



Sports ambassadors and destination image: a fuzzy set analysis

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Structured abstract

Objectives

This paper aims to identify different combinations of causal conditions (celebrity attributes) that explain our outcome: destination image. More specifically, three main research questions guide our work: (a) Which attributes should an outstanding sportsperson have to enhance the image of his/her country as a destination image? (b) Are these the same for different product categories? (iii) Do tourists and residents differ?

Method

To this end, fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) was used with a sample of 187 participants (105 tourists and 82 residents).

Results

Results show that some attributes of a sports celebrity are more critical than others in enhancing destination image. Those attributes of sports celebrities appearing in the intermediate and parsimonious analysis should be prioritized. This is the case of trustworthiness. Second, experience is a peripheral requirement (only appeared in the intermediate analysis). Third, attractiveness is unnecessary and an even and undesired attribute in many solutions. Fourth, when comparing tourists and residents, both groups value the role of football players, while residents also appreciate the role of marathon runners. Tennis players are the less relevant sports celebrities to build Spain's destination image.

Added value

First, a new statistical analysis in the marketing discipline, QCA, has been used. The use of qualitative approaches to investigate destination images has been scarce. Second, the study of the role of sports celebrity endorsement on brand-place attachment has yet to be investigated. Third, studies about the role of residents in the image of a tourism destination/city are scarce. Tourists and residents must be investigated because they can benefit from sports celebrities' activities.

Keywords

Qualitative Comparative Analysis, fuzzy set, destination image, sports celebrities, expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness.

Introduction

Studying those factors related to the sports industry's ability to affect the image of a country's destination is a complex reality. It is a new point not researched since now, and it represents a promising topic, as destination managers can leverage the achievements of sport to promote a particular tourist destination. More specifically, this research focuses on sports celebrities because they possess a strong level of recognition that influences customers' perception toward the endorsed brand (country in or study) and alters their attitudes and future behaviours (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021). Fans judge their favourite celebrity player "based on their different attributes such as celebrity credibility, likability, trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise level" (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021, p. 341). In this frame, this work aims to identify different combinations of causal conditions (celebrity attributes) that explain our outcome: destination image. This will permit DMOs (destination marketing organizations) to discover consistent configurations of variables from the sports industry (its outstanding sports ambassadors) capable of improving destination image. So, different alternative paths will be identified to understand the same construct (Kraus, Ribeiro-Soriano and Schüssler, 2018).

To this end, **fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA)** was used because this methodology permits the detection of relevant configurations of different variables that guarantee high performance in the outcome condition (Ragin, 2000; Pappas and Woodside, 2021). Its use in the tourism industry has been intensively recommended recently (Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019) because it permits obtaining a holistic impression of the phenomena to be explained: destination image in the present study.

The added value of this proposal can be summarized in the following points. First, compared to previous works, this paper adds value because a new statistical analysis in the marketing discipline, QCA, has been used. Given that the theory of country image antecedents from the sports industry is relatively new, QCA permits a closer link to a novel theory than traditional marketing research methods (Ragin, 1994). Since then, few studies have examined either the role of brand equity or celebrity endorsement in destination tourism (Kim, Choe and Petrick, 2018) because the use of this tool in the tourism industry is scarce (Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019). This tool permits the obtaining of different solutions to reach the output because the starting point is that, in reality, no one simple or one complex statement of an independent variable (X) is necessary for high values of a dependent variable (Y) (Woodside, 2013). The use of qualitative approaches to investigate destination images has been scarce. In the bibliometric revision of Pike (2002), less than half of the papers (63) reported using qualitative methods involving consumers at any research stage.

Second, although the study of the role of celebrity endorsement on brand-place attachment has been investigated (Chen, 2018), its application in the field of the sports industry to enhance the brand of place as a destination image is something new. Thus, a holistic view showing the link between a brand and the multidimensionality of celebrity attributes used in endorsements is missing in previous works (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021), and this represents a promising line of research as far as competitiveness in the tourism industry is increasing, and destinations need to offer new and exciting competitive advantages.

Third, few studies have attended to the role of residents in the image of a tourism destination/city (Stylidis, 2020; Tang and Wang, 2021). When promoting a destination brand, the impact of admired sports celebrities competing on behalf of the destination will attract more tourists to choose the destination (Hameed, Madhavan and Arumugam, 2020) while making its residents want to live in the country and perceive a higher quality of life. So, both groups, tourists and residents, need to be investigated because they can benefit from sports celebrities' activities. In terms of Madhavan and Arumugam (2020), both low and high-involved consumers can be affected by the link between a sports celebrity and a country, and a holistic approach must be followed.

Theoretical framework

On one side, when talking about tourism, the country of origin concept has advanced into that of destination image, early defined by Crompton (1979) as "the set of beliefs and impressions that a person forms towards a tourist destination" (p. 18). In most of the studies, the interchangeable use of "place image" and "destination image" is appreciated (Stylidis, 2020). As the bibliometric analysis of Pike, S. (2002) based on 142 papers concludes, the most popular destination was countries, which were analyzed in 56 papers. For this reason, country and destination images have often been used interchangeably. Most researchers define perceived destination image "as a tourist's overall perception or a comprehensive set of emotions, prejudices, imaginations, and impressions that a person has of a destination" (Gorji, Garcia and Mercadé-Melé, (2023, p. 101062).

On the other hand, the role of celebrities in explaining a country's image has been intensely investigated since 1997 (Authors, 2023). However, a relatively new point that needs further research in the tourism industry is the link between a celebrity and a destination image. Kim, Choe and Petrick (2018) focused their study on a literary festival, concluding that celebrity endorsements can strongly influence destination brand and festival community attachment. That's because, as the Image Transfer Theory (Gwinner, 1997) supports, if the tourist/resident has a favourable image towards a brand associated with a tourist destination, the image of that destination will be favoured due to the existence of a halo effect that allows the brand image to be transferred to the linked destination. The link between a celebrity and place attachment to promote a destination image has also been deeply investigated in the film industry (Chen, 2018, Zhou, Xiong, Li, Liu, Wang and Ryan, 2023). As this stream of research concludes, film celebrities play a significant role in tourists' destination choices.

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 "has the power to direct fans' attention towards the endorsed brand, create a positive brand image" (Dikčius and Ilciukiene, 2021, p. 342). Following, once again, the Image Transfer Theory (Gwinner, 1997), it's expected that the attributes recognized in a sportsperson competing for a country will be transferred to the country they represent. If the attributes identified in athletes are positive and admired, the image of the country they compete for will be favoured, increasing its 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.

There are many attributes in athletes, so the most relevant ones should be chosen to enhance the image transfer from a celebrity to a country. Attributes can be classified into three main blocks: expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness (Kim, Choe and Petrick, 2018). So, if a sportsperson is perceived as an expert, credible and attractive, it's expected that the image of the country they compete for will be improved. As the Brand Image Transfer Theory summarizes, the transfer of brand image is a transfer process from a sports celebrity brand image to the endorsed brand image when both (the endorser and the brand) share similar association sets. However, as the Balance Theory indicates, some attributes can be used together, but finding a balanced combination to correctly brand the country the sports celebrities represent (Chang and Cheng, 2014). A different balance should be recommended for stars competing in various sports categories. For example, if the athlete competes in group sports categories, attributes such as team spirit or leadership should be prioritized. On the contrary, if they compete individually, other attributes such as competitiveness should be chosen to support the image transfer from the person to the country. (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021, p. 342). Therefore, differences are expected between celebrities competing in different sporting categories in attribute ratings. In this frame, the first research question is:

RQ1: (a) Which attributes should an outstanding sportsperson have to enhance the image of their country as a destination image? (b) Are these the same for different sports categories?

Even more, the improvement of a country's image as a tourism destination will occur both among potential tourists and among residents. On the one hand, tourists are potential candidates for visiting a place. On the other hand, successful sportsmen and women from a country help their residents to believe more in the country, its good progress, and national pride (Kim and Morrison, 2005). Also, residents often act as "tourists" in their city, visiting attractions and events or accompanying their friends and relatives on their visits, usually spending relevant amounts of money (Stylidis, 2020). Residents act as destination ambassadors and can also influence tourists' image of a particular place. So, domestic and international sports fans are critical in building a destination image. Nationality (domestic versus foreign) can directly influence or mediate the perceived image of a tourism destination (Kim and Morrison, 2005). For all these reasons, sports celebrities are essential to enhance the image of a country from the perspective of tourists and the perspective of residents, but in a different way. So, the question that emerges is:

RQ2: Do tourists and residents differ in the attributes required of a sportsperson to enhance the destination image of their country?

Methodology

Sample

As Ragin (2009) explains, conventional methods use either given (i.e., taken for granted) populations or samples derived from such people, being frequent the use of national random samples. Given that the present research is interested in "qualitative outcomes", "given" populations may be hazardous, so using a given population is less critical (Ragin, 2009). Then, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared in Spanish and English for a multicultural sample using convenience sampling. Youth respondents were interviewed because they represent the most extensive fan base of sports consumption, as previous literature has demonstrated (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021). A final sample of 187

respondents was reached. They were divided into two groups: tourists worldwide (105) and residents (82).

The advantage of Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) is that quantitative data can be analyzed from a qualitative approach. So, compared to traditional methods, there is no impact linked to (i) omitting important variables, (ii) outliers and (iii) missing observations (Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019). As Styliadis (2020) explains, qualitative tools (such as in-depth interviews, ethnography and focus groups) can be used to collect the data, but also quantitative tools (questionnaires).

The profile of our sample is as follows: there were more female respondents (24, 70%) than male respondents (55, 30%). Regarding age, 59,8% of the sample was 25 years of age or less and 14,7% were between 26 and 35. Respondents were highly educated: 161 (86%) of respondents had a bachelor's degree or above, whereas just 23 (13%) had only finished junior high school, and 3 (1%) persons had not studied. They spend 2,97 hours per week watching sports and 4,9 hours per week practising sports.

Statistical tool

The Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA) tool was chosen for the following reasons. First, it was initially created "to research designs involving small and intermediate-size samples (e.g., 5-50)" (Ragin, 1994. P. 4), (i.e. between 7 and 15 experience information providers). However, the method has evolved to research using survey data and more extensive samples (Roig-Tierno, Gonzalez-Cruz and Llopis-Martinez, 2017). So, qualitative outcomes can be derived from quantitative information.

Second, this tool is based on sets of relationships among variables (different solutions) to understand the same outcome. Then, from this approach, the outcome (image destination) can be explained through different paths.

Third, this tool is based on Boolean logic, assembling quantitative and qualitative methods. So, it presents an alternative to traditional correlation methods used to explain causal relationships between a dependent variable and one (or more) independent ones. Given that different sets of relationships among the suggested variables can explain the same outcome, this is a perfect tool due to its equifinality (Roig-Tierno, Gonzalez-Cruz and Llopis-Martinez, 2017). More than one solution is permitted to explain the desired outcome because several alternatives lead to the same end (country image-brand in our proposal). The starting point is the identification of necessary condition/s (variable/s that need to be present to explain the outcome in all the solutions) and sufficient condition/s (variable/s that are sufficient on their own to explain the outcome).

More specifically, fuzzy-set QCA (fsQCA) was applied in this study because it has more advantages in social sciences than its precedent: crisp-set (csQCA), which is used more simplistically. Fuzzy-set QCA allows for the transformation of qualitative information to quantitative values while maintaining original differences (Pappas and Woodside, 2021), that is, in a gradual scale (from 0,0 to 1.0) and not just in dichotomous values (full membership "1.0", versus full non-membership "0.0") (Ragin, 2000). In fuzz-set QCA, the memberships are gradually understood, while csQCA works with categorical memberships. Maybe for this reason, the use of this tool in business and management research has been increasing in the last few years (Kraus, Ribeiro-Soriano and Schüssler, 2018).

In this method, the link between the antecedents (celebrity attributes) and the outcome (destination image) is not based on correlations; on the contrary, appropriate (set-theoretic) tools are used (Ragin, 2009), as far as multiple combinations of factors (sets of solutions) can explain the same outcome. Compared to traditional methods, fuzzy-set QCA does not presume that casual conditions are independent or affect the outcome variable in an additive and linear way (Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019). As the authors detail, QCA is designed as a set of theoretical approaches.

Conditions selection (variables included in the questionnaire)

Explaining variables: previous literature was followed to choose the relevant conditions initially proposed to explain our outcome (destination-country image). The explaining variables were 15 attributes linked to sports celebrities (Annexe 1). They were grouped into **three factors** (Ohanian, 1990): **attractiveness** (attractive, classy, beautiful, elegant, sexy), **trustworthiness** (dependable, honest, reliable, sincere, trustworthy) and **expertise** (expert, experienced, knowledgeable, qualified, skilled). Given that **four sports categories** were analyzed (general, football, tennis and marathon), a total of **12 conditions (4x3)** were considered in our study. The decision to study all-around athletes and three types of athletes (footballers, tennis players, and runners) is based on the popularity of these three sports categories in Spain, which shows differences in the sport and athlete remuneration. Also, football is a collective sport, a marathon is an individual one, and tennis can be both.

Outcome variable: destination image. The destination chosen was Spain because this country is recurrently placed in the top three tourist destinations in the world (UNWTO, 2023), so the conclusions can be interesting for DMOs promoting this country's brand. One item proposed by Bigné, Sánchez and Sánchez (2001) was used to measure the destination image. Responses ranged from highly unfavourable (1) to highly favourable (5). Although other multi-item scales have been used in the past, this study focuses on this proposal because, as the authors defend, the image has been described as an overall impression and more significant than the sum of its parts. Also, as in their study, this work aims to analyze the inter-relationships among destination image and other antecedents, not an in-depth analysis of the construct. Brown and Ragsdale (2002) used hotels' brand equity as an outcome variable in the tourism industry, similar to this study's (tourist destination brand) outcome variable.

Non-specific sports celebrities were suggested to collect the data. Respondents provided the information thinking in generic terms in Spanish sports celebrities, football players, tennis players and runners. They finally indicate their perception of Spain as a tourism destination.

Asymmetry of the variables

This tool is recommended when the relationships between the variables are asymmetric (Kraus, Ribeiro-Soriano and Schüssler, 2018), and regression analysis based on correlations is not recommended. That is, the variables in our proposal do not compete. A variable with a low correlation may be helping the condition (outcome) to occur. In QCA, there are different solutions to the same problem. We look for asymmetry. We are not interested in a high correlation between pairs of variables.

Recodification of the variables: calibration

Calibration is the first step of the fsQCA analysis. In this stage, the values of 12 variables are operationalized as membership scores within predefined sets following a direct calibration method (Ragin, 2008) based on Martínez-Cháfer, Molina-Morales and Roig-Tierno (2023). (2023). This method indicates whether a condition is entirely in or out of the set and the point of maximum ambiguity. fsQCA 3.0 was the software used for the calibration (Ragin & Davey, 2014).

The truth table

As Kraus, Ribeiro-Soriano and Schüssler (2018) detail, the fuzzy-set scores obtained in the calibration process were used as an input to construct a data matrix as a truth table with 2^k rows to operate the Boolean algebra. This table examines the impact of each cause (variable) in all logical contexts, 2^k being the configurations of conditions and k representing the number of causal conditions (variables).

The truth table was recalculated based on the consistency and coverage (frequency) of the starting conditions. Thus, only solutions with a consistency greater than 0.8 were retained. In addition, they were required to be supported by at least one case (participant).

The truth table includes "the reasonably feasible amalgamations of causal solutions (analogous to net effect in symmetric modelling) and the outcome (analogous to dependent variable in symmetric modelling) related to each amalgamation" (Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019, p. 298)

Results

The results show different patterns of association to explain how to improve Spain's brand as a tourist destination. Concretely, the patterns include various combinations of attributes required in a sports celebrity. Therefore, these results show that the tool used is equifinality: different sets of interrelated variables can lead to the same end. So, the results will show sets of conditions (factors) capable of producing an outcome (destination image) rather than focusing on single effects of individual variables.

Principal Component Analysis of the Conditions

Before applying the software, two steps were followed. First, we looked for a Cronbach alpha greater than 0.6 between the items used to measure each condition (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). Second, the items measuring the same concept were grouped with a principal components factor analysis to identify the initial conditions proposed by previous literature (Ohanian, 1990), which were confirmed. Therefore, the mean of the items included in each factor/condition was calculated. As a result, the following 12 starting conditions (explaining variables) with an appropriate α Cronbach were used in our study (annexe 1):

General athletes:

- 1) attractive sportspeople (α Cronbach =0.847)
- 2) sportspeople trustworthiness (α Cronbach =0.875)
- 3) expert sportspeople (α Cronbach =0.723)

Football players:

- 4) attractive football players (α Cronbach =0.911)
- 5) football players' trustworthiness (α Cronbach =0.942)
- 6) expert football players (α Cronbach =0.853)

Marathon runners

- 1) attractive marathon runners (α Cronbach =0.857)
- 2) marathon runners' trustworthiness (α Cronbach =0.943)
- 3) expert marathon runners (α Cronbach =0.826)

Tennis players

- 4) attractive tennis players (α Cronbach =0.900)
- 5) tennis players' trustworthiness (α Cronbach =0.877)
- 6) expert tennis players (α Cronbach =0.826),

Asymmetry of the conditions

The condition-variable correlations were tested to be below 0.7 (Woodside, 2013). This author explains that reality can be explained by multiple conditions "that lead to high values in an outcome condition (i.e., high values in a dependent variable)". Thus, reality usually indicates that any insightful combination of conditions has an asymmetrical relationship with an outcome condition and not a symmetrical relationship" (p. 464) (Annexe 2)

Conditions calibration

In this study, the calibration (gradually recodifying the values obtained in a questionnaire between 1 and 0) was done following Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus (2019). To transform Likert scores into fuzzy-set membership scores, variables are calibrated for their degree of membership in sets of cases to produce scores ranging from 0.00 = full non-membership to 1.00 = full membership in which 0.5 represents the crossover point and highest ambiguity (Kraus, Ribeiro-Soriano and Schüssler, 2018).

To specify the referred breakpoints, theoretical foundations were used, and following Chang and Cheng (2014), the calibration consisted of matching Likert-type scales with fuzzy-set membership scores. Our study used a Likert scale of 5 points (crisp values between 1 and 5). These values were calibrated into fuzzy sets ranging from "strongly agree=5" (full membership) for value "0.95", "agree=4" for value "0.8" (0.8), "neutral=3" (crossover point) for value "0.50", "disagree=2" for value "0.19", and "strongly disagree=1" (full non-membership) for value "0.04" (see Valaei, Rezaei and Okumus, 2019). All conditions (factors) were calibrated to the same standard using the macro prepared by Roig-Tierno, Gonzalez-Cruz and Llopis-Martinez (2017).

Sufficient and Necessary conditions

Necessary conditions were identified. The result cannot occur in its absence. So, this variable needs to be present in all the solutions. Conditions (factors) whose consistency was higher than 0.9 were included in the next step. Eight necessary conditions were identified in this study, which are the same for the global sample, for the tourists sub-sample and for the residents sub-sample: (i) TrustGlobal, (ii) ExpertGlobal, (iii) ExpertFootball, (iv) TrustFootball, (v) TrustMarathon, (vi) ExpertMarathon, (vii) TrustTennis, (viii) ExpertTennis (Annexe 3).

Sufficient conditions are absent in this study. A sufficient condition guarantees the result without the need for others. It does not need to be present, but if it is present, it alone explains the outcome sufficiently well. Sufficient conditions are those with a consistency higher than 0,75 but lower than 0,9. In our study, given that trust and expertise go hand in hand, sufficient conditions do not exist, and more conditions are needed. A sportsperson, football player, marathon runner, and tennis player needs to be an expert but also trustworthy.

Truth table: RQ1-RQ2

The standardized solutions of the Truth Table led us to group potential solutions capable of explaining the outcome. Only consistent solutions with appropriate consistency and coverage were retained. Both indicators mean the following:

1. **Consistency of a solution:** the degree of correctness of the solution. Roughly equivalent to the R2 in regression analysis (Woodside, 2013). It measures how much of the model is explained by this solution. It must be greater than 0.8 (or at least 0.75), although the threshold of 0.75 will lead to accepting a sufficient condition to explain the outcome (Roig-Tierno, Gonzalez-Cruz and Llopis-Martinez, 2017). In our study, the consistency is always bigger than 0,9.
2. **Coverage of a solution:** this index measures how many subjects support (cover) this solution. It is analogous to the "coefficient of determination" (Woodside, 2013). It depends on the number of respondents. If the number of respondents is lower, the overlap between them increases. A solution (a particular configuration of variables) can have low coverage but be able to explain an outcome (Woodside and Zhang, 2012). A low degree of coverage indicates several paths (combinations of conditions) to the same outcome (Ragin, 2009). In this study, given the enormous size of the sample for a qualitative study, the coverage is also very satisfactory.

The combinations of sports celebrities' attributes that were helpful in consistency and coverage were thus identified. As Table 1 shows, different combinations of conditions (celebrity attributes) can explain Spain's destination image. The parsimonious and intermediate solutions were analyzed based on previous literature (Castañeda-García, Sabiote-Ortiz, Vena-Oya and Epstein, 2023). The parsimonious solution minimizes the combinations of conditions, assuming that all files without empirical cases produce logical results. That is, logical remnants (solutions without cases to support them) are put in. In the intermediate solution, only some logical remainders are included (at the researcher's choice).

Table 2 shows, based on the parsimonious analysis: (i) 2 solutions/ways to improve destination image for the global sample, (ii) 2 solutions for tourists, (iii) and 2 solutions for residents. Regarding the intermediate analysis, table 1 shows: (i) 7 solutions/ways to improve destination image for the global sample, (ii) 4 for tourists and (iii) 6 for residents.

To respond to RQ1, Table 2 summarizes some sports celebrity attributes that should be present to improve a destination image. In the general sample, it is observed that:

- First, the **core attributes** (those that appear in the parsimonious and intermediate solution) in the global sample curiously concern the **truthfulness** of the sports celebrities associated with particular esports categories (**football and marathon**); and also is a core attribute to have **expert football** players. So, to improve the image of Spain, it is essential to have **complete football players** (trustworthy and expert) and trustful marathon runners. Tennis players and other general sports celebrities seem less critical in creating Spain's destination image.
- Second, the **peripheral attributes** (those that appear only in the intermediate solution) concern the **experience** of general sports competitors, marathon runners and tennis players and the **truthfulness** of general sports competitors, tennis players and marathon runners.
- Third, **attractiveness is not essential (neither for general sports celebrities nor for marathon runners, tennis and football players). It can even be an undesired attribute because some solutions do not recommend attractiveness.**
- Fourth, the recommended attributes to enhance the image of Spain are not the same for footballers, tennis players and runners (Table 3): (i) football players are the most relevant ones to determine Spain's destination image; (ii) trustworthiness goes before experience in all the cases except for football players, where trustworthiness and experience go hand to hand (iii) attractiveness is not a necessary condition, even more, many times is an undesired solution.

In sum, some attributes of a sports celebrity are more critical than others in enhancing destination image (see Table 3).

To respond to RQ2, the results from the global sample, the residents' sample, and the tourists' sample have been compared. As Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3 show, three main differences have been found:

- First, for **tourists**, the most relevant sports celebrities to create a good destination image are **football players** (expert and truthful). At the same time, **residents** also appreciate the role of **marathon runners** (expert and truthful), who are poorly known abroad.
- Second, **tennis players are the less relevant** agents for tourists and residents in creating a destination image.
- Third, for tourists, the attractiveness of the global sports competitors is undesired in 50% of the solutions. On the contrary, **residents** appreciate the **attractiveness** of **general sports** competitors;
- Fourth, **residents** do **not** always appreciate tennis players' attractiveness (this is an undesired attribute in one solution). On the contrary, **tourists** value **tennis players' attractiveness**.

In sum, differences in destination image drivers' were found between residents and tourists, in line with previous empirical studies' results (Kim and Morrisson 2005).

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

This paper achieves its primary objective by highlighting the importance of several sports' celebrity attributes representing a country brand in explaining how the brand image

transfers to consumers (tourists and residents). The findings of this research confirmed the positive relationship between the truthfulness and the expertise of a sports celebrity and the endorsed brand (Spain as a destination image). A sports celebrity gains consumers' awareness because of their expertise, performance on the field, and trustworthiness (Dikčius and Ilciukienė, 2021), but not because of their attractiveness. These attributes are the most outstanding ones.

These results have identified factors relevant to building a desirable outcome: Spain's destination image. Also, results show how these factors should be combined to achieve such an outcome. Based on the results obtained, promoting a tourism destination through sports celebrities should be based on the trustfulness of football players and marathon runners and the expertise of football players. Second, on the expertise of marathon runners, tennis players and general sports celebrities and the trustfulness of general sports competitors and tennis players. Third, sports celebrities' attractiveness in general and in specific categories (marathon, tennis and football) is not necessary; in specific solutions, it is even undesirable.

Linked to the sports industry, the main factor to be underlined in a communication campaign to build an optimum country image is the presence of **trustworthy** sports celebrities. People expect dependable, honest, reliable, sincere and trustworthy sports competitors because the results in this study reveal that sportsperson trustworthiness is the first factor in enhancing a destination image. **Experience** may be a second step because it seems less relevant in endorsing a tourism destination. For example, Spain has novel and young sports celebrities who have obtained outstanding achievements thanks to less experienced competitors, such as Alcaraz on the tennis field. **Experience and trustworthiness** should go hand in hand only when using football celebrities. Lastly, sports competitors' **attractiveness** is optional, and using this information to promote a destination can even be harmful.

Second, the attractiveness of a celebrity needs to be improved. So, it's not recommended to base the image of a destination on this pillar for tourists or residents. Mainly when tourists are concerned, it is even undesired if a sports celebrity is attractive, classy, beautiful, elegant or sexy. That is, having attractive athletes can be harmful in the case of athletes in general and, more specifically, in the case of footballers and marathon runners.

Third, **football celebrities are the most relevant** ones to build Spain's destination image (mainly among tourists), followed by marathon runners (appropriate also among residents) and lastly by tennis players (less relevant in both scenarios, domestic and international). So, in the specific case of Spain, football players are the most valuable sports celebrities in building a destination image among tourists and residents. Celebrities in this sports category should be used domestically and abroad in communication campaigns. In the case of residents, marathon runners also play a determinant role and could be considered. If the budget is limited, tennis players should not be prioritized in country image campaigns, in the case of Spain. Even more, given that different results have been obtained for different sports categories, managers should provide tourists with a better experience that aligns with their identification with the sports category they follow (Zhou, Xiong, Li, Liu, Wang and Ryan, 2023). In this vein, tourists could be informed about the achievements of sports celebrities from the leading sports categories in Spain (football, marathon, and tennis).

Lastly, in line with Styliadis (2020), managers should develop strategies to benefit from the encounters between residents and tourists because the results have demonstrated that residents also pay attention to sports celebrities to create an image of their country, and, sometimes the points of view of residents and tourists are not strictly the same. So, studying the similarities and differences between both targets in questions such as the conformation of destination images and their drivers is recommended.

In sum, and as Chen, (2018, p. 1041) has concluded for the film industry, "celebrity worship plays a key role in determining the image of a destination". Celebrities can act as a positive pull factor for the destination. Focusing on the sports industry and based on Dikčius and Ilciukienė (2021), it's a challenge for the DMOs (Destination Management Organizations) managers to have the right celebrity sports competitors with the appropriate attributes with whom they can match their country-brand and influence their target customers in a better way. Countries need to identify the best sports celebrities to represent them in communication campaigns, and these results recommend prioritizing trustable sports celebrities for their campaigns.

Limitations

The present study was limited to a specific destination, Spain. Future research could be done considering other kinds of tourist destinations. Second, only sports celebrity attributes were considered. At the same time, different points of the sports industry can also affect the interests of a tourist destination, such as the development of sportive events or the existence of well-named sports clubs. So, future research should consider the best attributes required for sports events (Kim and Morrisson 2005) and those required to sports clubs to promote a destination while gaining popularity among residents.

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TABLES:

Table 1. Parsimonious solution

	Required attributes (solutions)	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
GLOBAL SAMPLE	TrustF*TrustM	0.870572	0.0213344	0.934612
	ExpertF*TrustM	0.863989	0.0147523	0.932718
	Solution coverage: 0.885324 Solution consistency: 0.928845 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.978266			
RESIDENTS	TrustF*TrustM	0.849365	0.0259528	0.935334
	ExpertF*TrustM	0.840733	0.0173205	0.92929
	Solution coverage: 0.866685 Solution Consistency: 0.926561 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.980352			
TOURISTS	TrustF	0.921765	0.0196547	0.927801
	ExpertF	0.943787	0.0416763	0.921253
	Solution coverage: 0.963441 Solution consistency: 0.915079 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.976855			

(*) M (marathons), F (football)

Table 2. Intermediate solution

	Required attributes (solutions)	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency
GLOBAL SAMPLE	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.572289	0.0545322	0.979906
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.442217	0.00870842	0.981521
	~AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.439914	0.00078600	0.984807
	AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.353159	0.00084453	1,000000
	~AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.329696	0.00000000	0.998171
	AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*TrustF*ExpertF*AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.483968	0.00274575	0.979997
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.466192	0.00073576	0.978272
	Solution coverage: 0.707726 Solution consistency: 0.9718 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.971379			
RESIDENTS	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*~AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.43637	0.129751	0.973559
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.399789	0.03512111	1,000000
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.331284	0.02737 1	1,000000
	AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.417408	0.0745671	0.98071
	Solution coverage: 0.649664 Solution consistency: 0.970045 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.980352			
TOURISTS	AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.350028	0.00394589	1,000000
	~AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.327308	0.00169694	0.996723
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*~AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.419052	0.0106701	0.986884
	~AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*TrustF*ExpertF*~AtracM*TrustM*ExpertM*TrustT*ExpertT	0.415883	0.000262916	0.985833
	AtracGlobal*TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.560348	0.00244117	0.975212
	TrustGlobal*ExpertGlobal*AtracF*TrustF*ExpertF*TrustM*ExpertM*AtracT*TrustT*ExpertT	0.555864	0.0103097	0.975154
	Solution coverage: 0.710177 Solution consistency: 0.976855 Frequency cutoff: 1 Consistency cutoff: 0.976855			

(*) M (marathons), F (football), T (tennis)

Table 3. Relevant conditions to explain the outcome

	Global Sample	Residentes	Turistas
Attractive Sport Competitors	x • ••	•	x x ••
Trust Sport Competitors	•	•	•
Expert Sport Competitors	•	•	•
Attractive Football Players	x x •	x x ••	x x ••
Trust Football Players	☐	☐	☐
Expert Football Players	☐	☐	☐
Attractive Marathon Runners	x x ••	x x ••	x x
Trust Marathon Runners	☐	☐	•
Expert Marathon Runners	•	•	•
Attractive Tennis Players	x	x ••	•
Trust Tennis Players	•	•	•
Expert Tennis Players	•	•	•

- ☐ Core condition/attribute: the condition appears in the intermediate solution and in the parsimonious solution
- Peripheral condition/attribute: the condition appears in the intermediate solution (in some solutions)
- x Undesired solution: the condition is undesired (in some solutions).
- Irrelevant condition: the condition does not appear

Annexe 1: Principal Component Analysis to identify the 12 conditions (explaining variables)

The value given by each subject to each condition (factor) was obtained by averaging the items it included. These items were previously proposed in the literature and were confirmed using a Principal Component Analysis (Table 1).

Annexe 1: Principal Component Analysis to group the items of each condition

FACTORS GLOBAL	1	2	3	FACTORS FOR MARATHON	4	5	6
Attractive		.784		Attractive		.809	
Classy		.311		Classy		.544	
Beautiful		.852		Beautiful		.865	
Elegant		.608		Elegant		.770	
Sexy		.824		Sexy		.852	
Dependable	.469			Dependable	.739		
Honest	.765			Honest	.850		
Reliable	.775			Reliable	.882		
Sincere	.816			Sincere	.873		
Trustworthy	.727			Trustworthy	.842		
Expert			.440	Expert			.389
Experienced			.482	Experienced			.612
Knowledgeable			.415	Knowledgeable			.546
Qualified			.533	Qualified			.514
Skilled			.521	Skilled			.529

Variance explained with 3 components:
62,77%

Variance explained with 3 components:
70,93%

FACTORS FOR FOOTBALL	7	8	9	FACTORS FOR TENNIS	10	11	12
Attractive		.801		Attractive		.723	
Classy		.487		Classy		.630	
Beautiful		.861		Beautiful		.779	
Elegant		.666		Elegant		.694	
Sexy		.836		Sexy		.740	
Dependable	.762			Dependable	.640		
Honest	.804			Honest	.622		
Reliable	.883			Reliable	.609		
Sincere	.826			Sincere	.635		
Trustworthy	.845			Trustworthy	.628		
Expert			.290	Expert			.572
Experienced			.481	Experienced			.628
Knowledgeable			.587	Knowledgeable			.598
Qualified			.267	Qualified			.637
Skilled			.402	Skilled			.670

Variance explained with 3 components:
75,909%

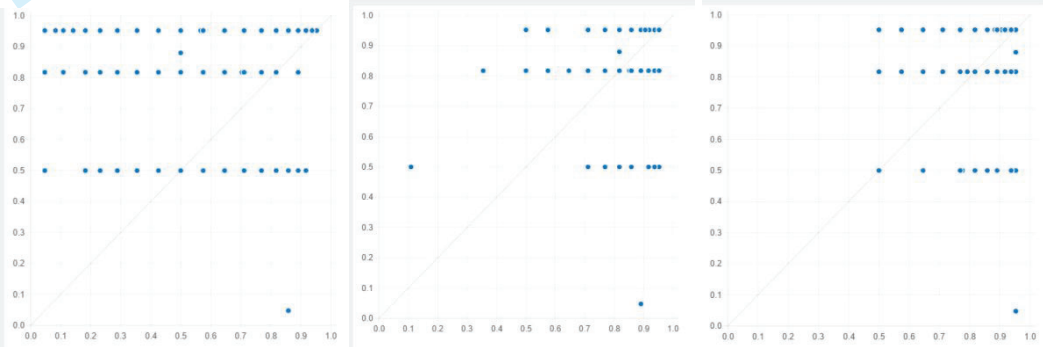
Variance explained with 3 components:
67,391%

Annexe 2: Asymmetry of the 12 conditions

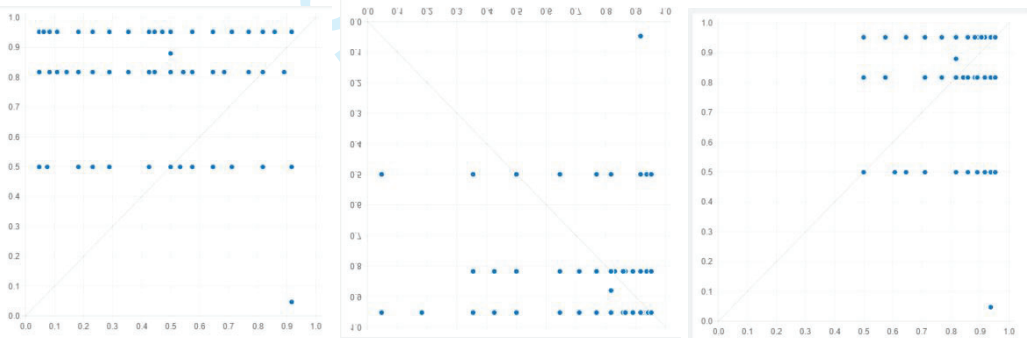
The outcome and the 12 conditions were asymmetrical as this annexe shows.

Annexe 2. Asymmetry of the conditions

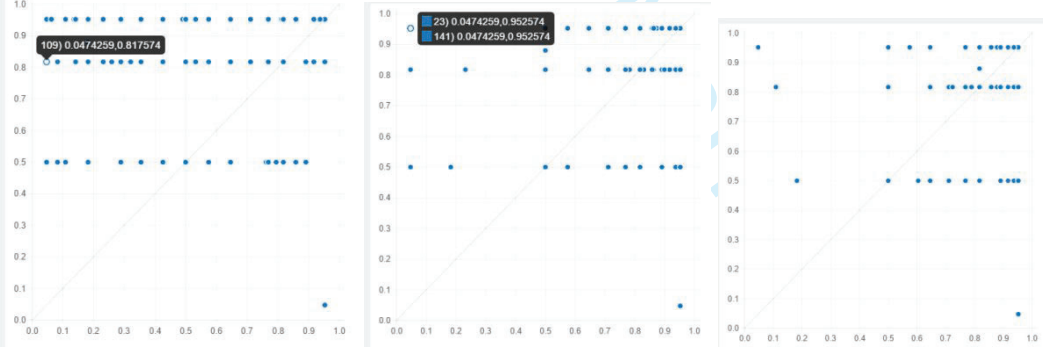
Asymmetry between the "outcome" AtractiveGlobal, TrustGlobal, ExpertGlobal



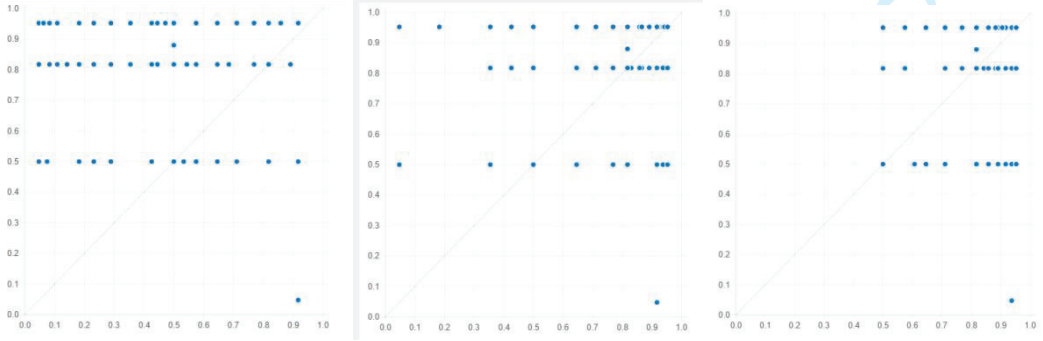
Asymmetry between the "outcome" AtractiveFootball, TrustFootball, ExpertFootball



Asymmetry between the "outcome" and AtractiveMarathon, TrustMarathon, ExpertMarathon



Asymmetry between the "outcome" and AtractiveTennis, TrustTennis, ExpertTennis



Annexe 3: Necessary conditions

Sportspersons in general and football, marathon and tennis players need to be expert and trustable, while attractiveness is not relevant in all cases.

Annexe. Necessary conditions.

GLOBAL SAMPLE	RESIDENTS	TOURISTS
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Conditions tested:			Conditions tested:			Conditions tested:		
	Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage		Consistency	Coverage
AtracGlobal	0.641939	0.958871	AtracGlobal	0.597803	0.968689	AtracGlobal	0.676440	0.952204
~AtracGlobal	0.504578	0.957823	~AtracGlobal	0.554623	0.958706	~AtracGlobal	0.465458	0.957003
TrustGlobal	0.944276	0.907887	TrustGlobal	0.938987	0.914010	TrustGlobal	0.948410	0.903204
~TrustGlobal	0.153294	0.981463	~TrustGlobal	0.162612	0.966136	~TrustGlobal	0.146011	0.995209
ExpertGlobal	0.937330	0.911292	ExpertGlobal	0.928307	0.909303	ExpertGlobal	0.944383	0.912826
~ExpertGlobal	0.167698	1.000000	~ExpertGlobal	0.174739	1.000000	~ExpertGlobal	0.162194	1.000000
AtracF	0.600748	0.954818	AtracF	0.554884	0.963406	AtracF	0.636601	0.949053
~AtracF	0.540835	0.953696	~AtracF	0.583537	0.941678	~AtracF	0.507457	0.964765
TrustF	0.911335	0.930347	ExpertF	0.906293	0.913113	TrustF	0.921765	0.927801
~TrustF	0.210916	0.973280	~ExpertF	0.202038	0.994736	~TrustF	0.199651	0.982193
ExpertF	0.927336	0.917745	TrustF	0.897992	0.933712	ExpertF	0.943787	0.921253
~ExpertF	0.183318	0.986542	~TrustF	0.225327	0.963371	~ExpertF	0.168685	0.978993
ExpertM	0.936546	0.920143	~AtracM	0.643695	0.955270	AtracM	0.554285	0.959062
~ExpertM	0.178344	0.999443	AtracM	0.508732	0.974952	~AtracM	0.598378	0.966966
TrustM	0.904933	0.922954	TrustM	0.895024	0.927897	TrustM	0.912680	0.919201
~TrustM	0.211740	0.981206	~TrustM	0.224467	0.971441	~TrustM	0.201791	0.989858
AtracM	0.534299	0.965637	ExpertM	0.939435	0.916616	ExpertM	0.934288	0.922934
~AtracM	0.618260	0.961588	~ExpertM	0.170744	1.000000	~ExpertM	0.184285	0.999039
AtracT	0.625309	0.956998	AtracT	0.606124	0.968260	AtracT	0.640307	0.948831
~AtracT	0.519784	0.957488	~AtracT	0.539104	0.946386	~AtracT	0.504682	0.966961
TrustT	0.944046	0.914189	TrustT	0.935612	0.909582	TrustT	0.950640	0.917764
~TrustT	0.163610	1.000000	~TrustT	0.167022	1.000000	~TrustT	0.160943	1.000000
ExpertT	0.924372	0.908183	ExpertT	0.933153	0.912130	ExpertT	0.917509	0.905068
~ExpertT	0.176898	0.991338	~ExpertT	0.172591	1.000000	~ExpertT	0.180265	0.984952