



AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE
OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIP, AND
ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER
BEHAVIOUR AND BUYER
CONSUMPTION LEVELS IN
IRELAND.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the role of sports sponsorship, and its impact on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels in Ireland. The researcher aimed to investigate the effect sports sponsorship can have on consumers, and to find out what it takes for consumers to be impacted positively. The dissertation is concerned with how consumers respond in terms of their buyer consumption levels towards the sponsor's products and services.

The researcher carried out a qualitative research approach, where a focus group was selected as the research instrument. The focus group contained nine participants, where several variables of sports sponsorship were discussed in detail.

Results found from the data collected indicate that the level of involvement consumers have with sports are critical in determining their purchasing behaviour towards the sponsor. The sponsor-event fit is important as well as the researcher discovered the size of the event is a significant component. Furthermore, consideration was given for the ethical implications for sports choosing their sponsoring, which included an analysis of alcohol sports sponsorship.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter offers an introduction in to the area of sports sponsorship. The researcher lays out the foundation of the research question that is answered in this research project. The role of sports sponsorship is outlined, with emphasis placed on the impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels.

Sports sponsorship in Ireland is an area that has always been viewed as important by the sponsorship brands as it is a form of promotion that can reap substantial rewards for the sponsored brands and the sponsored sports. This promotional element includes sponsorship activities that are used by marketers to inform and remind consumers of the specific products their sponsors have (Connett, 2004).

Meenaghan (1991) expresses the importance of the exploitable commercial potential a sponsorship can have. This is why sponsors invest substantial funds as a way of increasing brand awareness (Gwinner, 1997), and enhancing consumer attitudes and the overall image of the sponsor's brand (Amis et al. 1999).

However, the current sports sponsorship literature has often reiterated what has come before in terms of measuring the effectiveness of it. These scholars constantly pinpoint awareness, exposure, attitudes, and purchase intentions as the best outcomes of measuring sponsorship effectiveness. The literature is lacking fresh ideas when it comes to sports sponsorship as the same variables are used repeatedly. The researcher aims to insert this study here, as there is an identifiable gap in the literature. In this project, the researcher tests the impact of sports sponsorship in terms of consumer's buyer consumption levels towards the sponsor's products. It is interested in gauging consumer response to sports sponsorship in terms of the actual consuming that buyers do of the sponsor's products. This is where it is different from previous studies conducted, as the levels of buyer consumption have never been considered; rather the literature has been more concerned with purchasing intentions. The intention to purchase is a good indicator of the effectiveness of sponsorship, although it is accepted that intending to purchase a product and actually purchasing a product, are two separate entities entirely (Hickman, 2015).

The gap in the literature that the researcher examines above has been supported by academic scholars in their studies before. Gwinner and Bennet (2008), and

Mazodier and Merunka (2012) state the need to measure actual purchase data as this type of analysis would offer a more accurate picture of sponsorship effectiveness. The researcher collects and analyses data from participants with focus placed on the buyer consumption levels of consumers, as this is also considered as actual purchase data.

Sports sponsorship expenditure has grown significantly within the last decade as more and more brands can see the commercial potential attached to sponsorship. In a report published by WARC (2017), global sponsorship expenditure is expected to rise 4.5% to \$62.8 billion worldwide in 2017. This sponsorship expenditure now accounts for 6% of global marketing spend. The Irish and British sports sponsorship markets continue to grow as both countries are sports obsessed with numerous leagues and competitions needing sponsorship. Examples of these include the Guinness Pro 14 and the BT premiership.

The dissertation is organised as follows: The researcher undertakes a thorough analysis of the sports sponsorship literature, as part of the literature review chapter. The research methodology chapter follows after which will highlight the research instrument used and the type of data analysis adapted. This chapter also outlines the overall research question plus the subsequent research objectives. The chapter after this provides analysis of the results and main findings of the research study. This is then followed by the discussion chapter, which relates the findings to what is already established in the literature, and how they connect with each other. The final chapter of the dissertation offers a conclusion of what has been found, while proposing recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following section of the research paper will provide a detailed analysis of the reviewed sports sponsorship literature. It highlights key areas in relation to sports sponsorship and aims to offer an unbiased examination of the key literature studied on a worldwide scale. Key variables are constructed in relation to the research question are constructed in this chapter. This section of the paper provides the researcher with the ability to distinguish what direction his own research will take, and allows the researcher to form an array of ideas.

2.1 Sponsorship

Meenaghan defines sponsorship as “an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity” (Meenaghan, 1991, p.36).

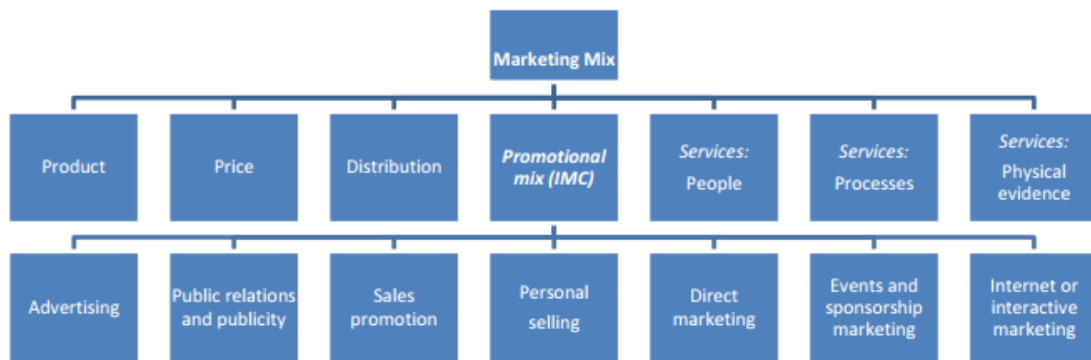
Gwinner outlines how sponsorship can be viewed alongside brand management objectives, and can be included to enhance brand awareness (Gwinner 1997), highlight brand image, and strengthen customer value (Amis et al. 1999). The reasons listed previous has led theorists to believe that sponsorship has become an integral component to the marketing mix. To further it, this has led to its ability to look after itself and compete effectively whilst taking on key marketing tasks (Crowley, 1991).

The marketing mix element that sponsorship is connected to is the traditional promotional mix. This promotional element includes all the relevant “activities, materials, and media used by a marketer to inform and remind prospective customers about a particular product offering” (Connett, 2004, p. 11). Furthermore, the goal of promotion is to persuade the target consumer to buy or consume a product offering. Considering that sponsorship is a pivotal part of the promotional mix, there should be a rationale when considering the role of sports sponsorship and the impact it can have on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels.

If the goal of sponsorship is to enhance sales of the sponsor’s products, the ensuing relationship between consumers and sponsors must be analysed. The research objective posed by the researcher of examining the impact this relationship has on consumers and their consumption habits will enter a gap in the extensive

sponsorship literature, which has failed to highlight the importance of a measurable variable.

The table below illustrates sponsorships place in the promotional mix, and also the overall marketing mix.



Source: Adapted from Clow and Baack (2010:33); Ouwersloot and Duncan (2008:12) and Belch and Belch (2007:17).

Table 1

According to a report published by WARC this year, global sponsorship expenditure is expected to rise 4.5% to \$62.8 billion worldwide in 2017. This sponsorship expenditure now accounts for 6% of global marketing spend. Out of this \$62 billion, North America is the largest sponsorship region to no surprise with Europe close behind (\$23 billion compared to almost \$17 billion). The most applicable statistic to this research study is the fact that sports sponsorship accounted for 70% of total sponsorship spend in North America in 2016. Furthermore, ‘creating awareness’ is the most likely campaign objective to be noted by sponsors (Warc 2017).

Global brands and sponsors of major sporting events see the value in sponsoring sports as a way of increasing brand awareness for their brand and products. The statistics above offer validation to this belief, as sponsorship expenditure is growing year-by-year, and thousands of brands are competing with each other to sponsor major sporting teams and events. This is all being conducted with the overall objective of raising brand awareness. The researcher posits that there is a lack of attention being paid to the overall success or failures of these sponsorships. Raising awareness is a positive result, but if this is not correlated with a change in consumer behaviour or a growth in buyer consumption levels, is it enough to warrant the

investment in the sponsorship? The research aims to examine this as a component to the research instrument.

Wareman (2008) discusses how sponsorship can evoke passionate responses from consumers. He talks about a consumer's level of engagement with an event or a sports team, and how consumers can become more receptive to a commercial message from the sponsor. Wareman's reasoning for this is that he suggests consumers are passionate about the team they support, or the event they attend. This point is investigated in greater detail later on in the literature review, as the researcher suggests through studying the relevant literature, that the level of involvement a consumer has with the sport or sponsored event is a critical factor to consider, in relation to buyer consumption levels.

2.2 The Effect of Sports Sponsorship

Garry et al., (2008) proposed three pieces of literature relating to the lack of clear understanding on the effect of sponsorship: definitional problems when trying to relate the processes and outcomes of sponsorship; managerial issues involving the drivers of sponsorship activities; and communication problems when measuring the effect of sponsorship.

However, Ferrier et al., (2013) conducted a study that investigates the impact of sports sponsorship on both consumer attitude and brand image. The authors examined a sporting event where they monitored the relationship between brand image and event image. Although this research study was one of the first of its kind to tackle the effect of sports sponsorship, it is constructed by referring to the United Kingdom financial services sector, and the role they play in sponsoring stadium events.

2.3 Attitude Towards the Sponsor

Attitude toward the sponsor is mentioned in the literature as being a significant factor of sponsorship effectiveness. If this attitude is favourable, it is more likely the sponsor is effected positively (Alexandris et al. 2007; Chen and Zhang 2011; Speed and Thompson 2000). Having scanned the literature, the researcher aimed to test in his research instrument whether a positive attitude toward the sponsor can impact purchase intentions of consumers.

An attitude is defined as a “psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavour” (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 1). From a critical perspective, an attitude toward a product can be connected with predicting how a consumer will react to it in terms of their consumer behaviour (Ajzen, 2001). The same applies to the sponsorship of sporting brands and teams, as it is hoped that if the attitude toward the relationship between sponsor and sponsored brand is viewed in a positive manner, then this will have the ability to impact consumer’s behavioural intentions.

Furthermore, Shaw and McDonald (2006) expand on the above by expressing how sport consumers should have the same positive feelings about the sponsorship brand that they feel about their own team they support. Firms invest in sponsorship activities on the basis of sport consumers feeling this way. The researcher believes this to be an important element as to further this, according to Cornwall et al. (2006) and Madrigal (2001) if sponsorship is perceived to be crucial to the team that the consumer supports, then these consumers will hold favourable attitudes towards the sponsor.

The academic research surrounding attitudes toward sport sponsorships suggests that these attitudes are viable predictors of purchase intentions of consumers toward the sponsor (Koo et al. 2006; Speed and Thompson, 2000). This led to Biscaia et al. (2013) hypothesizing in their seminal paper on sports sponsorship that “Attitude towards the sponsor has a direct positive effect on intentions to purchase products of that sponsor” (p.291).

To test for their hypothesis, the author’s methodology contained the following: research was conducted in the Portuguese football league with the top team Benfica and two of its main sponsors, one being an alcohol brand, whilst the other is an internet subscription service provider. 4000 participants were selected to receive a mail survey which was distributed with the help of marketing personnel from the Benfica club. Out of the 4000, 1800 were deemed usable for data analysis.

The results of the study in relation to consumer attitudes and purchase intentions found that attitude toward the sponsor was the major predictor of purchase intentions for both sponsors; this is consistent with Crompton (2004) who found consumer

attitude toward the sponsor to be of greater purpose than sponsor awareness when predicting purchases.

A potential limitation of this empirical study is that the random selection of participants led to a wide array of consumers between the ages of 18-70 getting selected for data collection. The authors analyse consumer attitudes of sponsors in relation to purchase intentions. Furthermore, the researcher of his project aims to expand on the study, with specific emphasis placed on buyer consumption levels, which will illustrate whether consumers actually buy the sponsor's products, in contrast to intending to purchase them. The researcher chose to conduct a focus group as he did not have the financial means to adapt a methodological approach like Biscaia et al. (2013), and also he aimed to achieve more in-depth responses and insights from participants.

2.4 Buyer Probability and Intention to Buy

There is a distinct lack of academic research publications on a consumer's probability to purchase products as a direct result of sports sponsorship. For the sake of this research project, buyer probability is also known as buyer consumption levels. Whilst there have been many connections made between consumers intention to buy and also similarly purchase intentions, in relation to the impact of sport sponsorships, there has been little research published on a consumer's actual change in behaviour or their buyer consumption levels, as a result of the aforementioned sponsorship.

Belch and Belch (2001) critically discuss consumer's intentions to purchase a product and how they are formed on many levels. These include perceptions about the quality of the product, as well as beliefs and attitudes of the brand itself.

Intent to purchase has been covered extensively in the academic sponsorship literature (Alexandris et al. 2012). Purchase intentions have often been accepted in the literature as a final measure of sponsorship effectiveness, the ultimate outcome that shows whether a sponsor has been effective in impacting on consumers' behaviour. This is ultimately where the researcher spotted a gap in the literature, and conducted his research project, to offer new insights for the sports sponsorship market. Furthermore, the research question of examining the role sponsorship plays on the buyer consumption levels of consumers in Ireland aims to be answered by

providing sponsor firms with alternative methods to analyse sponsorship effectiveness. The viewpoint of the researcher is supported by scholars who state the need to measure actual purchase data as this type of analysis would offer a more accurate picture of sponsorship effectiveness (Gwinner and Bennett, 2008; Mazodier and Merunka, 2012). In terms of this research project, data was collected and analysed from participants with inherit focus placed on the buyer consumption levels of consumers, as this is considered as actual purchase data.

From a critical perspective, intentions to buy are predominantly associated with the actual behaviour patterns of consumers. However, there is an opportunity for the literature to be more realistic. Hickman (2015) delves further whilst questioning whether an intention to purchase actually translates in to real purchase behaviour.

However, an argument can be constructed in response to Hickman's beliefs.

Previous research has shown that there is a causal relationship between purchase intentions and actual purchase behaviour. These two variables when considering the impact of sports sponsorship on buyer consumption patterns are intrinsically linked. Crucially, consumers cannot purchase products or take action straight away; they must have at least thought about it in their minds. In other words, the intention to purchase must be there to begin with before any actual purchase action is taken. Therefore, it is generally accepted in the literature that purchase intentions are an antecedent to actual purchase behaviour, or consumption behaviour (Dees et al. 2010; Fishbein and Ajzen, 2010).

The main seminal research paper that the researcher studied under this topic is by Hoek et al. (1997) that examines sponsorship and advertising, and offers a comparison of their effects. The research method adapted for this study was two sets of interviews that were carried out with students before the 1994 Soccer World Cup and after the World Cup. The method concerned itself with Snickers' sponsorship of the World Cup, and it showed participants advertising and sponsorship videos from Snickers in order to gauge opinions. After viewing the videos, students answered questions relating to their probability of purchasing the sponsor's products and unprompted recall of the brands featured in both the advertising and sponsorship clips.

The researcher decided to take a similar approach in the current research project. During the focus group interview, two videos were shown to participants of Aer Lingus 'Home Advantage' sponsorship campaign that was developed at the end of 2016 that showed Ireland's historic victory over New Zealand. The second video was an advertisement from Guinness that aimed to evoke emotional reactions from participants as it showed the story of Gareth Thomas, the ex-Wales rugby player, who was the first male rugby player to come out as gay. These sponsorship videos that could be considered as variables were used in conjunction with semi-structured questions to help answer the research objective of this project.

The results from Hoek et al's. (1997) research paper noted that among respondents there was no buyer probability or intention from them to buy the sponsor's products. The sports sponsorship strategy had no effect on consumer behaviour within the bounds of this methodological approach. For the purposes of this dissertation and the research instrument used, the researcher expects the results to be different. Sports sponsorship appeals have progressed significantly over the last twenty years so it is expected consumers will be more receptive to appeals, in terms of their buyer probability and purchase intentions toward the sponsor.

In comparison, Crimmins and Horn (1996) found contrasting results when analysing Olympic Games sponsors. Participants were asked if they would buy the product of a recognised Olympic Games sponsor, and 60% of respondents indicated that they would. The differing responses to the purchase intentions of consumers in the literature indicate that the size of the sponsor brand, and the event it is attached to are key determinants. The researcher aims to examine this in an Irish context during the data collection stage, and looks to uncover if a consumer's intention to buy the product of a sponsor is brand and case dependent.

2.5 Level of Involvement

The level of involvement a consumer has with the sponsored team, event or sport has been well published in the sports sponsorship literature. This level of involvement indicates in what direction consumers react to sports sponsorship strategies, and is often a pivotal component of their cognitive thinking processes when analysing the sponsor's image, products and the sport itself.

Involvement must be processed in relation to sports first, before the relationship between involvement and sports sponsorship can be examined. In the specificity of sports alone, the level of involvement consumers have is critical to their enjoyment of it. Consumers with a high level of involvement are more likely to be clued in and spend more time in processing information (Flynn and Goldsmith, 1993). These sporting lovers are full of energy and actively search for information regarding their favourite sports team or sports discipline. From a critical perspective, it is the sharing of this information and their experiences gained that makes it important (Alexandris and Tsiotsou, 2012a). According to Alonso dos Santos (2014), what this indicates is that the higher involved consumers are very active on social networks. From a report published by WARC (2017), some 98% of sponsors assessed social as the most popular and valuable channel for them. Moreover, sponsors can communicate with highly involved consumers via social channels, which increases the likelihood of positive interactions between the two and potentially this leads to a growth in sales.

Involvement is defined in the literature as having many different elements with no one singular definition. It relates to the interest one object holds for another. Some researchers have correlated involvement as an element of the sports marketing field. They define it as a single person's perceived relevance of an object in terms of their value and interest in it (Hur, Ko, and Claussen, 2012; Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). Involvement is dependent on individual characteristics, and it is an efficient variable for understanding the behaviour of sports consumers (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012).

Martensen et al. (2007) claim that the sports fan who is highly involved develops a better attitude toward the sponsor's brand compared to the fan who is less involved. However, there is no clear indication by these authors of what elements are contained in having a better attitude. The researcher tests the theory of high involvement in this research project, in relation to the impact sports sponsorship has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels. The question of the highly involved consumer being more receptive and having a better attitude to sponsor's messages is tested by the researcher.

Dos Santos et al. (2016) conducted a study on involvement and image transfer in sports sponsorship. The method of data collection used was a self-administered

survey for sports fans at a Spanish tennis event in Valencia. Two of the key findings of the study were as follows. First, the authors found “the relationship between attitudes towards the sponsor and purchasing intent was not significantly different between groups of involvement level” (Dos Santos et al. 2016, p.84). This finding implies that no matter the level of involvement, either low or high, attitudes towards the sponsor positively influence purchasing intent. The researcher addresses this result by gaining meaningful insights from focus group participants on their level of involvement with sports, and whether this influences their behaviour towards the sponsor’s brand.

2.6 The Importance of Sponsor-Event Fit

This is also known in the research as sponsor-event congruence. The term congruence is associated with relatedness, relevance, and fit within the sports sponsorship literature (Becker-Olson and Hill, 2006; Rodgers, 2004). D’Astous and Bitz (1995) underline the ability of sponsorship to enhance the brand image of a sponsor by having a high level of congruence or connectedness between the sponsor and sponsored property.

A definition of sponsor-event congruence is offered in the sports sponsorship literature where it is described as a connection, link or synergy between a sponsor and an event (Cornwell et al. 2005). Furthermore, Becker-Olson (2006) enhanced this definition to outline the significance of the connection making logical sense.

Similar to the importance of the level of involvement in sports sponsorship, which was discussed earlier, the level of sponsor-event fit is too a critical component. The level of congruency is critical in analysing consumer response to sponsor’s products. Higher congruence can result in favourable responses from consumers to sponsors. Poon and Prendergast (2006) discuss how sponsor-event fit has the ability to influence many different aspects of consumers, including both cognitive and behaviour elements. Moreover, sponsor-event congruence influences the impact on overall sponsorship effectiveness on both consumers and sponsors.

The researcher adapts sponsor-event fit as a key variable to help with data collection, and also to answer the research question. The examination of major sports sponsorships in Ireland was used as a trigger to formulate reactions and opinions from participants selected. This is in line with similar research topics in the

area of sports sponsorship. Examples of sponsor-event fit that were discussed in detail during the research instrument adapted include Aer Lingus sponsorship of Irish rugby, 3 and New Balance sponsorship of the FAI, and Lidl and LittleWood's recent sponsorship of the Ladies All Ireland GAA Championship.

Lobo et al. (2014) conducted a research study on evaluating consumer behaviour associated with the sponsorship of major sporting events in Australia. The authors found that the personal beliefs of consumers and sponsor-event fit were pivotal variables in determining post-event response to the sponsored products. The researcher decided to test the sponsor-event fit variable in his own research paper on post-event response. However, the difference being was that it was firstly developed in an Irish context, and secondly it addressed the research objective of examining sponsor-event fit and its potential impact on buyer consumption levels.

The researcher understands that the methods of data collection used were of a quantitative nature in Lobo's study. However, the researcher noticed that a similar study could be conducted in Ireland, with the right sampling frame chosen and the available resources to carry out a large-scale study. However, the researcher for this dissertation wanted to adapt a different methodological approach where in-depth qualitative research was conducted. Analysis is offered in the discussion chapter on potential differences between the researcher's findings, and findings from the relevant literature studied.

2.7 Ethical Implications for Sports Sponsorship

This variable poses the question in the sponsorship literature of whether there are ethical implications for sports or events choosing their sponsorships. It is mainly concerned with the widely-researched topic of alcohol sport sponsorships. Shortall (2015) discusses how sports sponsorship is a substantial component of the numerous forms of alcohol marketing. This topic in Ireland has proven to be quite controversial as there are two sides heavily competing with each other in terms of alcohol sponsorship bans and regulations. Shortall (2015) expresses that the sponsorship of major sporting events by alcohol brand is highly unethical as it leads to higher levels of alcohol consumption, and encourages young people to overindulge in drinking from an early age.

In contrast, major sporting associations in Ireland like the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), and the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA) do not think that there are any ethical issues with alcohol sponsorship. However, it is hard not to judge their responses without considering the amount of money that these alcohol brands contribute to these major sporting associations. McGee (2013) reported that alcohol sports sponsorship is worth a substantial 9 million to the IRFU.

Alcohol marketing of sports has been in the Irish media spotlight for the past number of years, and certain sections of the media, including public health boards, has called the sports being sponsored in to question for unethical practices.

The consumption of alcohol at sporting events by young adults is analysed in numerous research studies. Research suggests that consuming alcohol at sporting events are dangerous for university students in terms of the consequences derived from alcohol consumption (White, Kraus and Swartzwelder, 2006). In countries where college sports are enormously popular like American and Australia, students have reported consuming alcohol at college matches at much higher rates than they normally would in social contexts (Glassman et al. 2010).

To relate this to an Irish context, the number of alcohol sponsorships of large sporting events in the nation have to be considered. It has become the norm in Irish society that our major sporting teams and events are continuously sponsored by large alcohol brands like Guinness and Heineken. It is fair to say that a variable mentioned earlier of sports-event fit could pose for further analysis. Originally, it is not expected that alcohol brands match or connect well with sports in general, as the images of either brands are significantly different. The consumption of alcohol by consumers is potentially hazardous to their health, whereas the image of sports is associated with living a clean and healthy lifestyle. However, in current Irish society and culture it has become engrained that the two objects discussed fit appropriately.

The arguments posited by the researcher above are used as part of data collection for the purposes of this research project. Participants are asked questions relating to alcohol sponsorship, and whether they think it is possible that the sport or event sponsored has ethical considerations to be made as well.

To conclude the literature review chapter, the researcher offered a detailed analysis of the sports sponsorship literature. The researcher included specific topics under the sports sponsorship umbrella, in order to gain a thorough understanding of the best approach to take in answering the primary research question. Furthermore, the literature review allowed the researcher to identify key variables in the sports sponsorship area, which are developed further to enhance the researcher's ability in answering the research question. Moreover, relevant literature was discussed in this chapter concerning the role of sports sponsorship and its impact on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels. The crucial variables identified allowed the researcher to formulate further research objectives which best enable him to answer the research question. It is done through the collection and analysis of data from participants selected for the research project. This is explained further in the methodology chapter, whilst the research objectives, obtained from the literature review, are identified in this chapter as well.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This chapter of the research project offers a detailed explanation and examination of the research methods that the researcher used to obtain extensive data on the basis of helping to answer the research objective. According to Quinlan (2011) the research methodology chapter contains the methodological framework for the research project. This chapter contains various elements to the research process that include identifying what data is needed to answer the research question, how the data is obtained, and how the data obtained is analysed.

The word research is defined by Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill as “the systematic collection and interpretation of information with a clear purpose, to find things out” (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2009, p.600). Furthermore, Quinlan highlights the importance of the theoretical ideas and research methods used when defining research as a “process which makes discoveries about social reality” (Quinlan, 2011, p.31).

There are many different types of research methods that can be used when examining the role sports sponsorship has on consumer behaviour, and these will be analysed in detail later on in the chapter. The researcher adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach of a focus group to obtain data in order to help answer the research objective. The research objectives and aims of this dissertation are listed within this chapter as they are identifiable statements that allow a researcher to express what they hope to achieve as result of conducting the research (Saunders et al., 2009).

Firstly, the chapter provides an overview of the numerous research objectives and aims which have been identified by the researcher in order to best answer the research question posed. These research objectives are formulated on the basis of the extensive literature studied by the researcher on the topic of sports sponsorship and the impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels in Ireland. The research objectives are exemplified as the data requirements that need to be included in order to help answer the research question. Furthermore, each objective is identified in the first section of this chapter which follows.

Secondly, the sample size of the target population for the research question is illustrated by the researcher. In order for the research question to be answered,

identifying who and what type of people are needed to obtain the relevant data is a critical component of all research methodologies. Once this section is complete, the researcher can then move on and design the research methods that are most applicable to the research objectives. The sample profile of this research project is described in an accurate manner and the sample limitations are listed.

Thirdly, the research instrument and method adopted by the researcher is identified as this section includes how the relevant information is gathered from the sample selected. The methods and tools are examined from both a theoretical and philosophical perspective as the research instrument has to be verified and applicable to the chosen research question. The researcher aims to illustrate a detailed understanding of the various research methods that could have been selected, and explains why the research design chosen is best suited to answering the overall research objective. A wide-scaled analysis of the research process from identifying the method required to actually collecting the data from the sample is offered in this section.

Fourthly, the analysis of the data obtained from the sample population is highlighted in this section. What type of analysis the researcher undertook after collecting the relevant data is examined in detail here. A step-by-step approach of the data analysis process is discussed, where the researcher states the boundaries of the data collected, i.e. where the data starts and ends. Furthermore, the various techniques used by the researcher in relation to the research instrument and method selected are examined as a way of helping to analyse the data obtained.

Finally, there is a section within this research methodology chapter that mentions ethical considerations that the researcher undertook during each step of the research design process. It is crucial that researchers can abide to and consider the ethical implications of their work, especially during the research design stage.

3.1 Research Question

The research question for this dissertation is 'An examination of the role of sports sponsorship and the impact it has on consumer behaviour, and buyer consumption levels in Ireland'. The academic area in which the research relates to is the sponsorship by brands of large sporting events, and sporting teams within Ireland. It

analyses the ensuing effect these sponsorships have on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels within the sample population selected.

3.1.2 Research Objective One

To examine the role of sports sponsorship in Ireland and its impact on consumer behaviour, and buyer consumption levels. This is the primary objective or focus of the research project. This objective addresses the impact of the relationship between consumer and sponsor, and the data obtained from participants determines if this impact is positive or negative, in terms of their buyer consumption levels of the sponsored event/team.

3.1.3 Research Objective Two

To investigate whether the consumer's level of involvement with the sport that is sponsored impacts their consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels towards the sponsor's products.

3.1.4 Research Objective Three

To analyse if sponsor-event fit plays an important role for consumers when they are considering sports sponsorships in terms of their consumer behaviour towards the sponsor. Two recent advertising/sponsorship strategies carried out by Aer Lingus and Guinness are used by the researcher as part of the research technique/method of data collection.

3.1.5 Research Objective Four

To examine whether there are ethical implications for a sports team or a sports event when choosing their sponsors. Alcohol sports sponsorship is investigated under this objective, as participant's opinions are sought, in terms of their behaviour and buyer consumption levels towards these sponsor's products.

3.2 Sample

Sampling and sample size is a major component of the research process, especially when considering what research instruments or methods to adopt. From a general approach, sampling involves, according to Hair, Wolfinbarger, Ortinau, and Bush (2009, p.130):

“selecting a relatively small number of elements from a larger defined group of elements and expecting that the information gathered from the small group will enable accurate judgements about the larger group.”

When considering sampling as part of the research process, it is pivotal when designing questionnaires, or conducting interviews during the research design stage.

The sample size selected by the researcher for the basis of answering the research objective of this dissertation contains a focus group that is made up on ten participants. The participants selected range from two separate age brackets: five participants are between 18-24 years old and five are over the age of 35. This sampling frame was chosen by the researcher as he wished to obtain data from participants of two different age demographics. Furthermore, the aim is to see if there are any differences between a consumer's behaviour and buyer consumption levels, dependent on what age they are.

Furthermore, before a research instrument is selected, the sampling frame must be distinguished first. To be able to select a sampling frame, the target population for the research project must be identified first. In terms of this dissertation, the target population contains consumers who either participate in sport or have an interest in it. This target population is established on the basis of the objectives of this research project. The target population must then be broken down in to sampling units, which are the elements from the target population that are actually and readily available to be used during the sampling process (Hair et al., 2009).

As mentioned above, the target population for this project are sporty consumers, the researcher broke this down further in to a sampling frame. The aim for this sampling frame was to select ten participants from the target population, with five each coming from both age brackets. The objective was to conduct a focus group with those ten participants selected, in order to obtain the data required to answer the research

question posed by the researcher. However, on the day of the focus group, one participant was unable to attend so the sampling frame was left uneven. Due to time constraints, the researcher could not find an alternative replacement, therefore five of the participants were in the 18-24 age category, whereas the other four were over the age of 35.

The focus group, used to obtain the data of the research project, was conducted on the 5th of August. The setting of the focus group was selected to be in the local function room attached to Barnhall rugby club in Leixlip. This venue was selected as it was made accessible for the researcher on the specific date that all participants agreed to. The room is open-planned and has numerous chairs which made it convenient. There is also a projector in the room, which the researcher used to show participants two sponsorship video advertisements.

In terms of sampling, there are two types of sampling techniques that can be selected by the researcher: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. According to Hair et al., (2009) probability sampling is where each unit of the defined target population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample. In contrast, non-probability sampling is where the probability of each sampling unit being selected is unknown, and the selection is based on “intuitive judgement or researcher knowledge” (Hair et al., 2009, p.133).

For this research project, the researcher chose to adapt a non-probability sample. A limitation of this dissertation, the researcher acknowledges and accepts that the sampling unit selected may not be representative of the defined target population, i.e. the sample unit selected may not be a fair representative of the target population of consumers who either participate in sport, or have a keen interest in sport.

The sample design selected by the researcher is convenience sampling, which is a component of non-probability sampling. This will now be analysed further.

3.2.1 Convenience Sampling

In terms of the selection of participants for this research project, the researcher used the resources they had readily available to them. The researcher obtained his undergraduate degree from Maynooth University and while he attended that university, he was on the rugby scholarship programme for four years. The

researcher remained in contact with the rugby coordinator in Maynooth and reached out to this advisor to help select participants from the 18-24 age bracket for this research project. This was done in order to satisfy one of the research objectives. The coordinator was able to put the researcher in contact with five scholarship students, which consisted of three males and two females from different sporting scholarships in the university. These students were asked to partake in a focus group for this research project, to which they obliged.

This type of non-probability sampling is known as convenience sampling. However, it also contains an element of snowball sampling, as the rugby coordinator from Maynooth University is over the age of 35, and was also included in the researcher's instrument of data collection. Snowball sampling is where a respondent is chosen, and this respondent helps the researcher identify or put in touch with additional consumers who can be selected for the project (Hair et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the participants from the other age demographic of consumers aged over 35 were selected from the researcher's local gym. Again, this is convenience sampling, where sampling units are selected at the convenience of the researcher (Hair et al., 2009). The researcher handed out a note in the gym explaining the aims of the MSc dissertation project asking for relevant members to be a part of the project. The first five responses obtained by the researcher were selected, however as discussed earlier only four were able to attend on the day of data collection.

The rationale for convenience sampling being selected as the type of sampling unit was mainly due to time constraints of the research project. The researcher was aware of potential participants who could meet the aims of the research objective. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2012), an advantage of convenience sampling is that it is the most efficient technique of getting some basic information quickly and easily. Given more time, the researcher would select probability sampling as he understands this decreases the chance of a biased researcher, and provides a more rigid, balanced sampling frame.

3.3 Research Methods

When analysing what approach to take for the research project, the researcher considered both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The next section will briefly

analyse the two different methodological approaches considered, and will contrast them side-by-side.

3.3.1 Quantitative

Bryman and Bell (2015, p.160) note that quantitative research is a type of research strategy that is described as entailing “the collection of numerical data and as exhibiting a view of the relationship between theory and research as deductive, and an objectivist conception of social reality.”

It is concerned with numbers and statistics are a huge part of analysis of quantitative data. Hypotheses are usually already formed and researchers use quantitative methods to test their research question that has been formulated.

Furthermore, quantitative research emphasises using closed questions that have predetermined responses in surveys or questionnaires, which are sent to large numbers of respondents (Hair et al., 2009).

3.3.2 Qualitative

Qualitative researchers look for rich, insightful data in their research methods that are usually obtained from unstructured interviews with participants. Researchers have the ability to probe respondents during the data collection stage. Open-ended questions are contained in qualitative data where participants are encouraged to answer questions in their own words, and can often lead to the formulation of results that the researcher was not anticipating (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2007).

Hair et al., (2009) illustrate how qualitative research can be useful in providing preliminary insights in to a research area and it can researchers “develop ideas about how variables are related” (Hair et al., 2009, p.80). For the purposes of this research project, the previous statement has significance for the development of the research instrument selected, and for the research objectives that have been formulated.

Furthermore, qualitative research is noted by Bryman and Bell (2015, p.392) as being “concerned with words rather than numbers,” an “inductive view is formed of the relationship between theory and research, whereby the former is generated out

of the latter.” Deductive theory is the opposite where there are already predetermined theories and conceptual frameworks to begin with (Saunders et al., 2009). For the purposes of this research project, the researcher has chosen an inductive theory approach to the data obtained from the research instrument.

3.3.3 Quantitative vs Qualitative

Before the researcher was able to decide which research method to adopt for the research project, elements of both quantitative research and qualitative research had to be researched and questioned. The table below illustrated by Hair et al., (2009) helped the researcher to analyse the different elements of both methods.

Factor	Qualitative Methods	Quantitative Methods
Goals/Objectives	Discover/identification of new ideas, thoughts, feelings; preliminary understanding of relationships; understanding of hidden psychological and social processes	Validation of facts, estimates, relationships
Type of Research	Exploratory	Descriptive and causal
Type of Questions	Open-ended, unstructured, probing	Mostly structured
Time of Execution	Relatively short time frame	Typically significantly longer time frame
Representativeness	Small samples, only the sampled individuals	Large samples, with proper sampling can represent population
Type of Analysis	Debriefing, subjective, content analysis, interpretative	Statistical, descriptive, causal predictions
Researcher Skills	Interpersonal communications, observation, interpretation of text or visual data	Statistical analysis, interpretation of numbers
Generalizability	Limited	Generally very good, can infer facts and relationships

Table 2: Major Differences between Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods; Source Hair et al., 2010

The researcher was addressed with assessing which method would be best adopted for the research objective. The researcher chose a qualitative research approach as qualitative works best with small samples of the population. The researcher aimed to probe the sample population selected for rich, meaningful insights in to the sports sponsorship topic, and the impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels. The research tool or instrument used to explore the research objective was to carry out a focus group interview, which will be analysed in detail in the next section.

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), in terms of interviews, the significant difference between qualitative interviews and quantitative interviews are that the latter are predominantly structured whereas the former can be semi-structured or unstructured. The researcher chose to conduct a semi-structured focus group interview or group interview, on the basis of wanting to explore subjective or personal experiences with participants, in an in-depth format. As a form of data collection, they are flexible and interpretive, and there is room given for the researcher to go off topic by investigating unexpected areas of interest. These personal opinions of participants were eagerly sought, as a way of helping the researcher to construct meaning to the research area of sports sponsorship, and the role it plays for Irish consumers.

The researcher selected a qualitative research approach as according to Merriam (2009, p.5):

“qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”

3.4 Research Instrument: Focus Group Interview

The primary research instrument used by the researcher for the collection of data was a focus group interview or a group depth interview. According to Hair et al., (2009, p.82) focus group research “involves bringing a small group of people together for an interactive and spontaneous discussion of a particular topic or concept.” They normally involve between 8-12 participants who partake in a semi-structured discussion that is guided by a moderator. They are more informal than a one-to-one interview, as an interactive group discussion is encourage by the

researcher. In the case of this research design, the researcher was the moderator, and the focus group was face-to-face. A moderator is highly trained in the interpersonal expertise and communication skills required for a focus group, and they behave in a professional manner (Hair et al., 2009). The interactive nature of them allow for synergy to be created amongst participants as conversations and heated discussions are both anticipated and encourage.

Focus group interviews have become the most common form of a qualitative method for collecting data relevant to the researcher's research question (Bloor et al., 2001). This growing popularity can be connected to its fundamental ability to collect rich, insightful data from a group of selected participants. Krueger and Casey (2000) identify the importance of the environment in where the focus group is conducted as it is a relaxing and comfortable environment. In terms of this dissertation, participants were selected on the basis of convenience which has been discussed, but also because of the type of individual they are. The criteria of the participant had to match the researcher's sample population in order to answer the research question posed, i.e. participants have to actively play sport, or have a keen interest in sport.

According to Morgan (1997), focus groups interviews can be used in many different scenarios. The first type that Morgan notes is most applicable to this research project as all the data collected is fully gathered from the focus group conducted by the moderator, so it is viewed as an independent research method.

Furthermore, in terms of the size of a focus group, the literature has offered varying viewpoints. It is dependent on the purposes of the research project and what type of information the researcher is looking to gather. Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990) suggest that the ideal number of participants are 8-12, whereas 6-8 participants is what Morgan (1998) suggests. The researcher decided that ten participants would be sufficient for the purposes of this research project; however one person did not show up to the group, so there was only nine participants in the end. This is a limitation of the project as correlated with objective two, an equal number from both age demographics was sought. The researcher recognises that they should have included more participants in the study, just in case of participant cancellation or no-show.

The researcher or the moderator faced two problems whilst conducting the focus group. Firstly, moderating the interview was a challenge due to the number of participants. It was not easy for all participants to respond to each question or probe made by the moderator. The moderator had to probe certain participants more as there were a few dominant personalities in the room who spoke and gave their opinion a lot. The second issue was an element to focus group interviews called groupthink. This occurs when one or two participants' state their opinion on a topic and other participants in the group are unduly influenced (Hair et al., 2009). However, as the focus group progressed, groupthink was slowly eliminated as each respondent gained more confidence, and offered their personal insights no matter if they agreed or disagreed with other respondents.

The questions adapted for the focus group interview by the researcher are all directly linked to each research objective highlighted in this dissertation. Each of these objectives are known as variables; they come from the relevant academic literature relating to sports sponsorship and the potential impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels. Questions were also posed to participants in relation to two sponsorship advertisements from Aer Lingus and Guinness, which highlighted their partnership with rugby. These two videos were shown to participants during the focus group, and their reactions were discussed in detail. The videos relate to the research objectives, however they also delve in to further topics of the sports sponsorship area, such as the use of emotional appeals in advertising, and the impact a successful sponsorship advertising campaign can have for an Irish brand.

The questions asked were open-ended in order for the researcher to obtain insightful opinions from participants and to get them to share personal experiences, in relation to the research objectives. The questions were also used to allow for depth discussions in the interactive conversation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson, 2008). These questions are included in the appendixes section.

3.5 Data Analysis

After all of the data is collected by using the research instrument of a focus group interview, the researcher must organise the data obtained and analyse the data in an efficient manner. This section examines the data analysis procedure undertaken by

the researcher, and first provides a description of the step-by-step methodological approach taken.

The researcher conducted a focus group interview with nine participants on Saturday 5th of August. This research tool took place in Barnhall rugby club, where a function room was made available for the purposes of the project. When conducting this interview, an aim for the researcher was to provide the right setting for the research method. The selection of this venue was made on the basis of it being convenient for participants as all of these are from the Kildare/Dublin region. The researcher's laptop was connected to the projector in the function room, as the respondents were shown two different sponsorship advertising videos.

The focus group interview was audio-recorded from the researcher's smartphone. This action was not taken until all participant's permission had been received first. The sampling frame were made aware that they had the right to receive the audio recording if they wished, and that anonymity of the respondents would be strictly kept, in terms of their names.

The first stage of the data analysis process was for the researcher to take notes and make observations during the focus group interview. As the researcher was also the moderator, he found this to be quite a challenging and difficult task. A small number of notes were taken during the data collection stage, which included certain elements the researcher picked up on during the focus group; some things that the audio recording did not. An example here is of facial and body expressions of participants when observing other participant's answers. In the interactive context of the environment, it was easy for the researcher to tell if participants were in agreement or disagreement with other opinions from their facial expressions alone.

The second stage of the data analysis process was for the researcher to transcribe the data obtained from the focus group. This transcription took place immediately after the research was conducted to help enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Robson 2002). According to Kvale (1996), qualitative data should be analysed at the time of interviews, and also straight after, while the researcher still has the information fresh in his mind. The full transcription of this data is located in the appendixes section.

The third stage was for the researcher to analyse the focus group transcription in detail. This was examined thoroughly as a way of breaking down the data collected in to meaning so the researcher could address the research objective. The method of data analysis adapted by the research is thematic analysis, which stems from content analysis.

3.5.1 Thematic Analysis

Firstly, content analysis is a specific type of analysis used by qualitative researchers in interviews to create meaningful findings from them. It can be defined as “the systematic procedure of taking individual responses and grouping them into larger theme categories or patterns” (Hair et al. 2009, p.88).

Thematic analysis is what the researcher used to categorise data findings around the objectives of this research project. It is described as the analysis of data through themes (Saunders et al. 2011). The researcher undertook this type of analysis to code important responses given by participants, and to group them in to relevant themes. All of the themes emergent from the data obtained were then connected to the research objectives of this project. This is identified in the findings chapter where the themes found by the researcher are labelled appropriately under each relevant objective.

To conclude this section, the researcher would like to state the boundaries of the data obtained from the chosen research instrument. A list of data that the researcher analysed includes the focus group transcript, and also the notes and observations the researcher took during the data collection process. No other data was considered for analysis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher took thorough care in making sure the candidates chosen to participate in the research topic understood what the research is being conducted for. It was explained that it was for a dissertation research project for an MSc in Marketing student from the National College of Ireland. All information regarding the participant’s identity has not been included in the research project. The participants understood clearly that their responses and opinions would be just used for this

project, and nothing else. The audio recording of the focus group is stored in a safe place. Participants were told that they were entitled to a copy of the transcript that the researcher made and the audio recording, and they could remove any comments of their own if they wished to do so.

The researcher received full permission from participants to use any comments and responses as part of his dissertation. Furthermore, it was outlined to candidates that they did not have to answer any questions asked if they did not feel comfortable, and can pull out from the research project at any stage.

Chapter 4: Data Findings

In this chapter, the researcher presents the findings and results from the focus group interview that took place on Saturday 5th of August 2017. It is structured in a format based around the research objectives of this research project. Each objective has its own heading with data collected from the focus group discussed in detail. As mentioned in the previous chapter, thematic analysis was used to group or code data in to themes emergent from each research objective. They are listed in tables below.

Research Objective 1:

To examine the role of sports sponsorship in Ireland and its impact on consumer behaviour, and buyer consumption levels.

Focus Group Themes

Sports sponsorship more effective than sponsorship.

Strong brand awareness.

Sports sponsorship impact on consumer behaviour is dependent on price and the individual.

4.1 Sports sponsorship is more effective than sponsorship

The first question of this research study aimed to obtain initial, general insights from participants in to the overall sports sponsorship topic. The researcher asked what their opinion is on sports sponsorship as a whole, in comparison with sponsorship. All participants stated that they think sports sponsorship is a more effective strategy than sponsorship.

The first participant stated that sports sponsorship was effective at covering a vast array of markets and consumers, “sports sponsorship covers all types of consumer, Guinness is targeted at male adults, while Lidl is targeted at the supermarket shopper.”

The third respondent highlighted how the nation of Ireland is sports obsessed and how sponsors associated to sports have an advantage over regular sponsors. He stated “I think any sort of brand associated with sports gets an uplift.”

4.2 Strong Brand Awareness

A theme emerging from the role of sports sponsorship is that participants suggest it can have strong brand awareness. Both association and awareness were mentioned as beneficial for sponsors by a high number of participants. A nostalgic conversation started as participants remembered sponsorships and advertisements from years ago. The fact that participants remembered these sponsorships highlighted the strong brand awareness that those sponsors receive.

The seventh participant identified the associative connection between the sponsor and the sport. She stated “If you think of a brand like Guinness, everyone thinks of rugby. If you think of underage GAA, you think Electric Ireland as they are the sponsor.”

The second and sixth participants discussed the lasting effect of the old Carlsberg sponsorships as they are still synonymous with consumers today. Crucially, the data collected suggests that the sponsorship is remembered on both the team and the sport.

The sixth participant stated that “if you look at the likes of Carlsberg, I still think of it as being synonymous with Liverpool, even though that sponsorship ended years ago.” The second participant connects the sponsor to the sport as he stated “the association between Carlsberg and soccer sticks in people’s heads.”

4.3 Sports sponsorship impact on consumer behaviour is dependent on price

The third theme that emerged from the first objective showed that in terms of a consumer’s buyer decision levels, price is a mitigating factor to consider. The researcher asked a question to participants on the relationship between sports sponsorship and their own behaviour towards the sponsor’s products.

A common theme that materialised from the question posed is that the price is highly relevant to a consumer’s probability to buy the sponsor’s products. AIG are an insurance company who sponsor Dublin GAA, participants discussed how even though this is good brand awareness for the company, it would never cause a change in their behaviour toward the sponsor’s products. The 7th participant explained how “it is totally dependent on the value of the product.”

Furthermore, the 5th participant offered a rationale behind his thinking: “the price of a pint/ pair of runners is far cheaper than insurance. If the price is cheap enough, the sponsorship might swing you to go one way or another, depending on the exposure of the brand.” The last part of his statement relating to the exposure of the brand ties in nicely with the earlier themed connection between sports sponsorship and strong brand aware. For this participant, the price of the sponsor’s product, and the exposure of the sponsor’s brand are key determinants of his behaviour and buying levels toward sponsors.

Research Objective 2:

To investigate whether the consumer’s level of involvement with the sport that is sponsored impacts their consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels towards the sponsor’s products.

Focus Group Themes

High involvement with the sport, sponsorship effected positively.

Individual sports more likely to be influenced.

Dependent on the individual

Consumers look for experts in the area.

4.4 High involvement with the sport, sponsorship effected positively

The next variable the researcher needed to test was the level of involvement research objective that stemmed from the literature review. Participants who said that they’re highly involved with a sport found that this sponsorship effectiveness impacted them in a positive manner, in terms of the overall sponsorship effectiveness.

The 6th participant describes how his love of soccer and Manchester United has an impact on the brands he purchases. He stated “I would always buy Adidas boots because they sponsor Man United.” Adidas understand that by sponsoring a global corporation like Man United that this can lead to a positive relationship between them and consumers. The sponsorship of the team causes buyer consumption levels of consumers to grow.

4.5 Individual sports more likely to be influenced

As the focus group interview progressed, a group consensus emerged that individual sports are more likely to be influenced by sports sponsorship than team sports. The example of Rory McIlroy and Nike was used by a participant to place emphasis on individual sports. If the level of involvement is high for a consumer who plays tennis or golf for example, then they are more likely to be receptive to large sponsor's products like Nike golf clubs.

There is greater significance attached to the sponsorship of individual sports stars compared to team sports. The researcher states the reason for this is greater exposure for the sponsorship brand on the sponsored athlete. There is only one athlete in the spotlight compared to team sports where there are multiple.

The 4th participant emphasized how the sponsorship is influenced and stated that it is "dependent on the type of sport it is as well."

4.6 Dependent on the individual consumer

Two of the focus group participants argued that the level of involvement is person specific. The 9th participant who plays camogie noted how "it depends on personal preference. I don't think there is really a direct link between the sport I love and my purchase consumption towards that sport."

The 1st participant who plays soccer enhanced this view further by speaking about his individual context. He expressed "I buy the same brand every time I'm buying boots, simply because of fit and comfort." According to this participant the level of involvement between the consumer and the sponsored item can vary from consumer to consumer.

4.7 Consumers look for experts in the area

The data collected under this research objective suggests that in the case of sports sponsorship having an impact on consumer's buyer consumption habits that these consumers are heavily influenced by the experts within a given sport.

The 3rd participant provides an example of buying a Wilson tennis racket because "he sees Roger Federer using them and therefore associates them as being the best quality", and also seeing Andy Murray wear Under Armour clothing and "would buy

Under Armour clothing as a result.” Critically, this participant plays tennis, therefore his level on involvement is high.

The same applies for the participants who are runners or part of an athletics club. The 2nd participant explains how she buys Asics runners any time she needs a new pair as these are “accepted in the industry as the highest quality trainer.” She also examines what brands the experts are sponsored by as a guide in her buyer-decision making process.

Furthermore, the researcher found the 7th participant’s observation to be quite interesting as she discussed how “New Balance recent sponsorship of the Irish Olympic team lead to a growth in sales of many New Balance products.” New Balance were traditionally associated with running shoes; however a shift in sponsorship approach and a fitting sponsor-event congruency allowed New Balance to exponentially grow its market share.

Research Objective 3:

To analyse if sponsor-event fit plays an important role for consumers when they are considering sports sponsorships in terms of their consumer behaviour towards the sponsor.

Focus Group Themes

Brands like Aer Lingus and Guinness use emotional appeals in their sponsorship of rugby.

Size of the event is significant

Both neutral and positive effect on buyer consumption levels.

4.8 Brands use emotional appeals in their sponsorship of rugby

This objective was scrutinised in the research study with the aid of two advertising campaigns that were shown to participants. They highlighted both Aer Lingus and Guinness’ sponsorship of rugby, and participants were asked for their reaction to the sponsorships in terms of sponsor-event fit.

Participants noted that these brands used emotional appeals to portray their connection to rugby. The 1st participant spoke highly of the Aer Lingus #HomeAdvantage sponsorship campaign. He stated “they tap into your emotions, especially anyone that’s linked with sport and rugby. It is great for the brand image of Aer Lingus and brand association.”

The whole idea surrounding the strategy was that Aer Lingus would fly thousands of Irish rugby fans over for the historic match between Ireland and New Zealand, where the aim was to bring the usual home advantage of playing matches in Dublin to Chicago with them.

The 3rd participant argued that Aer Lingus tapped in to the values of being Irish for consumers and having Irish pride. He spoke of how their brand image is associated with flying Irish emigrants who live abroad home to their families for Christmas, which is a highly emotional topic within itself.

The 1st and 2nd participants both agreed that it would impact their buyer behaviour towards the Aer Lingus brand. The 1st participant stated “if a consumer thinks about who they should fly to America with, I think they would instantly think of Aer Lingus,” whilst the 2nd participant noted the significance of the strategy to the sponsor, “Aer Lingus transatlantic is a huge market in Ireland for them so therefore I would see it as being a very worthwhile sponsorship strategy adopted by them.” In their minds the sponsor-event fit between the sponsor Aer Lingus and the sponsored Irish rugby works fantastically well.

In terms of the Guinness advertisement, a number of fascinating insights emerged. The advertisement video featured ex- Welsh rugby star, Gareth Thomas, who was the first male rugby player to come out as gay. It is a 3 minute long interview with Gareth who shares his story, and tells of the difficulties he faced with publicly coming out. The positive reaction Gareth got from his Welsh teammates and the general rugby public was highlighted. The advertisement finished with a promotional message from Guinness, which is the only time the brand was featured in the video.

According to the 4th participant, Guinness were very clever in their development of this strategy as it not only tapped in to the emotional appeal of consumers, it also was a smart ploy by them because of the climate it was produced, as the same-sex marriage referendum was around this time. The 4th participant stated “Guinness is

associated with Ireland all around the world, and then recently in 2015 Ireland legalised same-sex marriage which Guinness manipulated to play on the hearstrings of Irish consumers.”

It is clear participants thought that the sponsor-event fit in this case linked together nicely as rugby is associated with being a family sport that anyone is welcome to play. The participants agreed that this image of rugby was effectively transferred to the Guinness brand.

However, in terms of buyer consumption levels toward the Guinness sponsor, the 8th participant mentioned that she does not think it has much of an impact as “someone who doesn’t drink Guinness will not start to drink it just because of an emotional sponsorship appeal.”

4.9 Size of the event is significant

The data collected from the research study indicates the size of the event plays an important role in terms of its impact on buyer consumption levels. The 6th participant noted: “We are talking about massive brands here sponsoring the Champions League etc. But if we’re looking at the smaller events and sponsors like LittleWoods with hurling, then I think it could have an effect.”

Participants discussed some of these smaller, local sponsors that included Supermac’s sponsorship of Galway GAA, Brady’s Ham sponsorship of Kildare GAA, and LittleWood’s recent sponsorship of the All Ireland hurling and camogie championships.

The 9th participant described how her buyer consumption levels are “impacted positively when local sponsors are involved” as she prefers to support local brands in the community over more powerful brands.

The 3rd participant declared that “consumers would not usually associate Supermacs, a fast-food chain of restaurants with a GAA county team. But because they local sponsors, just like Brady’s Ham with Kildare, then consumers view these sponsors in a positive light as these sponsors are helping to support the local communities.”

The sponsor-event fit does not always match perfectly; however associations extracted by local sponsors can positively impact a consumer's buyer consumption level toward that sponsor.

4.10 Both neutral and positive effect on buyer consumption levels

According to the 7th participant, "no sports sponsorships can be viewed as negative, even if the sponsor-event fit has no relevant connection to each other." This opinion is further enhanced by the 3rd participant as he notes that if sponsor-event fitness isn't linked, it still won't have any negative effect on the overall image of the sponsor's brand. Moreover, he describes how a "neutral effect takes shape instead." This neutral effect does not sway consumers to purchase the sponsor's products; however, it does not have a negative effect either that would cause consumers to purposefully not buy the sponsor's products.

The 4th participant expresses how a strong sponsor-event fit where both objects have an intrinsic connection can lead to a positive effect on buyer consumption levels. The example of Red Bull sponsoring extreme sports was given by the participant. He stated "I think if the sponsorship matches up with the event or sport like Red Bull being linked with extreme sports, then it could have a greater effect."

Research Objective 4:

To examine whether there are ethical implications for a sports team or a sports event when choosing their sponsors. Alcohol sports sponsorship is investigated under this objective.

Focus Group Themes

Sports have moral responsibilities when choosing their sponsors.

Alcohol sponsorship negatively impacts young people in an unethical manner.

Alcohol consumption during sporting events is part of Irish culture

4.11 Sports have moral responsibilities when choosing their sponsors

The data collected for this research study under this research objective discussed doping in sports, including the case of Justin Gatlin the 100m sprinter, and Maria Sharapova, the tennis star. The focus group participants emphasised the sponsors of these athletes and questioned whether they have moral responsibilities to society and ethical implications to consider.

The 8th participant stated in relation to Nike's sponsorship of Sharapova: "If Nike were to drop her, consumers could see this in a positive light, but if they didn't this could definitely have negative consequences for the brand." However, in terms of the purchasing levels of consumers toward Nike, participants found there to be no direct effect.

The 3rd participant noted that it is more important for sporting teams to take action toward the sponsor, rather than the consumer, as "there are enormous pressures place on these teams by the media." He also described how if a soccer team sponsored by Nike dropped their sponsorship with them because of Nike's refusal to drop the doping athlete from their sponsorship, then this is seen as a positive publicity stunt in the media landscape.

4.12 Alcohol sponsorship negatively impacts young people in an unethical manner

The researcher's results from data collection found that alcohol sports sponsorship encourages young people to indulge in alcohol consumption.

The 8th participant expressed her opinion on major sporting events that have alcohol brands sponsoring them. She stated:

"If we consider the Guinness Pro 14 league for a moment, a young person watching a Pro 14 match or attending one and seeing Guinness on billboards all over the stadium, and Guinness being sold at these events, could be easily influenced to consume Guinness."

The 9th participant enhanced this further by considering the association between alcohol brands and sports stars, and the harmful influence this has on young people's consumer behaviour. She stated:

“I think it would negatively impact younger people because if they constantly see alcohol brands being promoted at sporting events and being associated with rugby, and rugby players in general, then they will think that’s not bad for them, and could over-indulge in consuming alcohol.”

Furthermore, the 7th participant mentioned the unethical nature of promoting alcohol sponsorships at events where a lot of the crowd are of a young age. She stated:

“I think it’s definitely unethical if alcohol brands are sponsoring events where a good proportion of the audience are of a young age, or an event that is specifically targeted at young people, such as the minor GAA championship.”

4.13 Alcohol consumption during sporting events is part of Irish culture

This theme found through analysis of the data, emerged from the researcher’s question posed to participants of whether alcohol sports sponsorship is considered unethical. The 6th participant concluded that he does not think alcohol sponsorship is unethical as it is always consumed at sporting events; rather he thinks it is culture related. He stated:

“Irish culture, especially sporting culture is surrounded by alcohol, it is almost unavoidable.”

The 9th participant pinpoints the subconscious element to the alcohol consumption culture in Ireland during sporting events; however she proclaims that alcohol is not just consumed in the stadiums where the matches take place, it is a key component of watching sports anywhere. She stated:

“I think there is a subconscious element to it for Irish consumers, as we would all go down to the pub and have a couple of pints for a match, and not think twice about it.” She also posed a question to the group of whether this has resulted because of the culture we grew up in, where there has always been a close connection between alcohol consumption and sporting events.

The 3rd participant suggests alcohol sponsors recognise the major connection between alcohol consumption and the love of sporting events in Irish culture, and they have latched on to this. He mentions the pub culture where it is common place

“to meet up with friends and socialise while watching a match,” and doesn’t think there is any issue with alcohol being consumed at this time as well.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The following chapter expands on the data findings that the researcher found from the primary research conducted. It is formulated around the four research objectives. Meanings are formulated from the findings in light of previous research studied. These findings are critically analysed in relation to the literature review, where some similarities and some differences are identified by the researcher.

5.1 The role of sports sponsorship and its impact on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels

A number of key themes were identified by the researcher when analysing the data collected, in relation to this research objective. It was found that sports sponsorship has a substantial role to play in the promotional mix. Participants stated that it is more effective than regular sponsorship, strong brand awareness is an outcome, and two factors dependent to the impact of sports sponsorship on consumer behaviour were found to be the price and the type of individual.

The effect of sports sponsorship on brand awareness is a finding that is been supported in the literature. Gwinner (1997) outlines how sponsorship can be chosen by companies to enhance brand awareness of the sponsor. Meenaghan (2005) states the importance of exposure of consumers to the sponsorship linkage, as it is far more likely this linkage will be easily accessible for the consumer in their brains. Furthermore, another characteristic which is pivotal in influencing the level of brand awareness of the sponsor is the degree of sponsorship activation (Wakefield, Becker-Olson, and Cornwell 2007).

The sponsorship linkage Meenaghan discusses above is relatable to the results found in this research project. Participants outlined the exposure to Carlsberg sponsorships from years ago that they can still recall to this day. Participants were able to recall Carlsberg's sponsorship of Liverpool, and their overall intrinsic connection with soccer. The researcher now suggests a rationale for why there is a lasting effect of sponsorship links for these consumers. When questioned about the effectiveness of sports sponsorship, one participant replied:

“When I am watching t.v. and a sports ad comes on with a brand attached, I watch the ad, but if it is any other type of ad I switch the station over. It entices me to watch it because there is a sport attached to it.”

In regard to the level of brand awareness of the sponsor and this being influenced by the degree of sponsorship activation, this research project found similar findings. Sponsorship activation can include a number of elements, like the number of times a consumer is exposed to the sponsorship message. This can happen at a sporting event where activations are everywhere to be seen, or it can be done through advertisement campaigns. Using the example of Carlsberg again, one of the participants noted: “Carlsberg have become synonymous for their advertising campaigns. I always recall their humorous ads finishing with the slogan of probably the best lager in the world.”

The literature suggests that for consumers to be most receptive of brand awareness, they must be exposed to the sponsorship linkage, and also the degree of sponsorship activation must be at a high level. The findings of the focus group support this rationale.

A key finding from the research found that the impact sports sponsorship has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels is dependent on the price of the sponsor’s products. The researcher found this to be an additional new insight which he was not expecting to find. Participants suggested that their behaviours were more likely to be changed and effected if the price of the sponsor’s products were low.

Emphasis was placed on insurance, drink, and sporting apparel brand sports sponsorships. One participant responded with the following statement:

“The price of a pint or pair of runners is far cheaper than insurance. If the price is cheap enough, the sponsorship might swing you to go one way or another, depending on the exposure of the brand.”

The previous statement offers a couple of interesting insights. First, it suggests that consumers select insurance on the basis of price, and no matter how effective an insurance sports sponsorship is (think Dublin GAA and AIG), it will not have any effect on a consumer’s buyer consumption level. Second, it suggests there is an opportunity for brands with lower priced products to implement sports sponsorship

strategies as this could potentially lead to a growth in consumer sales. These two statements can be viewed as managerial implications suggested by the researcher.

5.2 Level of Involvement with the Sponsored Sport

This variable emerged from the literature review chapter as the researcher discovered that the level of involvement consumers have with sports and sporting event indicates how they react to the sponsorship. The researcher aimed to test this variable in relation to the potential impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels.

Data collected and analysed by the researcher found that one of the key themes relating to this objective is consumers who have high involvement with the sponsored sport are impacted positively in terms of their probability to buy the sponsor's products. The researcher was not surprised with this finding as a consumer who has high involvement with a sport by either playing it or supporting a team in it are expected to be more receptive to a sponsor's message.

From a critical perspective, the sports sponsorship literature studied show some similarities with the researcher's findings. Studies by Madigal (2001) and Cornwall et al. (2006) found positive attitudes toward the sponsor were formulated by understanding that the sponsorship was perceived to be pivotal to the sports team, which the consumer supports. In other words, consumers react favourably toward sponsors who are deemed important by the sponsored team. Furthermore, the consumer must support the team to begin with, or be highly involved with it, in order for positive attitudes to form. However, the researcher of this project strived to enhance these findings by expanding on what those positive attitudes actually were. As stated earlier, consumer's behaviour was impacted in relation to their purchasing of the sponsor's products, and not only their attitudes toward the sponsor.

Involvement is an effective variable for helping to understand the behaviour of sports consumers, but it is dependent on individual characteristics (Stevens and Rosenberger, 2012). When carrying out the research technique, the researcher came to the same conclusion as Stevens and Rosenberger, in that the level of involvement consumers' display toward a sport is dependent on the individual.

One participant from the focus group expressed in relation to buying football boots that he buys from the same brand every time, due to the “comfort and fit” of them. He understands that opinions vary from consumer to consumer but states that his consumer behaviour would not be impacted by the level of involvement he has in soccer. Another participant stated that although she plays and is highly involved with camogie, she does not think there is a direct link between the sport she loves and her purchase consumption levels towards that sport’s sponsors.

An interesting insight was discovered by the researcher that was not mentioned in the literature review or in the literature surrounding the variable on the level of involvement as a measure of sponsorship effectiveness. This insight is that individual sports are more likely to be influenced by the level of involvement than team sports. Participants were in consensus that there is greater significance attached to the sponsorship of individual sports stars compared to team sports. The researcher states the reason for this is greater exposure for the sponsorship brand on the sponsored athlete. There is only one athlete in the spotlight compared to team sports where there are multiple. It is dependent on the type of sport it is too as participants pinpointed how they were influenced by what golf clubs Rory McIlroy uses (Nike), what tennis racket Roger Federer uses (Wilson).

A managerial implication for this finding is that sponsors should place emphasis on individual sports rather than team sports as there is a greater chance that consumer’s purchase consumption levels toward the sponsor’s products will be impacted.

5.3 Sponsor-Event Fit and its Impact on Sports Sponsorship

The researcher aimed to discover if sponsor-event fit or congruence need to be relevant or relate to each other, in order for consumer behaviour to be impacted positively in terms of buyer consumption toward the sponsor’s brand.

It has been established in the literature that higher congruency between event and sponsor results in favourable responses and positive attitudes from consumer to sponsor. Poon and Prendergast (2006) outline how sponsor-event fit has the ability to influence behavioural and cognitive elements of consumer, and how it influences the impact of sponsorship effectiveness on both consumers and sponsors.

Data collected for the purposes of this research study show similarities to Poon and Prendergast's study. One participant stated: "I think if the sponsorship matches up with the event or sport like Red Bull being linked with extreme sports, then it could have a greater effect." This participant noted that sponsor-event congruence which relates and connects in an appropriate manner has the best chance of impacting consumer's buyer consumption levels toward the sponsor.

Becker-Olson (2006) outlines the significance of the connection of sponsor-event fit making logical sense. Furthermore, it is suggested that if the fit is not appropriate, this could negatively impact consumer response to the effectiveness of the sports sponsorship. The researcher's findings for this variable strongly dispose the previous statement, and the rationale for this is provided now.

One participant highlighted during the focus group that "no sports sponsorship can be viewed as negative," while another stated that there is no negative impact of an illogical sponsor-event fit, but rather a "neutral effect" takes place. This neutral effect is where consumers are not swayed towards buying a sponsor's products, but they do not purposefully go out of their way either to avoid these sponsors in a negative manner.

Furthermore, more of the data obtained also shows that sponsor-event fits that do not relate as well as others are still successful in having an impact on buyer consumption levels of sponsors. Moreover, the size of the event or the size of the sponsor holds a significant influence for consumers. Local sponsors of GAA county teams were discussed under this objective of the focus group. The results found indicated that these local, smaller sponsors have a greater impact on participants than large brands sponsoring major national events.

Another fascinating discovery was made in relation to the above sponsors as well. Considering Supermacs, a fast-food restaurant chain sponsor Galway GAA, and Brady's Ham sponsor Kildare GAA, have been successful in their sponsorships, although they do not seem to connect in a logical sense. This proves that the right sponsorship strategy can influence consumers positively as is the case with Supermacs and Brady's Ham. Consumers react positively as they see the benefits in purchasing their products like supporting local communities.

5.4 Ethical Implications of Sports Sponsorship including Alcohol Sponsorship

The findings found under this research objective include how sports have moral responsibilities when choosing their sponsors. Alcohol sports sponsorship is a massive part of sports sponsorship, and the potentially unethical associations attached with it were put to participants, in order to gain rich, meaningful insights. These considerations are addressed in line with the impact these sponsors have on consumer's purchasing behaviour.

Shortall (2015) expresses that the sponsorship of major sporting events by alcohol brands is highly unethical as it leads to higher levels of alcohol consumption, and encourages young people to overindulge in drinking from an early age. Shortall's study was tested on participants for this research study, and the same results materialised. The research found that the sponsorship of major sporting events by huge alcohol brands, like the Guinness Autumn Internationals and the Heineken Cup, were considered unethical by participants.

One participant stated that the effects of a young person being exposed to hundreds of alcohol sponsorship activations in a stadium during a match could be potentially hazardous. She explains how this could lead the young person to be encouraged to consume alcohol. Another participant points out how they are large sponsorships of popular sports like rugby. She explains how this could impact a young person by making them believe it is acceptable to consume alcohol if famous rugby players are encouraging it through the sponsorship of their sports.

In terms of alcohol sports sponsorship impacting the behaviour of consumers and their buyer consumption levels, a few of the participants illustrate how this is effected at sporting events. These participants explain how it is extremely beneficial for alcohol brands to sponsor major sporting events, due to the large numbers of consumers who attend events. They are also very close to the point of purchase as these sponsors sell their alcoholic products in the stadiums. One participant states:

“These alcohol brands like Guinness or Heineken push their products massively at the sporting events they each sponsor, as they have paid to be established as the only alcohol consumers are able to purchase at these events.”

From a critical perspective, if consumers only have one or two choices of what to drink at major sporting events, it is expected that their consumer behaviour and purchase intentions toward the sponsor will be heavily impacted. Another participant offers an interesting insight that moves away from the literature analysed. She outlines how the increase in consumption of those alcohol brands has more to do with the fact that there are no other options. She states:

“It would affect a consumer’s purchasing or buyer behaviour, more to do with the alcohol brand being enforced upon the consumer, rather than anything else.”

The researcher is of the opinion that what is good for the sales of the sponsor’s products in the short-run, has no lasting long-term impact.

Chapter 6: Conclusion & Recommendations

The results of this research study indicated a number of fascinating insights in to the topic of sports sponsorship and its impact on consumer behaviour, and buyer consumption levels. Quite a few of the findings supported studies that were carried out previously in the literature. However, the researcher also discovered a number of new insights from the method of data collection.

While there have been much studies adapted on the purchase intentions of consumers that occur due to the different variables that help scholars measure the overall effectiveness of sports sponsorship, the researcher proposed in this study to dig deeper and look beyond purchase intentions. The researcher can see the importance of offering more concrete data to sponsorship brands to help them measure different variables. It is for this reason that the researcher's goal of applying consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels to the impact sports sponsorship has on sponsor's products was developed.

The key insights that the researcher found that advances the current sports sponsorship theory are listed as follows: the impact sports sponsorship has on buyer consumption levels is dependent on the price of the sponsor's products, and the personal beliefs of the individual person. Participants uncovered the higher the price, the more chance the sponsorship has less affect whereas if the price is lower, the more chance the sponsorship has more affect. The researcher recommends this is a useful finding for future studies to consider. A comparison study examining different types of sports sponsorship depending on what price range they are in could be an interesting future study. Emphasis should be placed on buyer consumption levels as it is a crucial component that is often overlooked in the literature, as more emphasis is placed on positive attitudes and awareness as outcomes of the sponsorship.

Another new result found that the level of involvement consumers have with a sport and how it impacts behaviour, is more likely to affect individual sports over teams sports. Participants also discovered that experts in the relevant fields are sought by consumers, such as Andy Murray with tennis products, and Rory McIlroy with golf. Marketers involved with sports sponsorship brands might look to this as a potential future research area as an implication of the findings indicated that sponsoring individual sports is more effective than sponsoring team sports.

In terms of the research tool used in this research project, the researcher is satisfied with the focus group interview conducted. The level of discussion in the focus group was fascinating in the researcher's mind as rich, meaningful opinions were extracted from participants. The researcher found new insights in to the sports sponsorship literature that he was not expecting to find. The advantage of the focus group method is that these insights discovered were not generally formed off the basis of the moderator's questions. The discussion at times unlocked new discoveries or constructs which the researcher would have never considered asking participants.

However, the research understands that there are several limitations to this study. Findings from the research are difficult to generalise to the Irish population as the sample size used is quite small. The researcher would also have liked to split the focus groups in to two age demographics to test if there would be any different results to materialise. It would be fascinating to see if the dynamics of the room would have any effects on the findings. Furthermore, the researcher regrets that he did not conduct one-to-one interviews with focus group participants as well. An advantage of adapting this tactic is to uncover whether participants respond in a different manner when they part of the group, compared to how they would on their own. This research tool could offer analysis on groupthink that occurs within focus groups.

The researcher accepts that much of the studies published on sports sponsorship used large-scale surveys aimed at thousands of respondents. However, the researcher did not see as feasible for the purposes of this research project, as the resources were not available. Furthermore, the researcher questions whether some of the new fascinating insights that developed during this research tool adapted, would have materialised through the use of a quantitative approach. The qualitative nature of this study offered an in-depth analysis where meaningful personal insights were given by participants, which would not have been achieved through the use of a survey.

To conclude, the researcher finds sports sponsorship to be a hugely topical promotional element of the marketing mix. The research objectives outlined in this study offers a crucial examination of the different variables at play in the sports sponsorship literature. Some elements of this area are divisive in nature, such as the

alcohol sports sponsorship discussed with many differing viewpoints available. The primary research question was answered sufficiently as the researcher illustrated how the consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels of consumers toward the sponsor's products were impacted by the different roles sports sponsorship plays Irish society.

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Appendices

Moderator: Just to explain, this is a dissertation research project as part of obtaining an MSc in Marketing degree from the National College of Ireland. All participant's names will be kept anonymous and strict confidentiality will be in place. The information gathered from each participant will be used as part of the moderator's research paper, which is then made available online once the dissertation has been submitted. If any participant would like to keep their answers anonymous, or receive a copy of the final paper then they can let me know after the interview. The focus group will be recorded as a means of helping the researcher once the focus group has been conducted.

The title of the project is 'An examination of the role of sports sponsorship, and the impact it has on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels in Ireland. Therefore, the topic will surround the sports sponsorship area, with special focus on sponsorships within the Irish region. I will begin by highlighting some of the current sports sponsorships in Ireland at the moment.

We have Aer Lingus and Vodafone as the main sponsors of Irish Rugby, 3 and New Balance with the FAI, the Guinness Autumn Internationals, and the Guinness Pro 14, which are both rugby again, and Lidl sponsoring the Ladies All Ireland GAA Championship, AIB and Supervalu sponsoring Mens All Ireland GAA football Championship, and LittleWoods Ireland sponsoring the All Ireland GAA hurling Championship/ Ladies All Ireland camogie Championship.

Q1) (Moderator): What is your opinion on sports sponsorship as a whole in comparison with sponsorship?

P1: Personally I believe that sports sponsorship is more effective than sponsorship as a whole. I suppose it all depends what sort of market you're looking for and who you're aiming at. If you look at the likes of football and rugby, an awful lot of them would be sponsored by Guinness/Heineken. That would be geared towards people from the age of 18-40. As you mentioned the Ladies GAA is sponsored by Lidl, which would be geared towards the supermarkets, and shoppers. It is not just all drink and alcohol related in sports, its aimed at all consumers.

P3: I'd agree too that sports sponsorship would have a bigger effect than normal sponsorship because we are a sports mad nation, we love every sport, and we're looking at what sport is on this weekend (Premier League, GAA, rugby). I think any sort of brand associated with these sports gets an uplift. If you are looking at a sports ad on T.V. with a brand attached, I would watch it and if it was any other type of ad I would switch the station over. It would entice me to watch it because there is a sport attached to it and I love sport, and a lot of Irish people do.

P7: I think sports sponsorship holds an advantage because if you think of a brand like Guinness, everyone thinks of rugby. If you think of underage GAA, you think Electric Ireland as they are the sponsor. Everyone knows the sponsor who sponsor these teams or event, so I think it is definitely effective.

P6: I think it actually has a lasting affect as well because if you look at the likes of Carlsberg, I still think of it as being synmonous with Liverpool, even though that sponsorship ended years ago. The same with Vodafone/Man United, Heineken/Champions Cup rugby. It's very good for lasting associations between sponsors and the sponsored item.

P2: I think the Carlsberg sponsorships have been really effective, and some of their advertising campaigns have been excellently done. The association between Carlsberg and soccer sticks in people's heads. Guinness are linked with so many different sports that it sticks in people's heads. We love sport and I'm afraid that we love drink, probably a bit too much in this country. There is a huge association between the two.

P1: There is a huge correlation between the two. You look at any sport in any field, you kind of associate it with the day of the event. What are you going to do, you're going to go out watch a match, go down to the pub and have a couple of pints. It sticks in the mind.

Q2) Moderator: Another general question. What do you think of the relationship between the sponsor of the event/team and your own consumer behaviour, and buyer consumption levels? Would you be more inclined to favour that sponsor and buy their products over another similar product, with similar attributes and price?

P6: I definitely would. For example I'm a big Man United fan, so when I make the choice between Adidas or Nike runners, I choose Adidas because of their sponsorship with them, and for that reason alone.

P1: If you support a team you're biased towards the team, regardless whether it's a jersey, t-shirt, or a pair of runners. You will be more biased towards buying the team's sponsor's products in the long-run.

P3: I'm not so sure now. In terms of drink, I wouldn't ever drink Carlsberg, Heineken, Guinness.

P1: In fairness you drink what you are going to drink, you won't change specifically because of sponsorship. It is dependent on the individual. Sponsorship might make you more inclined to drink, perhaps, it puts a thought in your head. However, it's not just alcohol, it could be phone companies, insurance companies etc.

P8: I wouldn't personally pick a product just because its associated with a sport.

P9: I think the association puts the idea in the person's head. Going back to Lidl and SuperValu sponsoring the GAA, people might favour these brands as they are seen supporting local communities. By shopping in these places, consumers think it is helping the team in the long run.

P7: It puts the idea in your mind subconsciously. If you are sitting in Croke Park and you're seeing a SuperValu ad 10/20 times during the match. Subconsciously even if you don't think you're making the association, you definitely are.

P1: The sponsorship could lean you towards one product over another similar one. It could give the sponsored product the edge. It puts a thought in your head.

Moderator: AIG are an insurance company who sponsor Dublin GAA. What is your reaction to this type of sports sponsorship?

P7: totally dependent on the value of the product. Nike, Adidas will trigger consumers.

P5: Price of a pint/ pair of runners far cheaper than insurance. If the price is cheap enough, the sponsorship might swing you to go one way or another, depending on the exposure of the brand.

P3: The larger the price, the more chance the marketing has less affect. The smaller the price, the more chance the marketing has more affect.

For the next stage of the discussion, an Aer Lingus sponsorship/advertisement was shown to the group. It was about their #HomeAdvantage campaign which ran last November leading up to a rugby match between Ireland and New Zealand that took place in Chicago.

Q3) Moderator: Do you think the sponsor-event fit here between Aer Lingus and Irish rugby matches up? Secondly, does the positive result of the match, the fact that Ireland won impact the brand?

P4: I thought it was a great ad. AL were very clever because they didn't even touch on their actual product. All they did during the ad was tap into people's pride of being Irish.

P1: They tap into your emotions, especially anyone that's linked with sport and rugby. It is great for the brand image of AL and brand association.

P2: Yes I agree because if a consumer thinks about who they should fly to America with, I think they would instantly think of AL.

P5: I don't think it would influence me to book a flight with AL though. I'm not going to book with them over Ryanair if Ryanair's flight is 50 euro cheaper just because of their sponsorship of Irish rugby. But it depends on the location totally.

P1: AL transatlantic is a huge market in Ireland for them so therefore I would see it as being a very worthwhile sponsorship strategy adopted by AL.

P7: The whole video did show the product quite a bit. You see green everywhere, you see flight attendants checking customers in at the airport. However, it is subtle which is important, and the connection is clearly evident.

P3: I thought it was extremely well done showing players from the 3 different Irish teams who defeated the All Blacks before. The image of their brand would have a lot to do with emotional appeals such as flying Irish emigrants living abroad home to their families for Christmas. Also, the fact that Ireland were victorious that day was absolutely a monumental factor.

P8: The sponsorship on different generations, and both genders which is critical to the success of it.

Q4) Moderator: Do you think that a consumer's level of involvement with the sport is an important factor that could impact their consumer behaviour and buyer levels towards the sponsor?

P9: It depends on personal preference. I don't think there is really a direct link between the sport I love and my purchase consumption towards that sport.

P3: I play tennis and I do look at what the best tennis stars in the world are wearing and using in terms of their gear. I would buy UnderArmour clothes because I see Andy Murray wearing that brand, and I would buy Wilson tennis rackets because I see Roger Federer with a Wilson racket. I think a brand associated with a superstar of a sport, I would definitely consider buying from that brand. In terms of team sports, I'm not so sure.

P6: I think it definitely would. For example, I play as a forward in soccer and I look at what type of boots the best strikers in the world are wearing.

P1: I buy the same brand every time I'm buying boots, simply because of fit and comfort. There is a link that might make you think of looking elsewhere, but it is really just dependent on the individual consumer, and this does vary from one consumer to the next.

P5: There is brands associated with certain sports. When you think of Canterbury you think rugby, when you think of O'Neills you think of GAA.

P2: I'm a runner so I would look at what the ladies long distance runners wear. A lot of them wear Asics runners so I purchase them anytime I require a new pair. If the level of involvement with the sport is high, then there is a much greater chance that a consumer's behaviour towards the sponsors involved will be positively impacted.

P7: I'm a runner too and have always bought New Balance runners. When NB sponsored the Olympics, this heavily increased consumers buying NB products, not just runners. The impact NB had of sponsoring such a massive event for the entire Irish squad made a huge difference in terms of what consumers are buying.

P4: Individual sports are far more likely to be influenced by sponsors compared to team sports. It is dependent on the type of sport as well. Think of Nike and their sponsorship of Rory McIlroy.

Q5) Moderator: What is your opinion on sponsor-event fit in terms of a consumer's cognitive thinking process? If there is no clear connection, could it create a negative brand image for the sponsor?

P7: I don't think any type of sports sponsorship is ever going to be bad. It has a large market that I think even if the sponsorship doesn't connect or link with the event, it's not going to have a negative impact

P4: I think it depends on the size of the event. We are talking about massive brands here sponsoring the Champions League etc. But if we're looking at the smaller events and sponsors like LittleWoods with hurling, then I think it could have an effect.

P3: It wouldn't have a negative effect, but it would have a neutral effect, as it wouldn't sway you to buy the sponsor's gear. That wouldn't be negative however as it wouldn't make you purposefully not buy their gear. There is definitely more of a chance for sports sponsorships to have a positive impact rather than a negative one. For example, you wouldn't really associate Supermacs, a fast food restaurant with a GAA county team. But because they are local, Galway with Galway, Brady's ham with Kildare GAA, a consumer could think that's all positive as these sponsors are supporting the local communities.

P8: I agree, if we take LittleWoods as the example. Consumers might not have heard of them before but would be inclined to find out after hearing about the sponsorship and search for them online. It can help increase awareness for the LittleWoods brand, and potentially lead to more sales.

P4: I think if the sponsorship matches up with the event or sport like Red Bull being linked with extreme sports, that it could have a greater effect. One thing I would say though is a dooper for example being sponsored like Lance Armstrong or Jon Jones. The sponsors like Nike and Monster usually end sponsoring these athletes as it is bad PR for the brand. This could potentially have a negative impact on consumer behaviour and buyer consumption levels definitely.

P1: Gatlin who has been caught doping twice and Nike have still stood by him. If you were part of the athletics world, this could affect you and sway you to buy Puma products as they sponsor Usain Bolt.

P8: If I was to go into a shop and buy a pair of runners, I'm not purposefully going to not buy Nike runners because of their sponsorship of Gatlin. I don't think it does have a negative affect from the consumer point-of-view. However, from the brand point-of-view- it could negatively impact on them if they don't pull their sponsorship.

P3: I think on an individual basis it wouldn't sway people. It is more dependent on the price and comfort of the product. But I think when its related to a sports club, it is more important, as they are not going to be impressed if there are sponsored by Nike and Nike have not plugged their sponsorship of a doper. This could cause the sports club to end their relationship with the brand as they do not want to be associated with brands like these, and it can be seen as good PR for them.

Q6) Moderator: While we are on the topic of potentially immoral or unethical sponsorship, I'd like to ask my next question now. Do you think there are ethical implications for a sports team or event choosing their sponsors?

P8: It depends on the individual case. Take Sharapova and Nike for example, if Nike were to drop her, consumers could see this in a positive light, but if they didn't this could definitely have negative consequences for the brand.

P3: Is all publicity not good publicity? I think that it does not affect consumer sales, but could be frowned upon within the media world. Nike is a massive global brand, and I think people don't care.

Moderator: If we get away from what the consumers are thinking, and consider the sports themselves, should they have moral responsibilities when choosing their sponsors? If we consider alcohol sports sponsorship such as Guinness sponsoring the Pro 14 rugby league, do the sports have a responsibility to society?

P5: Well they do. If you look at the Champions League football, you are not allowed have any alcohol sponsorships. Celtic are sponsored by Magners, and anytime they play in European competition they are not allowed to show this sponsorship. It has been made illegal.

P4: They are allowed have it at home games as it is a national rule. But away from home they can't. It is like all alcohol sponsorships are forbidden in France.

P2: I think there should be some sort of ominous on the sport to associate themselves with a brand that is considered ethical.

P1: Is alcohol considered ethical?

P2: Drinking in moderation is fine.

Moderator: Well if we consider the tobacco sponsorship market which was enormous over previous decades, like Marlboro sponsoring Formula 1, this has now been banned as it was deemed highly unethical. I'd like to know your opinions on alcohol sports sponsorship?

P4: I don't think it is unethical. It is different to cigarettes. 1 cigarette is unhealthy for a person, whereas 1 pint is not. It all about moderation.

P8: I disagree here as if we consider the Guinness Pro 14 league for a moment, a young adult watching a Pro 14 match or attending one and seeing Guinness on billboards all over the stadium, and Guinness being sold at these events, could be easily influenced to consume Guinness.

P9: I think it would negatively impact younger people because if they constantly see alcohol brands being promoted at sporting events and being associated with rugby, and rugby players in general, then they will think that's not bad for them, and could over-indulge in consuming alcohol.

P7: I think it's definitely unethical if alcohol brands are sponsoring events where a good proportion of the audience are of a young age, or an event that is specifically targeted at young people, such as the minor GAA championship.

P6: It has more to do with our culture. I don't think it is unethical as we would be drinking at matches anyways. Irish culture, especially sporting culture is surrounded by alcohol, it is almost unavoidable.

P5: I think it would be hypocritical to ban alcohol sponsorship in Ireland of teams and events, and then allow it to be sold in the stadium anyways. I think it is more an issue with Irish society.

P9: I think there is a subconscious element to it for Irish consumers, as we would all go down to the pub and have a couple of pints for a match, and not think twice about it. Is that because we have grown up in a culture where alcohol has constantly been related to sporting events?

P3: The pub culture is part of Irish society, we go to the pub to socialise with friends, to watch matches together. It is going back years and years, and is part of why tourists come here as they want to see the craic that is had, and partake in it. I think that the alcohol brands sponsoring events have latched on to these sports because that is now a huge part of society. I don't think that we can't have one without the other, I just think we have a pub and sporting culture in Ireland and they are linked together, and sponsors have taken advantage of this.

P2: I don't think it is unethical as you always see or hear on the ads to drink responsibly and in moderation. There are clear warning signs given.

P1: These alcohol brands like Guinness or Heineken push their products massively at the sporting events they each sponsor, as they have paid to be established as the only alcohol consumers are able to purchase at these events.

P7: Again I think it is dependent on a consumer's taste though. They won't drink a pint of Heineken if they don't like the taste of it. However, I can see that they would be more likely to consume Heineken at these events as there are no other options sometimes.

P9: It would affect a consumer's purchasing or buyer behaviour, more to do with the alcohol brand being enforced upon the consumer, rather than anything else.

Q7) Moderator: Do you think the role of sports sponsorship can be culturally important and evoke emotional associations from consumers if the sponsor-event fit connects?

P2: I do think that some sponsorships are culturally important. For example, Lidl sponsoring the Ladies GAA All Ireland championships made a whole lot of sense. Firstly, emphasis has been firmly placed on women's sport in society and in the media over the past couple of years. Numerous governing bodies have been trying to encourage an increase in participation in sport for women, and also campaigning

for equal rights for women in terms of pay. So Lidl sponsoring ladies GAA is fantastic for this reason alone.

P4: It is also important for a German foreign brand like Lidl to have these sports sponsorships in Ireland, in order for them to compete with the likes of SuperValu. It is like them promoting their meat as coming from Ireland and being home-grown. It provides Lidl with a sense of localness to their brand and helps them in the Irish market. This sponsorship was an important cultural step for them to take.

P1: Lidl are trying to create an Irish profile and have been successful in adopting this strategy.

The next section of the focus group showed participants a Guinness advertisement video featuring ex- Welsh rugby star, Gareth Thomas, who was the first male rugby player to come out as gay. It is a 3 minute long interview with Gareth who shares his story, and tells of the difficulties he faced with publicly coming out. The positive reaction Gareth got from his Welsh teammates and the general rugby public was highlighted. The advertisement finishes with a promotional message from Guinness, which is the only time the brand are featured in the video.

Q8) Moderator: What are your opinions of the Guinness advertisement in terms of its emotional appeal?

P5: Guinness is associated with Ireland all around the world, and then recently in 2015 Ireland legalised same-sex marriage which Guinness manipulated to play on the heart strings of Irish consumers.”

P9: The sponsor-event fit matches brilliantly as rugby is known as a family brand. Guinness gain the appeal of rugby on to its brand.

P8: I think it is effective but not sure about the buyer consumption levels being impacted. Someone who doesn't drink Guinness will not start to drink it just because of an emotional sponsorship appeal.

Moderator: Okay that's great. Thanks everyone for your time, it has been a thoroughly enjoyable discussion with some fascinating insights gained. We'll finish up there. I'd just like to remind you that all participant's names are anonymous, and the answers given will just be used for the purposes of the dissertation. Thanks!

