96

Notes:  $\rho$  = composite reliability value;  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha coefficient.



**Figure 2.** Cultural aspects of the three examined countries, according to Hofstede's cultural characteristics survey. Source: <https://hi.hofstede-insights.com/national>

subscales,  $\rho$  values were also calculated (except for Mikasa, as the measurement model for this brand did not converge). The  $\rho$  values ranged between .62 and .96. Overall, the results of Cronbach's alphas,  $\rho$  and mean inter-item correlations suggest acceptable reliability for the fit and attitude scores.

### Cluster analyses

The agglomeration schedule coefficient and the dendrogram suggested a three-cluster solution (three sponsorship-fit profiles) as the most appropriate solution for Errea (France), Merooj (Iran) and Day Bank (Iran) brands, and a two-cluster solution for Generali (France), VTB Bank (Russia) and Mikasa (Russia) brands. The nonhierarchical procedure provided support for the hierarchical procedure, as similar clusters were obtained for the two clustering methods. Although the  $F$  tests informing the differences of fit scores across the several clusters should only be used for descriptive purposes since the clusters were chosen to maximize the differences in fit scores between participants in different clusters, it is worth noting that the clusters were significantly different ( $P < .001$ ) on all the fit subscales and for all the 6 brands, thus providing a solid indication of the

tenability of the cluster solutions (Table 4). Descriptive labels for the sponsorship-fit profiles are: low fit ( $N=26, 25, 49, 59, 79, 102$  for Errea, Merooj, Day Bank, Generali, Mikasa and VTB Bank brands, respectively), medium fit ( $N=95, 129, 157$  for Errea, Merooj and Day Bank brands, respectively) and high fit ( $N=44, 116, 64, 106, 89, 66$  for Errea, Merooj, Day Bank, Generali, Mikasa and VTB Bank brands, respectively). Of particular importance in the context of our study, results of ANOVAs showed that attitudes toward sponsors and brands significantly differed across the two or three fit profiles for all six brands, supporting hypothesis 1a (Table 5).

Then we explored the impact of culture on sponsorship-fit profiles. The results of the chi-square test showed a significant difference of sponsorship-fit cluster memberships across cultures ( $\chi^2(4) = 310.13, P < .001$ ). In particular, whereas 14% of Iranians were clustered in the low fit profile, 28% of French respondents and 54% of Russians had a low fit profile. In contrast, whereas 44% of French respondents were clustered in the high fit profile, 33% of Iranians and 46% of Russians had a high fit profile (Table 4). These results supported hypothesis 1b.

Finally, we also explored the impact of type of sponsor on sponsorship-fit profile. The results of



Figure 3. Main and interaction effects of culture and sponsor category on fit dimensions and attitudes.

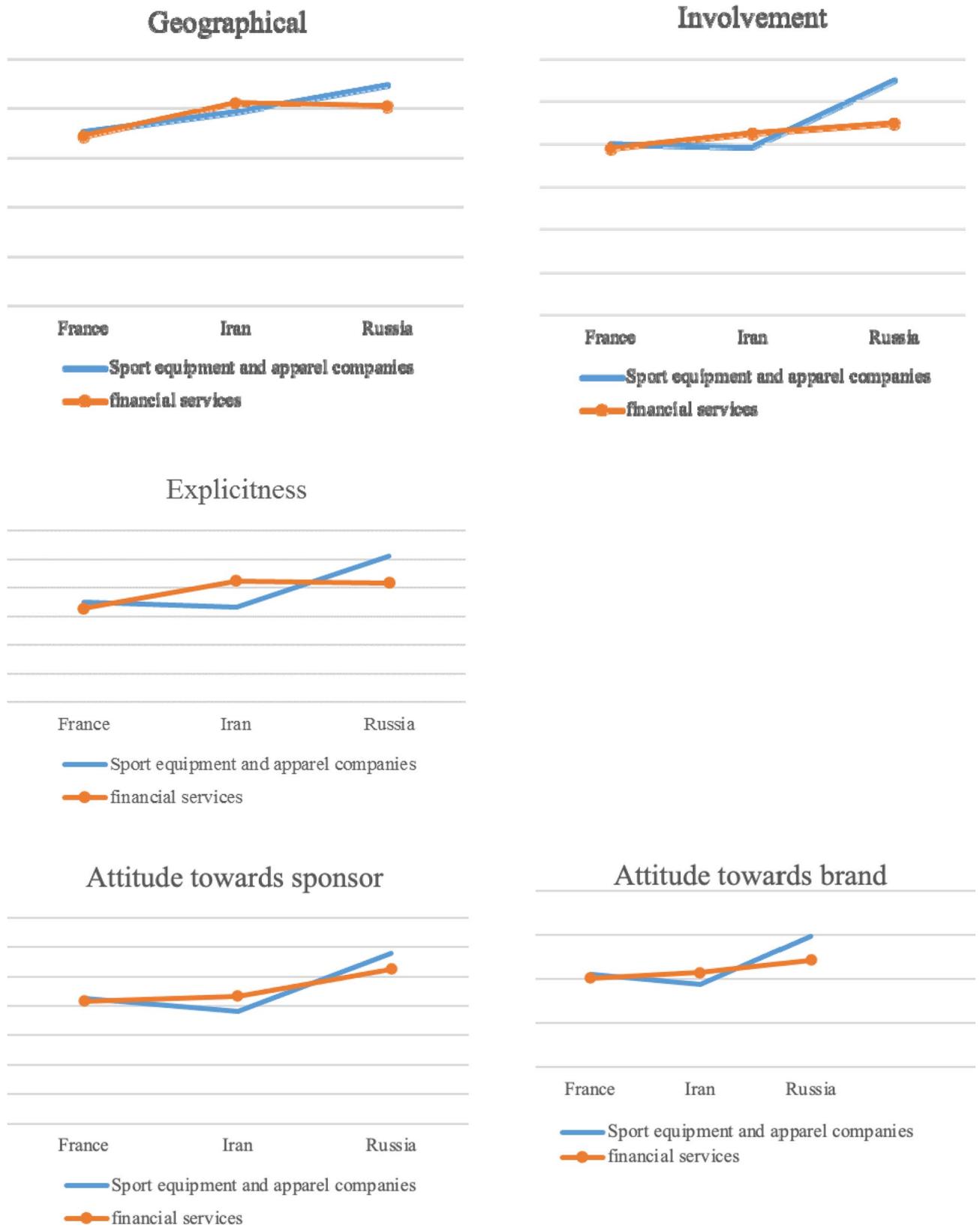


Figure 3. (Continued).

**Table 3.** Standardized and raw scores for fit aspects and attitudes toward sponsors and brands across clusters for six sponsors.

		Low-fit profile			Medium-fit profile			High-fit profile			ANOVA	
		Z M(SD)	Raw M(SD)	N	Z M(SD)	Raw M(SD)	N	Z M(SD)	Raw M(SD)	N	F	Differences between clusters
Errea (France)	Vis	-1.27(.60)	1.72(0.96)	26	0.02(.83)	3.81(1.33)	95	.70(.78)	4.90(1.25)	44	51.62	In all aspects: C3 > C2 > C1
	Slg	-1.07(.83)	3.50(1.11)		-.23(.65)	4.17(.88)		1.14(.57)	6.02(.77)		102.92	
	Mis	-1.33(.67)	2.04(.91)		-.06(.72)	3.78(.98)		.91(.71)	5.08(.96)		79.87	
	Col	-1.32(.94)	2.44(1.25)		.09(.74)	4.31(.98)		.57(.84)	4.95(1.11)		46.72	
	Tgt	-1.14(.84)	2.94(1.02)		-.23(.60)	4.05(.74)		1.18(.53)	5.77(.65)		124.60	
	Pro	-1.30(.75)	2.28(.88)		-.05(.71)	3.76(.86)		.88(.72)	4.86(.85)		72.83	
	Geo	-1.37(.69)	1.91(.82)		.05(.75)	3.61(.90)		.71(.82)	4.39(.97)		60.93	
	Inv	-1.20(.98)	2.51(1.24)		-.02(.77)	4.00(.98)		.76(.68)	4.98(.87)		49.27	
	Exp	-1.05(.73)	2.11(.96)		-.07(.86)	3.40(1.12)		.78(.76)	4.52(.99)		41.48	
	Att.Sp	-.54(1.24)	3.60(1.54)		-.13(.81)	4.11(1.00)		.60(.93)	5.02(1.16)		14.73	
Att.Br	-.59(1.10)	3.47(1.31)		-.12(.89)	4.04(1.06)		.60(.87)	4.90(1.03)		15.54		
Generali (France)	Vis	-.59(.95)	2.77(1.46)	59				.32(.87)	4.18(1.34)	106	38.87	In all aspects: C2 > C1
	Slg	-.70(.99)	3.39(1.20)					.39(.79)	4.71(.93)		61.65	
	Mis	-.97(.76)	3.36(.97)					.53(.66)	4.27(.84)		175.00	
	Col	-.62(.93)	3.41(1.21)					.34(.86)	4.68(1.11)		45.03	
	Tgt	-.84(.85)	3.15(.91)					.46(.74)	4.58(.80)		107.46	
	Pro	-.70(.97)	2.97(1.05)					.38(.79)	4.14(.85)		60.35	
	Geo	-.73(.96)	2.60(1.11)					.40(.77)	3.92(.90)		67.42	
	Inv	-.75(1.02)	3.02(1.21)					.41(.70)	4.40(.83)		74.44	
	Exp	-.51(.97)	2.66(1.20)					.27(.91)	3.62(1.13)		26.93	
	Att.Sp	-.28(1.12)	3.86(1.28)					.15(.88)	4.35(1.02)		7.32	
Att.Br	-.29(1.08)	3.69(1.20)					.15(.89)	4.20(1.01)		8.36		
Merooj (Iran)	Vis	-1.40(.37)	1.40(.50)	25	-.39(.67)	2.76(.85)	129	.66(.88)	4.12(1.16)	116	105.04	In all aspects: C3 > C2 > C1
	Slg	-1.50(.29)	1.27(.38)		-.21(.58)	2.97(.77)		.76(.71)	4.26(.94)		162.62	
	Mis	-1.45(.35)	1.33(.47)		.37(.75)	3.73(.99)		.94(.76)	4.49(1.00)		110.99	
	Col	-1.25(.50)	1.60(.66)		.29(.77)	3.66(.96)		.92(.70)	4.46(.93)		97.02	
	Tgt	-1.24(.61)	1.61(.81)		.23(.73)	3.56(.97)		1.21(.67)	4.85(.88)		146.78	
	Pro	-1.16(.69)	1.72(.92)		.19(.78)	3.50(1.03)		.91(.74)	4.45(.97)		84.13	
	Geo	-1.17(.68)	1.71(.86)		.49(.82)	3.90(1.08)		.93(.77)	4.48(1.01)		73.17	
	Inv	-.95(.83)	2.00(1.10)		.38(.70)	3.76(.90)		1.00(.76)	4.57(1.00)		77.00	
	Exp	-1.22(.71)	1.64(.94)		-.16(.72)	3.06(.91)		.50(.74)	3.98(.84)		64.98	
	Att.Sp	-.88(1.03)	2.09(1.36)		.32(.70)	3.67(.93)		.85(.89)	4.37(1.18)		47.28	
Att.Br	-.94(.86)	2.01(1.13)		.29(.85)	3.63(1.12)		.73(.86)	4.21(1.13)		39.91		
Day Bank (Iran)	Vis	-1.01(.85)	2.69(1.26)	49	-.18(.79)	3.95(1.12)	157	1.09(.59)	5.84(.90)	64	112.66	In all aspects: C3 > C2 > C1
	Slg	-1.00(.94)	2.92(1.20)		-.15(.68)	4.01(.92)		1.10(.70)	5.69(.94)		117.66	
	Mis	-1.20(.74)	2.58(.95)		-.03(.67)	4.13(.92)		.95(.90)	5.46(1.22)		114.43	
	Col	-1.16(.85)	2.73(1.10)		-.09(.68)	4.11(.92)		1.07(.69)	5.67(.93)		134.16	
	Tgt	-1.21(.91)	2.78(1.13)		-.03(.69)	4.27(.91)		.94(.75)	5.55(.97)		113.76	
	Pro	-1.11(.91)	2.77(1.66)		-.05(.72)	4.13(.96)		.93(.77)	5.44(1.03)		96.73	
	Geo	-1.17(.87)	2.59(1.11)		-.04(.71)	4.05(.97)		.95(.76)	5.38(1.01)		108.45	
	Inv	-1.16(.82)	2.67(1.11)		-.04(.74)	4.20(1.05)		.95(.73)	5.60(1.03)		107.85	
	Exp	-.96(.94)	2.90(1.32)		-.13(.73)	4.07(1.04)		1.04(.62)	5.73(.88)		102.15	
	Att.Sp	-.80(1.08)	3.31(1.37)		-.17(.71)	4.11(.90)		1.03(.67)	5.64(.86)		83.44	
Att.Br	-.57(1.17)	3.55(1.51)		-.19(.77)	4.04(.99)		.90(.74)	5.44(.95)		49.81		
Mikasa (Russia)	Vis	-.81(.80)	4.25(1.16)	79				.70(.49)	6.45(.72)	89	201.95	In all aspects: C2 > C1
	Slg	-.66(1.03)	4.93(1.41)					.59(.46)	6.64(.63)		99.69	
	Mis	-.79(.87)	4.56(1.21)					.70(.41)	6.64(.57)		193.38	
	Col	-.45(.85)	3.96(1.39)					.42(.94)	5.37(1.54)		42.04	
	Tgt	-.83(.75)	4.41(.98)					.71(.54)	6.43(.71)		235.36	
	Pro	-.76(.86)	4.33(1.11)					.63(.66)	6.15(.86)		150.92	
	Geo	-.31(.67)	4.01(1.01)					.25(1.18)	4.85(1.78)		13.31	
	Inv	-.75(.86)	4.48(1.19)					.68(.50)	6.45(.70)		181.64	
	Exp	-.63(.83)	4.16(1.24)					.52(.85)	5.88(1.27)		79.78	
	Att.Sp	-.66(.93)	4.90(1.26)					.60(.60)	6.60(.82)		112.33	
Att.Br	-.64(1.01)	5.08(1.30)					.58(.52)	6.65(.68)		104.93		
VTB Bank (Russia)	Vis	-.50(0.82)	3.78(1.31)	102				0.78(0.72)	5.81(1.14)	66	106.92	In all aspects: C2 > C1
	Slg	-.49(0.91)	3.88(1.72)					0.76(0.58)	6.27(1.10)		99.08	
	Mis	-.53(0.80)	3.26(1.52)					0.82(0.68)	5.81(1.28)		125.84	
	Col	-.52(0.80)	4.24(1.32)					0.81(0.57)	6.29(0.88)		122.85	
	Tgt	-.60(0.68)	3.01(1.23)					0.93(0.64)	5.79(1.17)		212.28	
	Pro	-.53(0.77)	3.63(1.27)					0.83(0.72)	5.89(1.19)		132.13	
	Geo	-.59(0.74)	2.91(1.45)					0.91(0.59)	5.82(1.16)		187.51	
	Inv	-.52(0.79)	3.63(1.33)					0.80(0.72)	5.86(1.21)		119.70	
	Exp	-.57(0.73)	3.13(1.33)					0.88(0.67)	5.80(1.23)		169.84	
	Att.Sp	-.41(0.97)	4.62(1.49)					0.64(0.66)	6.24(1.00)		59.58	
Att.Br	-.46(0.87)	4.05(1.49)					0.71(0.75)	6.05(1.28)		78.91		

Notes: Vis = visibility; Slg = slogan; Mis = mission; Col = color; Tgt = target market; Pro = promotion; Geo = geography; Inv = involvement; Exp = explicitness. Att.Sp: attitude toward sponsor; Att.Br: attitude toward brand. All ANOVA and post-hoc results presented in this table are significant at  $p < .001$ . We used Tukey's HSD post-hoc test for sponsors with more than two clusters.

**Table 4.** Results of the structural equation modeling of the attitude toward sponsors and brands.

Sponsors	AIC	BIC	RMSEA	90 Percent	CFI	Chi square	DF	SRMR
Errea	16389.92	16869.17	0.062	0.054 0.070	0.91	723.82	440	0.052
Generali	16514.45	16993.70	0.052	0.043 0.061	0.92	640.51	440	0.052
Merooj	28575.76	29129.92	0.040	0.033 0.047	0.92	628.71	440	0.046
Day bank	29633.44	30187.60	0.028	0.018 0.036	0.97	532.56	440	0.044
Mikasa	This model did not converge.							
VTB bank	16290.520	16752.87	0.069	0.061 0.078	0.93	684.74	379	0.064

Notes: Results for SEM and measurement models are exactly the same.

**Table 5.** The effect of sponsor category on membership of sponsorship fit profiles.

Cluster	Sport equipment and apparel companies	Financial service companies	Total
Low fit	130	210	340
Medium fit	224	157	381
High fit	249	236	485
Total	603	603	1206

the chi-square test also showed a significant difference between sponsor category on fit profiles ( $\chi^2(2) = 46.82, P < .001$ ). In particular, 22%, 37% and 41% of respondents belonged to the low, medium and high sponsorship fit profiles respectively for sport equipment/apparel companies, whereas 34%, 27% and 39% belonged to low, medium and high sponsorship fit profiles respectively for financial service companies, supporting hypothesis 1c (Table 6).

### Measurement model

Table 2 presents the goodness-of-fit indices for all the measurement models. The model for the Mikasa brand did not converge. Concerning the CFA measurement models, results of the goodness-of-fit indices provided an acceptable fit to the data for the other five sponsors (CFI  $\geq .91$ ; RMSEA and SRMR  $\leq .07$ ).

Figure 2 presents the predictions of attitudes toward sponsors and brands by aspects of fit for five of the sponsors. Results showed that visibility significantly predicted attitude toward sponsor for Errea and Day Bank ( $\beta = -.28, \beta = -.52, p < .05$ , respectively), slogan significantly predicted attitude toward brand for Errea and Generali ( $\beta = .31, \beta = .28, p < .05$ , respectively), mission significantly predicted attitude toward brand for VTB Bank ( $\beta = .51, p < .05$ ), color significantly predicted attitude toward sponsor for VTB Bank ( $\beta = .40, p < .05$ ), promotion significantly predicted attitude toward brand for Errea and Generali ( $\beta = -.56, \beta = -.41, p < .05$ ,

respectively), explicitness significantly predicted attitude toward brand for Errea, Generali and Day Bank ( $\beta = .43, p < .01, \beta = .33, \beta = .85, p < .05$ , respectively) and finally, attitude toward sponsor significantly predicted attitude toward brand for Errea and Generali ( $\beta = .52, \beta = .61, p < .01$ , respectively). Other aspects of fit did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward sponsors and brands. For Merooj, none of the aspects of fit significantly predicted attitudes toward sponsor and brand.

### The impact of culture and type of sponsor on fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands

The results of MANOVA ( $F(1,11) = 13.13, P < 0.01$ ) showed significant effects of culture and category of sponsor, as well as a significant interaction effect between culture and sponsor category on the dependent variables as a whole (fit, attitudes toward sponsors and brands). The results of the subsequent ANOVAs are presented in Table 5 and Figure 3. Concerning the main effect of culture on the dependent variables, results showed that Russians showed significantly higher scores in the fit parameters of visibility ( $F(2,1204) = 147.97, P < 0.01$ ), slogan ( $F(2, 1205) = 196.69, P < 0.01$ ), color ( $F(2, 12.4) = 42.30, P < 0.01$ ), target ( $F(2,1205) = 61.91, P < 0.01$ ), attitude toward sponsors ( $F(2,) = , P < 0.01$ ) and brands ( $F(2,) = , P < 0.01$ ) in comparison to Iranians and French, and French respondents showed significantly higher scores in these variables in comparison to Iranians. Also, in the fit

**Table 6.** ANOVAs testing the effects of culture and sponsor category on fit, attitudes toward sponsors and brands scores.

		F	P	DF	Effect size	Post hoc Comparison using Tukey's HSD
Visibility	Culture	147.97	0.001	2	0.20	Russia > France > Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Category	9.06	0.001	1	0.01	
Slogan	Culture*Category	9.89	0.001	2	0.02	Russia > France > Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	196.69	0.001	2	0.25	
	Category	21.37	0.001	1	0.02	
Mission	Culture*Category	12.69	0.001	2	0.02	Russia > France, Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	111.42	0.001	2	0.16	
	Category	16.73	0.001	1	0.01	
Color	Culture*Category	14.41	0.001	2	0.02	Russia > France > Iran
	Culture	42.30	0.001	2	0.07	
	Category	0.02	0.88	1	0.001	
Target	Culture*Category	18.23	0.001	2	0.03	Russia > France > Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	61.91	0.001	2	0.09	
	Category	16.50	0.001	1	0.01	
Promotion	Culture*Category	20.73	0.001	2	0.03	Russia > France, Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	60.18	0.001	2	0.09	
	Category	16.85	0.001	1	0.01	
Geography	Culture*Category	32.59	0.001	2	0.05	Russia > Iran > France
	Culture	29.31	0.001	2	0.05	
	Category	1.42	0.23	1	0.001	
Involvement	Culture*Category	31.26	0.001	2	0.05	Russia > France, Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	80.47	0.001	2	0.12	
	Category	14.48	0.001	1	0.01	
Explicitness	Culture*Category	11.51	0.001	2	0.02	Russia > France, Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	188.29	0.001	2	0.24	
	Category	2.92	0.07	1	0.01	
Att.Sponsor	Culture*Category	1.08	0.34	2	0.002	Russia > France > Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	148.38	0.001	2	0.20	
	Category	8.84	0.001	1	0.01	
Att.Brand	Culture*Category	10.74	0.001	2	0.02	Russia > France > Iran sport equipment and apparel companies > financial services
	Culture	156.69	0.001	2	0.20	
	Category	18.29	0.001	1	0.02	
	Culture*Category	22.08	0.001	2	0.03	

parameters of mission ( $F(2, 1205) = 111.42, P < 0.01$ ), promotion ( $F(2, 1205) = 60.18, P < 0.01$ ), involvement ( $F(2, 1205) = 80.47, P < 0.01$ ) and explicitness ( $F(2, 1202) = 188.29, P < 0.01$ ), Russians scored significantly higher than French and Iranians (between which there was no significant difference). In the fit parameter of geography, Russians showed a significantly higher score in comparison to French and Iranians, and Iranians showed significantly higher scores than French respondents ( $F(2, 1205) = 29.31, P < 0.01$ ) (Table 5 and Figure 3).

Concerning the main effect of sponsor category on the dependent variables, results showed that participants showed significantly higher scores in the category of sport equipment/apparel companies in comparison to financial services for the fit parameters of visibility ( $F(1, 1205) = 9.06, P < 0.01$ ), slogan ( $F(1, 1206) = 21.37, P < 0.01$ ), mission ( $F(1, 1206) = 16.73, P < 0.01$ ), target ( $F(1, 1206) = 16.50, P < 0.01$ ), promotion ( $F(1, 1206) = 16.85, P < 0.01$ ), involvement ( $F(1, 1206) = 14.48, P < 0.01$ ), explicitness ( $F(1, 1203) = 2.92, P < 0.07$ ) and attitude toward sponsors ( $F(1,$

**Table 7.** Mean fit values and cell counts for each country and sponsor category.

Variables	France				Iran				Russia			
	Sport equipment and apparel companies		Financial services		Sport equipment and apparel companies		Financial services		Sport equipment and apparel companies		Financial services	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Visibility	3.38	1.62	3.67	1.53	3.22**	1.31	4.18**	1.51	5.43**	1.45	4.57**	1.58
Slogan	4.49*	1.34	4.24*	1.21	3.37**	1.22	4.21**	1.34	5.83**	1.37	4.82**	1.90
Mission	3.83*	1.37	3.58*	1.28	3.83**	1.30	4.17**	1.36	5.66**	1.39	4.26**	1.89
Color	4.20	1.34	4.23	1.31	3.82*	1.22	4.23*	1.35	4.70**	1.62	5.04**	1.53
Target	4.34*	1.22	4.07*	1.09	3.93**	1.33	4.31**	1.31	5.50**	1.30	4.10**	1.81
Promotion	3.82	1.18	3.72	1.08	3.74**	1.27	4.20**	1.33	5.32**	1.30	4.52**	1.65
Geography	3.54	1.20	3.45	1.17	3.94	1.29	4.11	1.34	4.48**	1.50	4.05**	1.95
Involvement	4.01	1.27	3.91	1.19	3.95**	1.21	4.26**	1.41	5.51**	1.37	4.50**	1.68
Explicitness	3.49	1.32	3.28	1.25	3.32**	1.12	4.25**	1.41	5.10**	1.49	4.18**	1.83
Att.Sponsor	4.27	1.25	4.17	1.15	3.83**	1.26	4.33**	1.27	5.79**	1.35	5.26**	1.53
Att.Brand	4.18	1.20	4.02	1.11	3.73**	1.28	4.29**	1.28	5.91**	1.28	4.84**	1.71
Cell size	166		166		270		270		168		168	

Note. Statistical significance reflects group comparisons between sport equipment and apparel versus financial services sponsors. M = mean; SD = standard deviation;

\* $p < .01$ ;

† $p < .05$ .

1206) = 8.84,  $P < 0.01$ ) and brands ( $F(1, 1206) = 18.29$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ) (Table 5 and Figure 3).

Of particular interest in the context of this study, the interactions between culture and sponsor category were significant for all the examined variables, including fit parameters (except explicitness) and attitudes toward sponsors and brands (for more details, see Figure 2 and Tables 5 and 7).

## Discussion

The main aim of this study was to examine the impact of sponsorship fit on attitudes toward sponsors and brands across three national cultures and different categories of sponsors in the national volleyball team context. Specifically, we sought: (a) to identify naturally occurring fit profiles of participants based on their scores of the perception of several aspects of fit, (b) to examine if sponsorship-fit profiles were similar across two sponsor categories (sport equipment/apparel companies and financial service companies) and across three countries (France, Iran and Russia); (c) to explore whether individuals from distinct sponsorship-fit profiles differed in their scores of attitude toward sponsors and brands; (d) to examine whether these relationships were similar between the two sponsor categories and the three countries; and (e) to examine whether the scores of fit, attitudes toward sponsors and brands differed across cultures and categories of sponsors.

The cluster analysis approach provided a parsimonious yet nuanced view of the heterogeneity in fit parameters between participants in the context of men's national volleyball teams. Instead of having to individually consider the different aspects of fit, this analysis organized information about fit in a meaningful way. Aside from being a powerful exploratory tool to examine the fit construct from a global perspective, cluster analysis was also effective in unpacking the complex associations of sponsorship-fit profiles with attitudes.

To reach a strong position in the market and to optimally target fans, marketing should not only cluster participants according to certain characteristics, but should ideally extend marketing strategies to all people who have been categorized in different clusters (Ross 2007). Our results identified three distinct profiles of low, medium and high levels of fit for the sponsors Errea, Merooj and Day Bank, and two distinct clusters of low and high fit for the sponsors Generali, Mikasa and VTB Bank. The low-fit sponsorship profile contained 37%, 20%, 19%, 9%, 61% and 47% of the samples for Generali, Errea, Day Bank, Merooj, VTB Bank and Mikasa respectively. In contrast, the high-fit sponsorship profile contained 63%, 26%, 22%, 43%, 39% and 53% of the samples for Generali, Errea, Day Bank, Merooj, VTB Bank and Mikasa respectively. These results indicate that having a particular fit profile was impacted by national culture and product category, as the

proportion of participants in each sponsorship-fit profile clearly differed across brands (and thus across national culture and product category). As might be expected given the type of analysis (cluster analysis), participants from distinct sponsorship-fit profiles had significantly different scores on all aspects of fit. This result supported the effectiveness of this type of categorization, which can help sports managers and marketing specialists understand consumers' views of different sponsors and develop strategies to react to different fit levels.

Participants belonging to the high-fit profiles had significantly higher scores of attitudes toward sponsors and brands than participants from the moderate- and low-fit profiles across all 6 brands. Despite being based on a different methodology (cluster analysis versus correlational analyses or SEM analyses), these findings nonetheless replicated previous studies (Jagre, Watson, and Watson 2001; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). As has been shown by many studies, a high level of fit has many advantages (Rifon et al. 2004; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). A high fit between sponsor and sponsee (or sport entity) does not involve processing incongruity, as would be the case for a sponsor with low fit (Rifon et al. 2004). Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) argue that positive outcomes happen at high levels of fit, as low fit can blur brand positioning and lead to less altruistic motives being attributed to the sponsoring brand (Rifon et al. 2004). High-fit sponsorships are also consistent with what consumers expect from the company, reinforcing brand image (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Studies have indicated that people have more favorable thoughts when they perceive a sponsorship with a high fit. The marketing strategy should thus be to improve clarity for consumers and capitalize on the transformative effect of high fit (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). However, as Hickman (2015) suggested, sponsors of non-congruent product categories also have the potential for successful sponsorship outcomes. In situations of low fit, it is better for the sponsored organization rather than the sponsor to communicate about the sponsorship, as this decreases negative impact (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). In line with the latter authors, the results

of our SEM analyses also suggested that the relationship between fit and attitude toward the brand is mediated by attitude toward the sponsor. Brand building is time consuming, and one step is to involve the brand in positively viewed sponsorships. Consistent with previous studies (Rifon et al. 2004; Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006; Weeks, Cornwell, and Drennan 2008), we found that attitude toward sponsors significantly drove attitude toward brands (when all the fit parameters were also included within the SEM models) for all sponsors. A positive attitude about brands is a prerequisite for consumer decision-making and purchasing, one of the main goals of sport sponsorship (Melovic et al. 2019). The link that exists between sports teams and their fans and the nature of a sponsor's message as well as the values promoted through the sponsorship result in the latter's positive effect on fans' perceptions and attitudes (Melovic et al. 2019).

Of particular interest in our study, we found that the type of sponsor as well as national culture significantly impacted the scores of fit and attitudes toward sponsors and brands. Significantly higher scores of fit were found for sponsors in the category of sport equipment/apparel (e.g., Errea, Mikasa) compared to sponsors in the category of financial services. These results highlight the important role of sponsor category and are in line with Cornwell et al. (2006) who emphasized the importance of the type of sponsor when there are several sponsors, as direct competition hampers the ability of consumers to recall sponsors. Our findings are similar to those of Evans, Shapiro, and Brown (2020) but differ from Hickman (2015). The congruence with the former may possibly be attributed to the fact that it also sampled students (like our study), while the latter used a non-student sample.

In terms of national culture, we found that French respondents had significantly higher scores in perceptions of fit compared to Iranians and Russians. These results are consistent with those of Barrada-Tarrazona et al. (2014) who demonstrated the role played by national culture in consumers' perceptions of fit. In line with certain other studies, our results highlighted significant differences in attitudes toward brands and sponsors across countries. For example, Dalakas

and Kropp (2002) found the highest positive attitudes toward buying sponsors' products among Americans, in comparison to Greeks and Koreans, which seems to indicate a cultural component in attitude toward sponsors.

### **Sports management implications**

Level of fit is a crucial factor for sponsorship management (Cornwell et al. 2006), as this controllable element is effective for outcomes. Sponsorship fit affects firm equity, but a low or a high fit can be managed in order to obtain the best results. For example, a sponsor with a low fit could increase positive attitudes toward the firm or product by adding attractive elements (e.g., a celebrity spokesperson), although the brand image may be blurred. Or a sponsor with a high fit may reinforce the brand image, but dilute brand equity if the sponsorship is disliked for other reasons (e.g., heavy-handed promotional efforts) (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006).

The sponsorship-fit profiles identified in our study allow the opportunity to develop tools for multiple marketing goals: for example, the creation of a customer database based on the fit profile per sponsor (Ližbetinová et al. 2019). Knowing which fans have a medium or high sponsorship-fit profile could also allow teams or federations to target them and involve them more in the sport. Equally, understanding the impact of type of sponsor (e.g., here, sport equipment/apparel or financial services) on consumers in terms of fit profiles could play a determinant role on sponsee decisions when choosing sponsors to support their teams or events.

From a sports management perspective, it is also important to understand the role culture plays in sponsorship fit. While cultural aspects cannot be 'controlled', as they have long and deep roots in a country, their effects on attitudes – and consequently, behavior – should be considered by sponsors in their marketing actions to optimize sponsorship effectiveness.

### **Limitations and suggestions for future research**

A possible limitation of our study is that the findings may have been influenced by the specific

context of the sport studied (volleyball) and the fact that the sponsees were national teams. A country's citizens, as well as sponsors, are likely to take more interest in a national team than other types of teams and may then be more likely to support its sponsors. Likewise, the studied countries may have had an influence on the results; different countries may have led to different results. While national volleyball includes major international events (e.g., FIVB World League, FIVB Men's World Cup, FIVB Men's Nations League) that attract global audiences several times a year, this type of study could be replicated in the context of other top-class sports or events.

Another limitation may have been linguistic: we distributed the questionnaires in the language of the target population, but this approach could possibly generate bias due to the incommensurability of different languages. To prevent this methodological bias, the translation of the questionnaires into the three languages was conducted according to a standardized back-translation procedure, but certain nuanced cultural meanings can be lost in translation (Song et al. 2018). This study was also confined to a student sample. To increase the generalizability of the findings, a replicated study could include non-student participants.

Finally, our study did not consider any predispositions or prior attitudes toward sponsors, which may be a mediating factor that can affect perceived fit. For instance, if a respondent has had an unpleasant experience with a sponsor's product, this might result in a theoretically high-fit sponsor being perceived as a sponsor with low fit. While these limitations are important to bear in mind, each presents possible avenues for future research.

### **Note**

1. In the Russian sample, a series of MANOVAs were conducted with fit, attitude towards brand and sponsor entered as the dependent variables to explore differences between cluster groups. In the analyses, a significant multivariate effect ( $p < .05$ ) was followed up with post-hoc comparisons of group means (Tukey's HSD) for cluster results, and two items, one from the

visibility subscale and another from the slogan subscale, were removed. These were identified as problematic within the Russian sample based on: (a) the weak correlations of these items within the other items pertaining to the same subscales; and (b) the weak standardized factor loadings of these two items with their targeting of latent factors.

## Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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