



Sports icons in nation branding the interplay of motivations, culture and country attachment

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships among three main concepts: celebrity's media exposure, celebrity's image, and country image. Additionally, the moderating role of tourists' (i) motivations, (ii) culture, and (iii) country attachment was investigated. To this end, 938 real tourists visiting Spain from 3 nationalities were approached: the UK, France, and Germany. An international market research company provided the data using an online questionnaire among its panelists. Structural equation modelling with JAMOVI, based on R, was used. Our results showed the relevance of both media activities and the image of sports celebrities to enhance the perceived image of the country they represent and, in turn, tourists' intention to revisit and buy national products. First, the image of sports celebrities could improve Spain's brand, mainly (i) among those who travel for sports motives, (ii) from England, and (iii) being highly attached to Spain. Second, the country's image will augment tourists' intention to revisit the country, mainly (i) among non-sports travellers, (ii) from France, and (iii) low-attached tourists. The effectiveness of celebrities' media exposure was confirmed, supporting the Symbolic Communication Theory. Also, sports celebrity endorsement on destination image has been probed, strengthening the usefulness of the Image Transfer Theory. Lastly, the relationship between perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours has been demonstrated, as stated in the Theory of Planned Behavior. To conclude, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) could invest in communication using sports celebrities as the campaign's backbone to improve the Spanish destination image. This policy will work better among (i) those who travel for sports motives, (ii) those from England and (iii) those who are highly attached to Spain.

1. Introduction

Places (countries, cities, and communities) have been using celebrities to improve their images and attract tourists (Zhou et al., 2023). As these authors explain, "celebrity" refers to those who are famous for their achievements and publicly known in specific fields, including entertainment, sports, and politics (Yen & Teng, 2015; Zhou et al., 2023, p. 33). Among the celebrities used, sports figures are increasingly gaining prominence (Dubinsky, 2019). For example, in the global North, the stars of the Super Bowl play a role in the diffusion of American culture and American ideology abroad (Dubinsky, 2023). Additionally, in both Global North and Global South, the work of Arning (2013) remarks that the most significant manifestation of the intersection between sports and country branding is probably during the Olympic Games opening

ceremonies (Dubinsky, 2023). National sports celebrities transcend their roles as mere entertainers or athletes; they may become symbols of national identity and pride (Jun & Lee, 2012). Their global achievements bolster domestic constituents' morale and shape foreign audiences' perceptions (Richelieu & Desbordes, 2009). Their personal attributes, ranging from sportsmanship and dedication to resilience and integrity, often become intertwined with the image of their home nation.

In sum, the power of global celebrities is observed in both the global North and the global South. For instance, Usain Bolt's lightning speed doesn't just evoke admiration for his prowess but also casts a positive light on Jamaica, his home country, presenting an image of a nation producing world-class talent (Cornwell & Coote, 2005). The same goes for the admired Spanish sportsmen and women, such as Rafael Nadal, who is known worldwide for his success in tennis. Such associations are

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not confined to the realm of sports. Tourists, exposed to the charisma of these sports celebrities, may develop a favourable image of the respective countries, which in turn influences their travel decisions (Beerli & Martin, 2004). For this reason, the tourist destination Spain has been chosen as the framework for this research. In addition, the World Economic Forum has ranked Spain as the second best tourist destination in the world in 2024, only behind the United States, as shown by the Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024 (<https://www.weforum.org/publications/travel-tourism-development-index-2024/press-release-and-related-contributions-12ce9d1d22/>).

In this framework, four major gaps representing four added-value sources have been identified in the present work. First, previous studies have mainly focused on the role of particular sports events in destination branding, such as the Olympic Games in China (Heslop et al., 2010) or the Super Bowl in the USA (Dubinsky, 2023). On the contrary, the study of sports celebrities is less common. As Lin et al. (2024) have remarked, a country-destination brand represents what is communicated to build an appropriate country image. However, the specific role of national sports celebrities in sculpting the image of a country and its impact on tourism remains under-researched. So, this paper will focus on this point. Although some studies have dabbled into the broader domain of celebrity endorsement and its ripple effects on destination marketing (Chalip et al., 2003; Riley & Van Doren, 1992), they have provided only a tangential understanding of the phenomenon. Their insights, though valuable, are insufficient to grasp the depth and breadth of the influence national sports celebrities wield on a country's image, especially in the context of global tourism.

Second, and related to the former, the role of the media in building sports celebrities' image to help destination branding has been poorly investigated. Dubinsky (2023) has highlighted this gap, examining how international audiences frame America through the Super Bowl. So, this paper will try to cover this gap by demonstrating how communication strategy in the sports business could be crucial for country branding.

Third, previous literature linking the sports industry with country brands has focused on American countries, mainly the USA (Dubinsky, 2023) and Asian countries, such as China (Heslop et al., 2010). Still, European countries, particularly Spain, remain poorly investigated despite Spain being the second (or third) world tourism power behind the United States and directly competing with France, according to UNWTO data (2023). So, this paper will analyze how the sports industry can help Spain attract tourists by improving its destination image thanks to sports celebrities.

Fourth, cross-national studies comparing the effect of sports on place brands are limited. Heslop et al. (2010) did one of the few cross-national studies to investigate country effects of the Olympics using before-and-after event measures. Much research is needed to gauge how celebrity endorsement works in various cultural contexts (Um & Lee, 2015) because various countries with different habits, sense of tradition, and histories represent different cultures that probably behave differently. For this reason, comparative studies focused on unexplored variables, such as travel motivations, need to be done to understand sports celebrities' endorsements better (Kim et al., 2018). In this framework, this paper will compare tourists' perceptions towards Spain from three different countries: England, France and Germany.

Given the above backdrop, this study seeks to fill these gaps by empirically investigating the relationships among three main concepts: celebrity's media exposure, celebrity's image, and country image. In our proposal, respondents could think of Spanish sports celebrities competing in Spanish clubs or teams, representing Spain and, therefore, proxies of Spanish culture, regardless of nationality.

In general terms, our research aims to elucidate how admiration for sports celebrities translates to a favourable destination image and how such an image, in turn, impacts tourists' intention to visit and recommend the respective nation and to buy its products. They all compare different groups of tourists according to their travel motivations (re-

lated versus non-related to sports), cultural background (English, French and German) and level of country attachment (low versus high). Three different theories have been used to understand our model: the Symbolic Communication Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Two of them (the Symbolic Communication Theory and the Meaning Transfer Model) allow us to understand the proposed antecedents: the image of celebrity and the image of the country. The last one (Theory of Planned Behavior) will enable us to understand the effects: intention to visit the country and to buy products from the country.

Given the above backdrop, this study seeks to fill these gaps by empirically investigating the relationships among three main concepts: celebrity's media exposure, celebrity's image, and country image. While antecedents are focused on celebrities' media exposure, effects include tourists' intention to revisit the country (tourists' loyalty) and buy products from the country. In general terms, our research aims to elucidate how admiration for sports celebrities translates to a favourable destination image and how such an image, in turn, impacts tourists' intention to visit and recommend the respective nation and to buy its products. They all compare different groups of tourists according to their travel motivations (related versus non-related to sports), cultural background (English, French and German) and level of country attachment (low versus high). To this end, this paper is based on the image transfer meaning theory (Um & Lee, 2015), as it supports the idea that a place's image will be linked to the image of its sports celebrities. There is a subjective source effect that explains that subjects (athletes) with a good image will infuse the country they represent with a good image.

Our study hopes to confirm the relevance of sports celebrities in country branding and, thus, in tourism's dynamization. If so, policy-makers in charge of tourist destinations will be able to have a powerful communication weapon (endorsement) knowing in which target/s this resource is more recommendable: (i) sports tourists and/or tourists who travel for other reasons (ii) English and/or German and/or French tourists; (iii) tourists attached to Spain or not attached to Spain.

1.1. Literature review

The following lines present the model under study, which includes, first of all, the role of the media in the image of a sports celebrity (H1). When discussing media, we have considered both traditional and new media based on new technologies (i.e. social networks). Second, the image transfer from a sports celebrity to the country they are competing for is analyzed using the Image Transfer Meaning Theory (Um & Lee, 2015). Although place image can be defined at different aggregation levels (i.e. city, region, country, or even to smaller locations, such as resorts or events) (Heslop et al., 2010), this paper will focus on how tourists perceive the image of a country: Spain. Particularly, the country's image will be linked to the image of a sports celebrity (H2). Third, the effects of this image transfer on tourist loyalty (intention to revisit the country and buy its products) are addressed (H3, H4, H5, H6, H7). Lastly, three moderating variables related to the tourist profile have been considered to complete this proposal: tourists' motivations (RQ1), tourists' culture (RQ2) and tourists' level of attachment to Spain (RQ3).

The stated hypotheses that will be commented on in the following lines have been summarized in Fig. 1.

Three different theories have been used to understand our model: the Symbolic Communication Theory, the Meaning Transfer Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Two of them (the Symbolic Communication Theory and the Meaning Transfer Model) allow us to understand the proposed antecedents: the image of celebrity and the image of the country. The last one (Theory of Planned Behavior) will enable us to understand the effects: intention to visit the country and to buy products from the country.

Regarding the antecedents, two basic theories have been followed. First, the Symbolic Communication Theory helps to understand the rel-

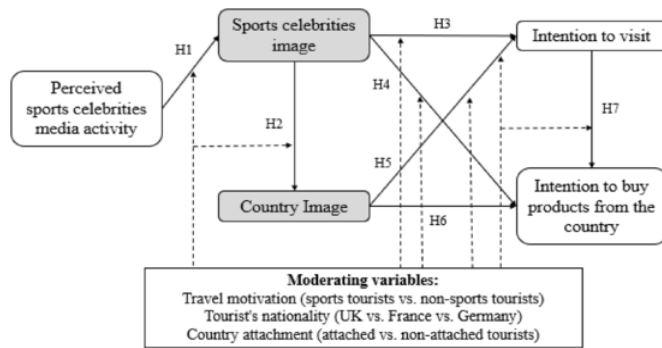


Fig. 1. Antecedents and effects of sports celebrities' image.

evance of media exposure in building an appropriate celebrity image (Kim et al., 2018). As this theory supports, the attributes recognized in a sportsperson competing for a country are expected to be transferred to the country they represent. So, having well-known, reputed, and prestigious celebrities becomes a priority, and the media plays a key role in this process. This theory describes a solid approach in the field of communication to justify heavy investments in communication budgets. However, this theory is insufficient to understand why a major communication investment in a celebrity can help improve the image of the country where the celebrity competes. So, a second theory, the Meaning Transfer Model, has been used to understand better the relevance of celebrity image exposure in building an appropriate country image. As this theory supports, when choosing a celebrity endorser, an essential factor is the perceived ability of the celebrity to transfer their symbolic meaning to the endorsed brand (country in our study) (Um & Lee, 2015). As this theory, also known as the Image Transfer Theory (Gwinner, 1997), explains, if the tourist/resident has a favourable image towards a celebrity associated with a tourist destination, the image of that destination will be favoured due to the existence of a "halo" effect that allows the celebrity image to be transferred to the linked destination.

Regarding the effects of our model (intent to visit and to buy from the country), we have also used the Symbolic Communications Theory (Bormann et al., 1994). Based on this theory, the effect of the symbolic imagery attached to a celebrity is transferred to a product (country), which lastly increases product brand equity (country image) and purchase intention (Kim et al., 2018). Again, this theory does not entirely understand this process because it does not wholly relate perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. For this reason, recourse has been Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, which has been widely used to understand behavioural intentions. This theory states that perceptions (images) precede attitudes, ultimately leading to behaviours. Abundant literature argues that studies on country branding and destination image adopt the same framework of this attitudinal theory to explain future tourist behaviour based on previous attitudes (Hwang et al., 2020). From this perspective, the positive or negative engagement that tourists develop towards a certain destination based on the image they formed of it (Kumar et al., 2013), will explain the greater or lesser intention to visit it and to buy products made in the country.

1.2. Celebrity's media exposure, celebrity's image, and country image: antecedents and effects

1.2.1. Antecedents

First, starting with celebrity media exposure, previous literature (Chanavat, 2017) has explained the sports industry has used the media to build omni-sports brands with a particular identity and invest in brand athletes to support the communication strategy. As indicated before, the Symbolic Communication Theory is of great help in under-

standing the importance of the media in constructing sports icons capable of symbolizing international success. (Kim et al., 2018). As Ginesta and de San Eugenio (2014, p. 226) remark, "sports have become one of the *consumer-driver* products for the media industry and its interests". Recently, in Qatar, media coverage of football reached astronomical heights, claiming that certain sports clubs and celebrities are very prominent in the media (FIFA Club World Cup, 2023). Barcelona Football Club is considered, for instance, the most media-conscious sports club in the world (EFE, 2011; Ginesta & de San Eugenio, 2014). Thanks to its sports celebrity stars, this is followed by other relevant clubs, such as Paris Saint Germain (PSG) (Chanavat, 2017). Also, the cases of Manchester United (Chanavat, 2017) and the Super Bowl in the case of the USA (Dubinsky, 2023) are other examples that illustrate the crescent role of communication in consolidating a sports brand.

Given the growing omnipresence of sports celebrities in the media, sports clubs must be obliged to manage their public image through these media. As Chanavat (2017, p. 8) concludes: "although the football skills of the players are crucial, clubs recruit international players according to their marketing profile, represented by their potential in terms of merchandising, and the interest they generate in the media". Thanks to media coverage, public knowledge of celebrities helps them better endorse the message they support. This means that celebrities' media exposure affects the influence they can exert (Brown & Basil, 1995). As the authors explain, the exposure of the star of the Los Angeles Lakers "Magic" Johnson to the media has improved his image, helping, by extension, to change audience attitudes (in this study, disease prevention). That is, the public knowledge of a celebrity with high media coverage has more significant effects than those caused by celebrities less exposed to the media because media exposure positively affects the celebrity's image. Therefore, following this argumental line.

H1. There is a positive relationship between the media activity of a national sports celebrity and the image of this celebrity.

Second, previous lines have shown how the media can reinforce a celebrity's image; now, we will investigate how celebrities can reinforce a country's image. Sports celebrities and sports clubs have also used the media (Moragas et al., 2011) to globally configure the brand of the place where the sporting events are held or to which the most famous sports celebrities and clubs belong. What is the same is that the globalization of professional sports clubs and athletes, thanks to the media, has led to the internationalization of the countries to which they are linked (Chanavat, 2017).

The following lines will focus on a relatively new point that needs further research in the tourism industry: the investigation of a direct link between a celebrity and a destination image. Based on the Meaning Transfer Model (Um & Lee, 2015), Kim et al. (2018) developed their study on a literary festival. They concluded that celebrity endorsements could strongly influence destination brands and festival community attachment. Following this argument, it is expected that the same is true for sports celebrities. A sports celebrity is defined as "a player or coach who gained popularity in a specific sport" and "a sports celebrity has the power to direct fans' attention towards the endorsed brand, create a positive brand image" (Dikčius & Ilciukienė, 2021, p. 342). That is, if the attributes recognized in a person are positive and admired, the image of the country they belong to will also be positive and admired, increasing the country's attractiveness as a tourist destination. From this approach, the attributes of a sportsperson competing on behalf of a country could be used to boost the image of the country they represent.

In sum, as previous literature indicated, the media are crucial to promoting the image of a celebrity and, by extension, the image of the country they represent. The role of diverse celebrities in explaining place images has been investigated since 1997 (Authors, 2023). So, the presence of notorious athletes in the media contributes highly to place branding because, as Chanavat (2017) summarizes, the communication strategy of sports celebrities tries to find an alchemy between grown

players (like Adrien Rabiot) and galactic, the best players of the moment (like Neymar). So, the image of a national sports celebrity is expected to impact the image of the country they represent positively. So, the following hypothesis has been enounced.

H2. There is a positive relationship between the image of a national sports celebrity and the image of the country they represent.

1.2.2. Effects

Both the image of the celebrities competing for a country and the image of the country itself have interesting effects regarding the intention to visit and buy products from the country, which will be analyzed in the following lines. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen's, 1991) states that perceptions (images) precede attitudes, ultimately leading to behaviours. So, having good perceptions (images) towards celebrities representing a country and towards the country itself will improve tourists' attitudes and behaviours (intention to visit and intention to buy from the country).

On the one hand, as stated in previous lines, celebrity image has interesting effects in terms of brand loyalty (intention to visit/recommend the country) and brand sales (intention to buy products made in this country) (Kim et al., 2018). As these authors obtained for a literary festival celebrated to improve the image of a country, brand image was found to be positively and strongly related to brand loyalty and attachment to the festival destination. In the same vein, the effect of celebrity image on loyalty and sales can be seen in the revision of Um and Lee (2015). The authors explain how Korean actress, Jun Ji-Hyun, appeared in TV ads for Olympus, causing brand recognition to rise by more than 15% according to the Korean advertising agency LGAD, and how the actress Chang Jin-Young's endorsement of SKII (a female cosmetic brand) resulted in a 50% sales increase for the brand. Indeed, some studies suggest a direct impact of celebrity endorsement on sales increase (Um & Lee, 2015). In our case, if potential tourists have a favourable perception of a national sports celebrity, it might positively influence their attitudes and, by extension, their intentions to revisit and recommend the celebrity's home country and buy the products this country offers (made in Spain in our study). So, given that celebrity endorsement augments loyalty and sales, the following hypotheses could be enounced.

H3. There is a positive relationship between the image of a national sports celebrity and the intention to revisit the country they represent.

H4. There is a positive relationship between the image of a national sports celebrity and the intention to buy products made in the country they represent.

On the other hand, having a good country image leads to the same effects: intention to visit and to buy products from the country. Following Dubinsky (2023), the effects of country branding need to be considered from two main approaches: (i) a tourism-based approach (intention to visit) and (ii) a product-based approach (intention to buy). In this vein, previous studies converged in affirming that an adequate country brand improves the desire of tourists to visit the country, buy products made in the country, and speak well of the destination (Chalip et al., 2003; Riley & Van Doren, 1992). In tourism, attitudes toward visiting a particular destination or buying its products would be influenced, on one side, by the image of notable figures from that place, as previous lines have stated. On the other hand, we should buy the previous image of the country itself. So, suppose a destination has a salient image. This will positively influence tourists' travel decisions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999): intention to visit and buy products made in the country. For example, Heslop et al. (2010) investigated how the Beijing Olympic Games 2008 improved the image of China as a leisure destination among North Americans, encouraging interesting effects such as future visits and buying. In sum, an influential research study has shown a robust link between the image of a destination and the inten-

tion to buy its products and visit the country (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Accordingly.

H5. There is a positive relationship between the image of a country and the intention to revisit it.

H6. There is a positive relationship between the image of a country and the intention to buy products made in the country.

Lastly, a last relationship could be added, as far as country loyalty (intention to revisit the country) leads to augment the intention to buy products from the country. As Wang et al. (2012) explain, although the image of a country can be partially derived through prior experience of using products from that country (both terms are connected), a country image is somewhat distinct from products lined with a particular country. If the image of a country is not good, consumers will not tend to buy products from that country that they perceive as ugly and/or bad. Mainly, the country's image will act as an important cue that influences perceived product quality, leading to purchase intention due to the presence of a halo effect (Wang et al., 2012). In sum, the Halo Effect can be used to explain an image transfer from a good reputation brand (country in our study) to its products, leading to buying intentions of the products coming from that brand (country) (Burke et al., 2018). In this sense, we propose the following hypothesis.

H7. There is a positive relationship between the intention to revisit the country and the intention to buy products made in this country.

1.3. The moderating role of travel motivation: sports tourists and non-sports tourists

Motivation theories support the study of decision-making by tourists, which may be inferred from the evolution of Decision Theory (Mansfeld, 1992). In this scenario, travel motivation is crucial in explaining tourist behaviour (Xie & Ritchie, 2019). That is, tourists' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours will depend heavily on the motives the tourists search. For example, expert tourists who are highly motivated in a particular topic (e.g., culture, sports, religion) will respond differently than less motivated ones. From this approach, Kim et al. (2018) have shown that perceived expertise could reinforce consumers' responses (impressions and behaviours) in tourism destinations. The authors defined expertise as an individual's skill, experience, and knowledge in decision-making.

Our study has investigated the role of the sports industry in tourism development, including sports and non-sport tourists, who could be defined as those travelling for sporting purposes. From this approach, it's expected that the relationships in the proposed model will be stronger for sports tourists, those who have decided to travel due to sports motives, than for non-sport tourists, who travel for other motivations. The reason is the existence of an information asymmetry among tourists according to their travel motivations (Matiza, 2022): tourists who travel due to sports motives will be more enrolled with sports celebrities; therefore, the antecedents and effects of a sports celebrity image will be stronger. In sum, celebrity endorsements will work better in this scenario because these tourists are better informed than those who travel for non-sporting reasons. The following question arises.

RQ1: In which scenario using sports celebrities to endorse a country brand work better: sports or non-sports tourists?

1.4. The moderating role of nationality

Culture should be considered a key variable that can be integrated into theory and research on human behaviour (Um & Lee, 2015). How individuals process information, value attributes, and make decisions depends heavily on their cultural background (Hofstede, 2001). Among dimensions of cultures, literature has extensively used Hall's context-

based dimension of culture (low vs. high context communication) (Hall, 1990) and Hofstede's individualism/collectivism dimension (Um & Lee, 2015).

First, following Hall's context-based dimension, country image is a multidisciplinary research field influenced by national and collective identity (Dubinsky, 2019). From this approach, Cerda-Hegerl (2006) classified France as a more collectivist (high-context) country than Germany, which is highly individualistic (low-context), being the United Kingdom between both. The difference is that emotions and implicit information are very relevant for tourists from a high-context (collectivistic) culture. On the contrary, nothing is assumed for tourists from low-context cultures; everything must be clearly specified in the communication campaigns promoting a destination (for example, using rational texts instead of emotional images). This is because, in low-context individualistic cultures, emotions such as autonomy and anger are common. Conversely, high-context collectivistic cultures value relational interdependence and harmony (Vila-López et al., 2022).

Second, focusing on the cultural dimensions model by Hofstede (2001), countries can significantly differ in dimensions like uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, and individualism vs. collectivism. From this perspective, a sports celebrity from Spain exhibiting a passionate and expressive style might be perceived positively in countries with low uncertainty avoidance (like the UK), as they may appreciate spontaneity. In contrast, tourists from countries with high uncertainty avoidance (like Germany) might perceive the same attributes as unprofessional or reckless (Reisinger & Turner, 2003).

Similarly, Um and Lee (2015) summarized how celebrity endorsement does not work equally in all countries. In collectivistic cultures (such as Japan, Korea or France), consumers view celebrities as individuals who are one of them with shared values and outlook, and the message is implicit and linked to signs and symbols. On the contrary, in individualistic cultures (such as the United States, Canada, or Germany), consumers view celebrities as exceptional individuals who have succeeded in their respective fields, and the message must be explicit and direct. In the same vein, recent studies comparing Germany, the United Kingdom, and France concluded that citizens from these countries exhibit different emotions (Böhm et al., 2023). They can be represented on a dimension going from outrage to hope, accounting for a large part of the variance, with France and Germany at the outrage/fear end and the United Kingdom at the hope end. A second dimension shows much more worry in France than in the United Kingdom and Germany (Böhm et al., 2023).

Therefore, in view of the emotional differences observed between these countries (France, Germany and the United Kingdom), it is worth asking which of them the model of image transfer from sports celebrities' to their country of origin will work best. Thus.

RQ2: In which scenario does using sports celebrities to endorse a country brand work better: more collectivist, more individualistic tourists, or in the middle?

1.5. Moderating role of country attachment: attached and non-attached tourists

Place attachment has been defined as the process by which persons formulate emotional bonds to a place (Kim et al., 2018). As these authors have reviewed, this has been found to be one of the most influential factors explaining the effectiveness of celebrity endorsement, as previous literature, such as Um and Lee (2015) have demonstrated. Brand attachment is a key variable in intensifying the feelings and intentions of consumers. Those more attached to a brand (country brand in our case) are expected to develop better feelings and behaviours than those less attached to the brand. In our case, brand followers (attached tourists) are expected to believe more in celebrity endorsement to improve brand image.

In tourism, the role of place attachment needs further research due to its potential to improve destination competitiveness (Dwyer et al., 2019). More attached tourists to a country are expected to react strongly than less attached tourists. Their image perception towards a celebrity representing a country, towards the country, and their attitudes (measured in terms of intention to revisit and buy products from the country) will be higher.

RQ3: In which scenario using sports celebrities to endorse a country brand work better: attached or non-attached tourists?

2. Methodology

We used a structured questionnaire to collect the data needed for our study. A pretest was done with a cross-cultural sample before collecting the data. All measures were based on well-validated, 7-point Likert scales used in prior research (see Table 1). First, a 3-item scale adapted from Kim and Ko (2012) to the sports celebrity context was used to measure **sports celebrity media activities**. The celebrities that respondents had to think about in the present study were those competing in Spanish clubs or teams representing Spain and, therefore, proxies of Spanish culture, regardless of their nationality. Second, a 4-item scale by Salinas and Pérez (2009) measured the **perceived image of a sports celebrity**. Third, the **perceived image of the country** as a tourist destination was measured with the 4-item scale adapted from Hahm et al. (2019). Fourth, the **intention to revisit the country (country loyalty)** was approached with one single item: asking respondents how likely they were to revisit Spain (Um & Crompton, 1990). Finally, an adaptation from Putrevu and Lord (1994) and Marques et al. (2021) was used to measure tourists' **intentions to buy products** from the country.

Questionnaires were translated into English, German, and French, and an international market research company was hired to assist with the data collection. All panels use consent or some other legal basis for processing personal data and are operated in compliance with ISO 20252 (<https://www.cint.com/esomar28>).

The final sample consisted of 938 real tourists from 3 nationalities: the UK, France, and Germany. The sample description is shown in the Appendix. The sample was 42.1 years old (s.d. = 14.1), with 44.8% female and 54.4% holding a college degree. Although these characteristics significantly differ among some moderating variables (see Appendix), these differences were minor. The criteria used to choose the re-

Table 1

Construct measurement summary: Results of convergent validity tests.

Constructs and Items	Stdzd loading (t-value)
Sports celebrities' media activity	
Following this celebrity is fun	0.73 (22.7)
Contents about this celebrity seem interesting	0.80 (25.3)
News about this celebrity in the media is always the newest	0.72 (22.0)
Sports celebrities image	
The quality of this sports celebrity is high	0.75 (17.6)
This sports celebrity has better characteristics than others do	0.76 (19.8)
The value of this sports celebrity is higher than that of others	0.76 (21.2)
This sports celebrity has a very distinguished personality	0.76 (20.7)
Country Image	
Economic development	0.72 (22.0)
Environmental awareness	0.78 (26.0)
Attention to societal well-being	0.75 (24.4)
Production of high-quality products	0.73 (22.6)
Intention to buy products from the country	
I like to buy Spanish products	0.78 (26.3)
I search for Spanish products in my shopping cart	0.88 (32.7)
I commend my close people on Spanish products	0.88 (33.0)

spondents was that the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample could be considered representative of the international tourist profile visiting Spain (Tourespaña, 2024). These three countries are, besides, the largest contributors to Spain's inbound tourism, accounting for significant market shares and exhibiting diverse but comparable sociodemographic characteristics (Statista, 2024; Turespaña, 2024). Given that tourists from the UK, France, and Germany tend to have high exposure to international media, including celebrities, their opinions are likely to be influenced by celebrity endorsements and public figures in tourism campaigns. Furthermore, the sample's age and education level suggest they are informed consumers who may respond to branding efforts, including those involving celebrities, which is critical in shaping attitudes toward loyalty and revisitation.

Each tourist in Spain (English, German or French) suggested in the questionnaire their own most relevant Spanish sports celebrity for the Spain brand. Additionally, they expressed their level of attachment to Spain on a scale of 6 items taken from Alves et al. (2019) based on Williams and Vaske (2003).

3. Results

3.1. Measurement model results

The first step in our research analysis is to provide evidence about the validity of our measuring instrument. Convergent and discriminant validity were assessed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using JAMOV 2.4, based on R. We first examined the multivariate normality of the entire dataset through the Mardia test ($\chi^2 = 5023$; $p < 0.05$), which led to the rejection of the normality assumption. Then, Robust Maximum Likelihood was used as an estimation approach, a method tailored to non-normal distributions. Unidimensionality of each construct was verified (see Table 1), and the fit indices for the overall sample indicated a strong model fit ($\chi^2(81) = 168$, $p < 0.01$; GFI = 0.99; NNFI = 0.98; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05; RMSR = 0.03). The normed χ^2 value was 2.07, which is below the threshold of 3 suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981), confirming a satisfactory model fit.

Convergent validity was checked by verifying that all factor loadings were positive and with significant associated t-values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981, see Table 2). The reliability of these measures was also established, with the average variance extracted surpassing the 0.50 standard (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988) for all latent constructs (Table 2). To check discriminant validity, we compared the average variance extracted by each construct against the shared variance with other variables (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In each comparison, the variance explained was higher than the shared variance, thus validating discriminant validity.

3.2. Structural model results

After verifying that the scales and measurement model used in our research met the required validity and reliability criteria, hypothesis

testing was the second step in our research analysis. Hypotheses included in our research model were evaluated using structural equation modelling with JAMOV, based on R. The estimated structural model for the overall sample showed a very good fit ($\chi^2(84) = 260$, $p < 0.01$; GFI = 0.94; AGFI = 0.92; NNFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.05; RMSR = 0.07), with a normed χ^2 value around the recommended value of 3 (3.10, Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All of our hypotheses were supported except for H4, which was significant only at 90% (see Table 3 also Fig. 2).

Specifically, and regarding our first hypothesis, the results show that the relationship between sports celebrity media activity and sports celebrity image is supported with a standardized path coefficient of 0.79 ($p < 0.05$). This indicates a strong and positive relationship, suggesting that as the media presence of the sports celebrity increases, so does their perceived image. This confirms that media activity is a powerful driver of celebrity image in the context of tourism marketing. Regarding H2, the relationship between sports celebrity image and country image is also supported with a standardized coefficient of 0.44 ($p < 0.05$). This positive coefficient indicates a positive relationship between these constructs, implying that a favourable sports celebrity image contributes to an enhanced perception of the country's image. In H3, we find that the relationship between sports celebrity image and country loyalty (intention to revisit) is significant, with a standardized path coefficient of 0.23 ($p < 0.05$). Although the effect is weaker than in the previous relationships, the positive coefficient suggests that a positive sports celebrity image can still boost loyalty toward the country.

The analysis of H4 shows a less robust relationship between sports celebrity image and intention to buy, with a low standardized path coefficient of 0.07 ($p < 0.10$). This indicates that this relationship is only supported at a 90% confidence level, suggesting that the impact of a sports celebrity's image on purchase intention is limited.

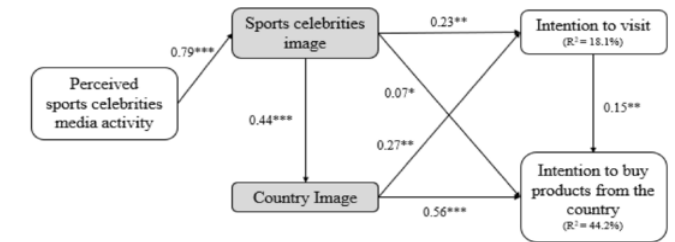
Table 3
Parameter estimates.

Paths	Stdzd Path Coeff. (z-value)	Hypothesis supported?
H1: Sports celebrity media activity → Sports celebrity image	0.79 (12.70)	Yes
H2: Sports celebrity image → Country image	0.44 (8.00)	Yes
H3: Sports celebrity image → Country loyalty (intention to revisit)	0.23 (4.74)	Yes
H4: Sports celebrity image → Intention to buy	0.07 (1.66)	Only at 90%
H5: Country image → Country loyalty (intention to revisit)	0.27 (5.44)	Yes
H6: Country image → Intention to buy	0.56 (11.65)	Yes
H7: Country loyalty(intention to revisit) → Intention to buy	0.15 (4.18)	Yes

Table 2
Mean, SD, correlation matrix, AVE and discriminant validity.

Variable	Mean	sd	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sports celebrity media activity	5.18	1.18	0.56					
2. Sports celebrity image	5.83	0.94	0.58	0.47				
3. Country image	4.87	1.03	0.55	0.48	0.32			
4. Intention to revisit (country loyalty)	6.02	1.24	–	0.35	0.31	0.34		
5. Intention to buy	4.79	1.38	0.72	0.45	0.29	0.56	0.38	

Shared variances of multi-item measures are reported in the upper half of the matrix. Correlations are reported in the lower half of the matrix: All correlations are significant ($p < 0.05$).



*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Fig. 2. Structural model results
*p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

In contrast, **H5** demonstrates that country image substantially affects country loyalty (intention to revisit), with a standardized path coefficient of 0.27 ($p < 0.05$). This result confirms that a positive country image significantly enhances loyalty, supporting the hypothesis. Similarly, the relationship between country image and intention to buy (**H6**) is strongly supported, with a high standardized coefficient of 0.56 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that a positive image of the country strongly influences the likelihood of tourists purchasing related products or services. Finally, the relationship between intention to revisit and intention to buy (**H7**) is significant, with a standardized path coefficient of 0.15 ($p < 0.05$). Although the effect size is modest, this positive coefficient confirms that higher loyalty to the country leads to an increased intention to purchase.

In summary, the hypotheses are largely supported, with the relationships showing varying degrees of strength and significance. These findings underscore the importance of both celebrity endorsements and the country image in shaping tourist behaviour and purchase intentions in the tourism sector.

3.3. Moderation results

The moderated effects in our three research questions were tested through multigroup analysis in Jamovi (R). The participants were split into two categories (tourists with low vs. high attachment) based on median splits for the country attachment variable. This method guarantees uniformity within each group and diversity across the groups, as suggested by Stone and Hollenbeck (1989). The other two moderator variables (travel motivation and nationality) were naturally categorical. First, and before testing the research questions, we checked for the invariance of the measurement model across each subsample derived from the moderating variable (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). As shown in Table 4, none of the chi-square tests showed significant differences between the free measurement model and the constrained one, indicating that metric invariance was confirmed for the 3 moderating variables.

Test for structural invariance showed significant differences between sports and non-sports tourists ($\Delta\chi^2(7) = 38.51$; $p < 0.01$), across tourist nationalities ($\Delta\chi^2(14) = 63.82$; $p < 0.01$), and between low versus high attached tourists ($\Delta\chi^2(7) = 41.60$; $p < 0.01$).

Results shown in Table 5 and Fig. 3 reveal that **tourist motivation** moderated the impact of sports celebrity image on the country's image (**H2**) and of the country's image on both intention to revisit (**H5**) and intention to buy national products (**H6**). Specifically, the effect of sports celebrity image on the country's image was significantly stronger in the sports tourist group (0.54; $p < 0.05$) as compared to the non-sports tourist group (0.34; $p < 0.05$). Similarly, the influence of country image on intentions to buy national products was also stronger between sports (0.64 $p < 0.05$) than in the non-sports tourists' group

Table 4

Analysis of metric invariance for each moderating variable.

Moderating variable	N	χ^2 difference between constrain and freed measurement model (d.f.)	p-value
Travel Motivation			
Sports tourists	427	13.32 (10)	0.21
Non-sports tourists	511		
Nationality			
UK	308	29.42 (20)	0.08
France	355		
Germany	275		
Country attachment			
Low attached tourists	467	13.99 (10)	0.17
High attached tourists	471		
Total	938		

Table 5

Results of moderating effects and parameter estimates.

Relationship	Chi-Square Difference ($\Delta df = 1$)	Moderator variable		
		Sports tourists	Non-sports tourists	
H1: SC media activity $\rightarrow$ SCI	$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.52$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.87$ ($z = 9.39$)	$\beta = 0.71$ ($z = 7.97$)	
H2: SCI $\rightarrow$ CI	$\Delta\chi^2 = 8.01^c$	$\beta = 0.54$ ($z = 5.51$)	$\beta = 0.34$ ($z = 5.35$)	
H3: SCI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 0.03$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.38$ ($z = 3.75$)	$\beta = 0.16$ ($z = 2.87$)	
H4: SCI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.17$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.09$ ($z = 1.40$)	$\beta = 0.03$ ($z = 0.49$)	
H5: CI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 15.75^c$	$\beta = 0.06$ ($z = 0.80$)	$\beta = 0.39$ ($z = 6.40$)	
H6: CI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 6.14^b$	$\beta = 0.64$ ($z = 7.31$)	$\beta = 0.46$ ($z = 7.16$)	
H7: CL $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 2.26$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.10$ ($z = 1.40$)	$\beta = 0.22$ ($z = 4.48$)	
	Reference country: UK ^a	UK tourists	France tourists	Germany tourists
H1: SC media activity $\rightarrow$ SCI	$\Delta\chi^2_{UK-France} = 1.37$ (ns); $\Delta\chi^2_{UK-Germany} = 11.67^c$	$\beta = 0.83$ ($z = 8.65$)	$\beta = 0.71$ ($z = 6.23$)	$\beta = 0.68$ ($z = 7.61$)
H2: SCI $\rightarrow$ CI	$\Delta\chi^2 = 5.30^b$	$\beta = 0.53$ ($z = 5.12$)	$\beta = 0.35$ ($z = 4.81$)	$\beta = 0.45$ ($z = 3.93$)
H3: SCI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 0.01$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.35$ ($z = 3.53$)	$\beta = 0.16$ ($z = 2.48$)	$\beta = 0.29$ ($z = 2.94$)
H4: SCI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 1.60$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.19$ ($z = 2.42$)	$\beta = -0.04$ ($z = -0.69$)	$\beta = 0.08$ ($z = 1.19$)
H5: CI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 10.51^c$	$\beta = 0.09$ ($z = 1.23$)	$\beta = 0.38$ ($z = 5.01$)	$\beta = 0.21$ ($z = 2.13$)
H6: CI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 0.68$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.53$ ($z = 5.81$)	$\beta = 0.58$ ($z = 7.22$)	$\beta = 0.64$ ($z = 7.31$)
H7: CL $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 15.43^c$	$\beta = -0.04$ ($z = -0.83$)	$\beta = 0.32$ ($z = 6.26$)	$\beta = 0.58$ ($z = 7.75$)
		Low attached tourists	High attached tourists	
H1: SC media activity $\rightarrow$ SCI	$\Delta\chi^2 = 1.59$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.72$ ($z = 9.34$)	$\beta = 0.78$ ($z = 5.95$)	
H2: SCI $\rightarrow$ CI	$\Delta\chi^2 = 14.05^c$	$\beta = 0.21$ ($z = 3.04$)	$\beta = 0.43$ ($z = 4.91$)	
H3: SCI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 0.95$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.17$ ($z = 2.96$)	$\beta = 0.27$ ($z = 2.91$)	
H4: SCI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 5.17^b$	$\beta = -0.04$ ($z = -0.58$)	$\beta = 0.15$ ($z = 2.08$)	
H5: CI $\rightarrow$ CL	$\Delta\chi^2 = 15.64^c$	$\beta = 0.24$ ($z = 3.45$)	$\beta = -0.02$ ($z = -0.35$)	
H6: CI $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 0.01$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.48$ ($z = 5.79$)	$\beta = 0.41$ ($z = 7.76$)	
H7: CL $\rightarrow$ IB	$\Delta\chi^2 = 1.81$ (ns)	$\beta = 0.13$ ($z = 2.42$)	$\beta = -0.00$ ($z = 0.04$)	

SCI = Sports celebrity image; CI = Country image; CL = Country loyalty; IB = Intention to buy.

ns = not significant.

^a $p < 0.10$.

^a Unless otherwise indicated, chi-square comparisons refer to differences between the UK and France. Except for the specified case, there are no significant differences between the UK and Germany in any other relationship.

^b $p < 0.05$.

^c $p < 0.01$.

(0.46; $p < 0.05$). However, we found that the effect of country image on intention to visit the country was only significant for the non-sport sample (0.39; $p < 0.05$). This is a reasonable result as non-sports motivated tourists will revisit the country if they have a good country image, while sports tourists will be more influenced by sports celebrities' activities than the country's image.

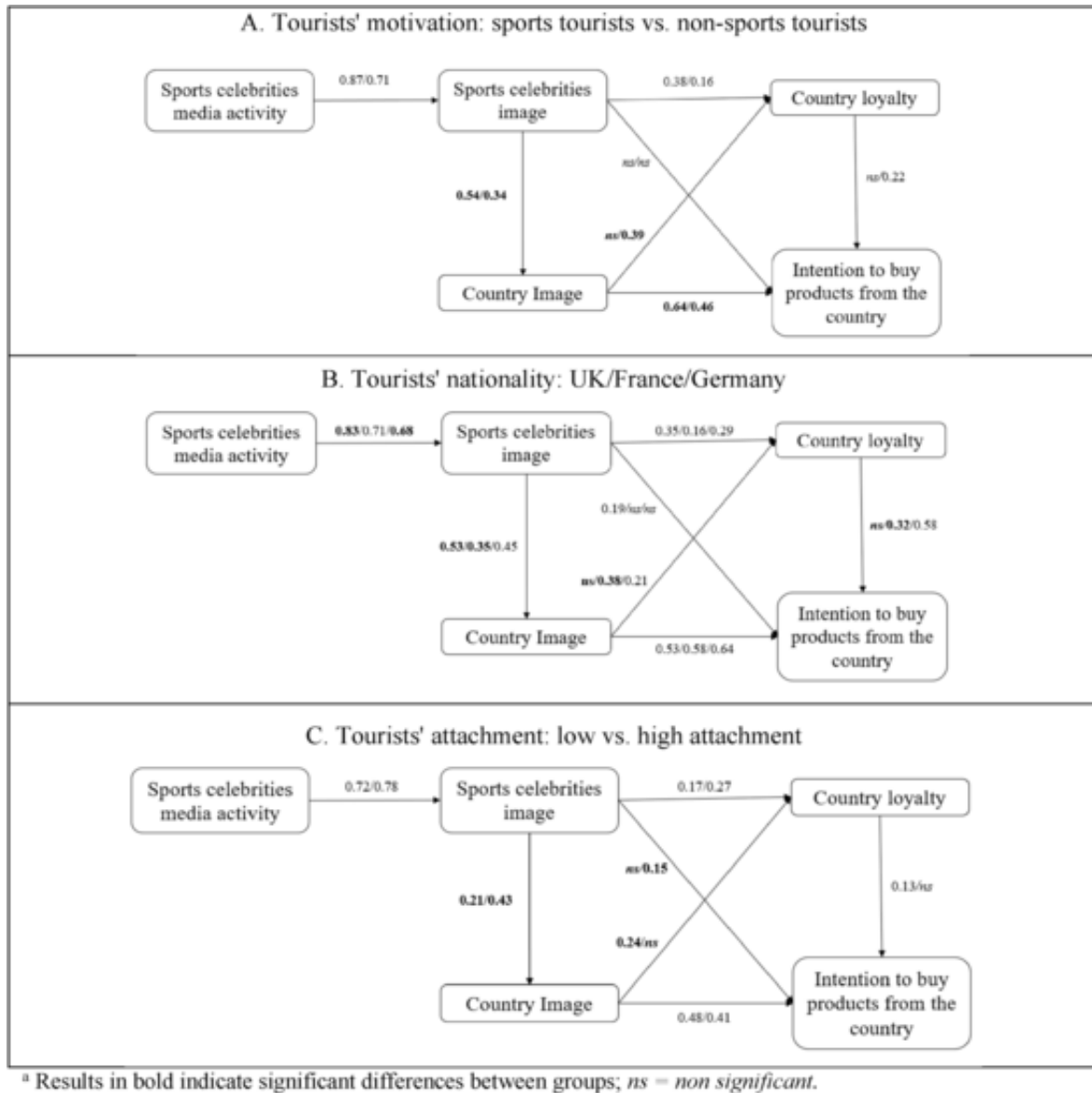


Fig. 3. Research model across the different groups of tourists^a

^a Results in bold indicate significant differences between groups; ns = non significant.

Regarding differences based on the **nationality of the tourists**, most differences were found between English and French tourists. The Germans only differ from the English in the effect of sports celebrity media activity on sports celebrity image (**H1**), which turns out to be significantly greater for the English (0.83, $p < 0.05$ as compared with 0.68, $p < 0.05$). Interestingly, although the influence of sports celebrity image on country image (**H2**) was found to be greater among the English than among either of the other two groups of tourists (0.53, $p < 0.05$ against 0.35, $p < 0.05$ or 0.45, $p < 0.05$ of French and German, respectively), the English was the only group for which having a positive image of the country did not translate in a greater intention to revisit the country (**H5**) (0.09, $p > 0.05$). Intention to revisit the country had only a significant influence on intention to buy national products in French (**H7**) (0.32, $p < 0.05$) and German (0.58, $p < 0.05$), but not among English (0.04, $p > 0.05$). Interestingly, and although the difference was not found to be significant, English are the only tourist group for which the sports celebrity image is significantly translated into a greater intention to buy products from the country (0.19,

$p < 0.05$ against 0.04 $p > 0.05$ and 0.08 $p > 0.05$ of French and German, respectively). In sum, although for all three groups, having a good image of the country increases purchase intention, it is clear that for the English, the image of sportsmen is especially relevant: it is for them that the media activity has the greatest effect, and it is the only one for whom the image of sportsmen translates into wanting to buy more things made in the country.

Finally, three significant differences were found when comparing **low versus high-attached tourists**. First, the relationship between sports celebrities' image and country image (**H2**) is bigger for high (0.43, $p < 0.05$) than for low (0.21, $p < 0.05$). Second, the relationship between sports celebrity image and intention to buy national products (**H4**) is only significant for highly attached tourists, 0.15, $p < 0.05$. On the contrary, the relationship between country image and intention to revisit (**H5**) is only significant for the low attached group (0.24, $p < 0.05$). These results suggest that the potential of sports celebrities to influence tourism is higher among highly attached

tourists. More general variables, such as country image, show a greater potential to influence low-attached tourists.

4. Discussion

Our research, derived from 938 real tourists from three different nationalities, showed the relevance of both media activities and the image of sports celebrities to enhance the perceived image of the country they represent and, in turn, tourists' intention to revisit the country and buy national products. We provide a comprehensive understanding of the responses of different groups of tourists based on their travel motivations, nationalities and attachment to the country, providing different ways of approaching distinct segments of tourists.

The first finding is that **sports celebrity media activities** significantly and positively influence all tourist groups' perceived image of sports celebrities. This result corroborates the usefulness of the Symbolic Communication Theory in understanding the importance of the media in constructing sports icons capable of symbolizing international success (Kim et al., 2018), confirming the importance of investing in communication in the sports industry. This positive influence is more powerful for English tourists than German ones. To our knowledge, this result is the first to provide empirical evidence about the potential impact of celebrities' media activities on tourists' behaviour, also giving solid reasons for managers to pay attention to such media activities, notably in the British market.

Also, the **perceived image of national sports celebrities** was found to have three significant effects. First, it helps to improve the destination image among all groups of tourists. This result corroborates the usefulness of the Image Transfer Theory (Gwinner, 1997) in understanding the image transfer process from a person (sports celebrity) to a country (Spain). That is, the attributes recognized in an admired person competing for a country will increase the country's attractiveness as a tourist destination. Still, this link between sports celebrities' image and destination image differs in strength between all the moderating variables considered, being one of the most variable relationships found in the model. Results showed that sports celebrity image could improve Spain's brand, mainly (i) among those who travel for sports motives, (ii) from England and (iii) those highly attached to Spain. So, in this scene, the Image Transfer Theory is given more prominence.

Second, a **sports celebrity image** helps to improve tourists' intention to revisit the country for all groups of tourists without differences between them. Third, a sports celebrity image also improves tourists' intention to buy national products among (i) English and (ii) highly attached tourists. So, our results support Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour, as celebrities' perceptions (images) precede intentions, confirming previous studies' results (Hwang et al., 2020). However, this theory works better in the case of English tourists and among those highly attached to Spain. Thanks to the improvement in celebrities' image, those buying more products from Spain will be tourists from England. Also, when a tourist is highly attached to the country, its destination image is no longer a relevant factor in explaining the intention to return to the country. Still, it is relevant to buy its products. So, although Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour explains the intention to buy products from Spain well, the other attitude (intention to visit) is not properly explained, as far as celebrity image does not augment the "intention to visit" in all the scenarios considered.

In addition, the **perceived image of the country** was also found to have two positive influences. On the one hand, an optimum country image will augment tourists' intention to revisit the country. In this case, Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour explains the intention to visit Spain well, while the other attitude (intention to buy) is not properly explained, as far as the country image does not augment the "intention to buy" in all the scenarios considered. This relationship between country image and intention to visit is more decisive for (i) non-sports travellers, (ii) French and (iii) low-attached tourists. On the contrary,

this relationship was found to be non-significant for (i) sports-motivated travellers, (ii) English, and (iii) highly attached tourists. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour does not work in this scenario.

Our results seem to suggest something interesting about the differences among the two groups of tourists identified. In the first group of tourists (non-sports travellers, French and low attached), revisiting intention is linked to a country's image, while in the second group (sports-motivated travellers, English and highly attached) it is related to sports celebrities' images. Regarding the intention to buy products from the country, an optimum country image will improve tourists' intention to buy national products for all groups of tourists. Here, just one difference was found among sports-motivated and non-sports-motivated tourists, the former showing a more substantial influence of country branding in buying intentions. Sports tourists are more sensitive to the activities and achievements of celebrities and less to the destination's image. Thus, if the image of the destination improves, the effects of this improvement will be consequently lower among sports tourists.

In sum, the incidence of Spanish country image is higher among non-sports travellers. This is probably because the incidence of sports celebrity image is not so relevant for this segment. On the contrary, celebrities' image is more relevant for sports travellers. The same explanation could be valid when Spain's attachment is considered. For low-attached tourists, the incidence of Spanish country image is higher because this segment of tourists (not very attached to Spain) is not very familiar with its sports celebrities either, so the factor that most influences their behaviour is the image of the country directly, and not that of its celebrities. Lastly, regarding the cultural factor, the incidence of celebrity image is stronger among the British sample because they follow more of our sporting achievements and less the country itself, given its Anglo-Saxon culture. On the contrary, for the French sample, the direct incidence of Spanish country image is stronger because the geographical proximity between the two neighbouring countries (Spain and France) means that the French public is more familiar with Spanish culture, which is akin to the Latin tradition.

Finally, although the relationship between the intention to revisit the country and to buy national products was found to differ only according to tourists' nationality significantly, results still show a pattern of very different responses: this positive effect was found significant only among (i) non-sports; (ii) French, German and (iii) low attached tourists, being insignificant for the other tourists' groups.

5. Theoretical implications

As in Kim et al. (2018) work, our study offers a significant theoretical contribution as it has probed the effectiveness of sports celebrity endorsement on destination image, destination loyalty, and destination products' buying intention. The Meaning Transfer Model (Um & Lee, 2015) has been probed in the global sample and in some scenarios, showing the perceived ability of a sports celebrity to transfer their symbolic meaning to the endorsed brand: Spain.

Second, motivation theories support the study of decision-making by tourists, which may be inferred from the evolution of decision theory (Mansfeld, 1992). In this vein, our results have confirmed that consumers' perceptions and behaviours are linked to motives. Sports-motivated and non-sports-motivated travellers have exhibited differences in some of the proposed relationships. There is an information asymmetry among tourists according to their travel motivations (Matiza, 2022) that may explain their differences. Sports travellers are more likely to be affected by the image of a sports celebrity, while non-sports travellers are more likely to be affected by the image of Spain as a destination.

Third, regarding cultural relativity in perceptions, as stated in the theories of Hofstede (2001) and Hall (1990), our results reiterate that perceptions are not universally shared. For example, tourists from

France, the UK, and Germany interpret the image of a Spanish sports celebrity in diverse ways, reflecting their unique socio-cultural lenses. This cultural relativity highlights the complexity of international marketing and the importance of nuanced, culturally sensitive strategies. The British market is more susceptible to the image of Spanish sports celebrities. In contrast, the French market is more susceptible to the country brand Spain, given its Latin origin and geographical proximity.

Lastly, and in line with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, we have also probed that brand attachment can also be helpful in better understanding consumers' behaviours. Generally, the attached tourist segment (who feels a strong personal connection to Spain) is more susceptible to the image of Spanish sports celebrities. In contrast, the non-attached tourist market is more sensitive to the country brand Spain, showing a higher revisiting intention. This suggests that, for attached tourists, sports celebrities may embody the culture and values of the country, so following these celebrities can provide these tourists with a deeper connection to the local culture and traditions. On the other hand, for non-attached tourists the image of the country as socially and economically developed, with higher standard of experiences and goods, may be a more important aspect in their intentions and decisions, as they do not have a special attachment that makes them value other cultural aspects of the country, such as its sports industry.

6. Managerial implications

6.1. Private sector implications

The usefulness of sports celebrity endorsement in the tourism industry has been confirmed in the present study. The efficacy of sports celebrities has also been confirmed in the field of private brands. For example, the collaboration between Nike and Jordan was so productive that Nike launched the brand variant Air Jordan line of sports shoes (Um & Lee, 2015). In this scene, the first managerial implication is recommending sports celebrities pay attention to their media activities (in traditional and new media) to improve their image. It is not enough to be a good athlete; you must also look like one. Therefore, sports celebrities should not neglect their communication to improve their cache in the brand sponsorship industry (in this case, endorsing destinations).

6.2. Policy implications

Second, if the objective is to improve the Spanish destination image, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) invest in communication using sports celebrities as the campaign's backbone. Their power in shaping the country's brand has been proven. Celebrities work to endorse brands because there exists the so-called "wannabe effect" (Um & Lee, 2015). The focus of a country's communication campaign remarketing its celebrities' achievements will work better among (i) those who travel for sports motives, (ii) those from England and (iii) those who are highly attached to Spain. This target should be a prime consideration when using sports to position Spain as a tourism destination. Therefore, in the choice of media and communication supports, the habits of this type of tourist should be observed, as they are the most likely to be seduced by the sports celebrities of the country to be promoted.

Third, public institutions can use two ways if the objective is to augment Spain's revisiting intention. On one side, take advantage of sports celebrities with an optimum image. In this case, different communication campaigns focused on sports celebrities' achievements could be used by public administrators for all kinds of tourists (sports-motivated

and non-sports motivated; from England, France or Germany and highly attached to Spain and lowly attached to Spain). Remember that, for individualistic cultures (such as Germany), consumers view celebrities as exceptional individuals who have succeeded in their respective fields, and the message must be explicit and direct. On the contrary, British tourists appreciate more emotional messages, while the French sample is situated in the middle (Böhm et al., 2023).

On the other hand, another way to augment revisiting intention is to invest directly in country branding. Particularly, DMOs will need to remark on country image attributes when focusing on tourists less involved in the Spanish sports industry: (i) non-sports tourists, (ii) French and (iii) low-attached travellers. Their intention to revisit the country is more linked to a country's image than sports celebrities. On the contrary, sports celebrities' branding should be remarked on when attending: (i) sports-motivated travellers, (ii) English speakers, and (iii) highly attached tourists. This pattern of results seems to suggest something interesting about the differences among these groups of tourists.

Fourth, if the intention is to sell more products from a country, using sports celebrities to endorse a country's branding is a good choice for DMOs. The prime target should include British tourists and tourists attached to Spain. Consequently, Spanish sports celebrities could ask for better economic conditions to endorse brands in the British market or to tourists who have visited Spain in the past (attached travellers) in loyalty campaigns. DMOs may need to link sports celebrities and the country's image more clearly for other tourists.

Our results have confirmed that sports celebrities represent a pillar of the sports strategy and, therefore, of country branding (Chanavat, 2017). In this study, we have confirmed this usefulness, but only in the scenario of country branding. A perfect match-up between a sports celebrity and a country will be crucial to explain the success of celebrity endorsement, serving as a mediating variable (Um & Lee, 2015).

7. Future lines and limitations

Our research has some limitations that may motivate opportunities for new research. First, we focused on the general media activities of sports celebrities as our main antecedent. Further research may focus only on digital media activity by specifically analyzing social media activities, as in this context, the interactivity and connection between celebrities and followers are intensified. Future research could analyze the power of eSports in place branding, mainly among young fans and millennials (Chanavat, 2017). Also, although this paper has focused on how to promote the Spain brand among tourists based on celebrities, the study of resident well-being is still a pending issue in the literature (Tang & Wang, 2021).

Uncited references

Bowlby, 1979; Chen, 2018; Monaco, 1978; Patel et al., 2013; UNWTO, 2023; Vila-Lopez et al., 2022. DELETE THESE REFERENCES

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Natalia Vila- López: Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Ines Kuster-Boluda:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Isabel Pascual-Riquelme:** Visualization, Validation, Software, Formal analysis. **Cristina Aragonés-Jericó:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Investigation.

Appendix.

Sample description

Demographic variable	Whole sample (N = 938)	Tourist motivation			Tourist nationality				Tourist attachment		
		Sports tourists (n = 427)	Non-sports tourists (n = 511)	χ^2	English (n = 308)	French (n = 355)	German (n = 275)	χ^2	Low attached (n = 467)	High attached (n = 471)	χ^2
Gender											
Male	55.2	61.4	50.1	11.9*	54.9	56.3	54.2	0.32	57.2	53.3	1.43
Female	44.8	38.6	49.9		45.1	43.7	45.8	(ns)	42.8	46.7	(ns)
Age											
<35	35.6	41.9	30.3	21.8*	36.0	37.5	32.7	3.18	39	32.3	7.19*
35–54	41.9	41.7	42.1		43.8	40.0	42.2	(ns)	37.7	46.1	
>54	22.5	16.4	27.6		20.1	22.5	25.1		23.3	21.7	
Education											
Elementary	9.1	6.6	11.2	49.1*	19.5	3.7	4.4	95.9*	9	9.1	8.84*
Professional	36.6	26.7	44.8		25.3	34.1	52.4		38.1	35	
Bachelor's degree	28.6	34	24.1		29.9	31.5	23.3		24.4	32.7	
University degree	25.8	32.8	20		25.3	30.7	20.0		28.5	23.1	

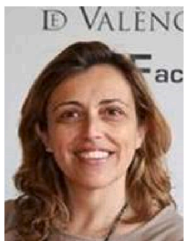
ns = not significant.

*p < 0.05.

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