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Three Ireland, Two Sports, One Country: Contemporary Sports Sponsorship and the Commercialisation of National Identity

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Introduction

Recent history has seen the emergence of a notable body of academic work exploring the significance of advertising's engagement with sport. Specifically, a good deal of it has focused on advertising's employment of what Mark Falcous describes as the 'sport-nation nexus' (Falcous 2007, 375). Falcous asserted that 'Increasingly informing the promulgation of national narratives is the tendency for corporations to seek to capitalize on the sport-nation nexus as a way of resonating with national markets in their promotional media' (2007, 377). But despite this 'increasing promulgation' of national sports sponsorship, much of the research into the topic stops short of fully exploring the role of all of the players involved – often focusing on the appeal of the sports-nation nexus to advertisers, and their subsequent impact on the perceptions surrounding it. Through this paper and subsequent related work, the intent is to spark a more nuanced discussion about the situation by exploring all parties in the triangular relationship between sponsor brand and advertiser, team and governing body, and fans and consumers. This paper forms part of a wider study on the subject which will hopefully reach full fruition in my Doctoral thesis.

Here, scope is limited to the first two parties in the triangular relationship at the heart of the commercialization of national identity¹ with the intention of examining the fault lines and contradictions which run through it. David Rowe expounds on the appeal sport holds for advertisers, arguing that advertisers operate within a perceived ‘values vacuum’ in which feelings of alienation and rootlessness abound. Advertisers, Rowe asserts, can take advantage of these cultural anxieties by engaging in what he describes as ‘the “consciousness” trade,’ selling a sense of community to a society which feels bereft of same. In such a context ‘sport’s capacity to stimulate emotional identification with people and things is priceless. Sport can connect the past, present and future, by turns trading on sepia-tinted nostalgia, the “nowness” of “live” action and the anticipation of things to come’ (Rowe 1999, 72-73).

This study focusses on Three Ireland (the Irish branch of international telecommunications company, Three) and advertising campaigns it produced in its role as official sponsor to the Irish international rugby union and football teams.² In Three Ireland’s case, engaging through the consciousness trade through the sport-nation nexus has reaped significant commercial benefits. A 2014 report by Boys & Girls, the advertising agency employed by

¹ I intend to carry out consumer/fan research at a later stage in my research.

² A short note here as to the geo-political nature of both teams: The Irish international rugby union team represents both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, while the Irish international football team referred to throughout this paper is technically the Republic of Ireland team.

Three for their sport sponsorship campaigns asserts that the latter's sales rose by 214% as a result of the former's advertising; *An Ode to Fans* – the 2013 Irish football campaign discussed in further detail below – foremost among these commercial successes (Three Mobile ADFX Case Study, September 2014). An interview conducted with a sponsorship executive from Three further underlined the importance of sport sponsorship to the brand, as the executive opined that it had played a huge role in the company being on the verge of becoming most popular mobile phone network in Ireland (Three Sponsorship Executive, 26/2/16). This paper will examine the above mentioned *An Ode to Fans*, as well as *All it Takes* – a 2015 campaign released in anticipation of the Irish rugby team's participation in that year's Six Nations Championship.

These findings aim to contribute towards the wider context of this field; not only to sport sponsorship in general, but also to the notable trend of brands attempting to co-opt intangible associations in an incongruously official fashion – what might be dubbed 'concept sponsorships.' Examples of this latter phenomenon include the UK branch of multinational consumer goods company P&G claiming to be “proud sponsor of mums” (P&G Newsletter, April 2012) in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympic Games and the Coca Cola co-opting Christmas, transforming their recurring advertisements into Christmas traditions. These brands appear to be engaging in the consciousness trade through tapping into the values and qualities associated

with motherhood and Christmas; an attempt which is complicated by the nebulosity of the concepts (rather than events, a more conventional object of sponsorship) involved. Does P&G's partnership with the Olympic Games and championing of "mummy" bloggers legitimize its implicit claim to represent all British mothers?

Three's appropriation of national identity through its sponsorship of Ireland's two most prominent international sports teams simultaneously poses advantages and complexities greater than those of the other 'concept' sponsorships outlined above. Their claim to represent the teams and their fans is infused with a sense of legitimacy owing to their official arrangement with the recognized Irish governing bodies of both sports (The Football Association of Ireland, FAI; and the Irish Rugby Football Union, IRFU). In addition, the presence of a pre-existing fan base who consciously self-identify with the sponsored teams gives Three a more tangible consumer group to appeal to than the tenuous collective identification of P&G or Coca Cola's concept sponsorships. Furthermore, international matches blur the boundaries between fan and consumer by providing a public platform in which the team, the object of fandom, become conflated with the sponsor brand by performing in jerseys bearing the company logo, therefore rendering the act of supporting the team a tacit gesture of brand consumption.

However, Three's situation is also replete with complications unique to sports sponsorship. While fan discontent with administrators over sponsorship arrangements is not unheard of in other fields, in sport (and particularly at the level of international teams) there is a particularly pointed perceived disconnect between the object of sponsorship (the team, and by extension their fans, players and arguably the sport within the country in general) and those tasked with arranging this sponsorship. Notably this is something of which the administrators themselves are very aware, as one FAI sponsorship official says: "there's the Irish team and then there's the FAI: they're two separate identities and we're very conscious of that" (FAI Sponsorship Manager, 8/12/15). Despite this awareness, there remains the risk of fans questioning the legitimacy or appropriateness of the sponsorship and disrupting the narratives which Three attempts to impose on them. Nor are the fans the only unpredictable variable within this arrangement, underperformance from the team or even the actions of individual players can dictate perceptions of the team – and thus, to an extent, the brand – in a way which may undermine sponsorship campaigns.

In this paper, these complexities will be expounded on; examining *All it Takes* and *An Ode to Fans* in order to explore the narratives Three is attempting to construct around both teams, the potential disruptions to these narratives and the ideological underpinnings which facilitate their construction. While this paper is ultimately part of the larger ongoing

project of my doctoral thesis, it aims to help to establish the theoretical and cultural context from which this wider work progresses and, in doing so, outline the socio-cultural significance Three have accrued in its unusual act of dual sponsorship.

Context

The appeal of sport to commercial brands is obvious, but nonetheless merits some discussion here. David Rowe expounds on the particular qualities sport offered advertising, arguing that: 'When contemporary advertising relies so heavily on making very similar items (such as sugared drinks, cars with shared components, "re-badged" computers) appear different,' sport can be an invaluable distinguishing feature for brands (Rowe 1999, 73). Sport, therefore, acts as a flexible and potent symbol for advertisers to draw from to help elevate their brands above those of competitors. While it is by no means the only prominent symbol from which advertisers can draw emotional stimuli, it does have the distinct advantage of having an organized fan base which they can appeal to and substantial events on which they can focus their promotion. In these respects, a major international film franchise could pose similar advantages to a sponsor, but the commercial effectiveness of such an arrangement would be somewhat limited by the period the film was in theatres and thus at the forefront of

media outlets and public consciousness. An arrangement with a sports team or organization offers a brand greater long term prominence.

Of course, in connecting themselves to sport, sponsors also gain a significant degree of increased visibility for their brand. In November 2015 72% of Irish adults watched a Rugby World Cup match against France, while almost 1.6m people tuned into a Euro 2016 qualifying match with Germany. Few other modern events can boast attracting such viewership, or such a sense of cultural significance. Such major sporting events take on what Gary Whannel describes as a ‘vortextual character;’ commanding the attention of the media and wider public in a self-perpetuating spiral in which an event is deemed too significant to ignore and is thus the subject of greater and greater attention, furthering its aura of significance. While other events may take on vortextual qualities, Whannel asserts that sport does so to a greater degree than most other regular, scheduled media events (Whannel 2009, 206-211). Sport and the media exist in a symbiotic relationship with the latter transforming the former into events of national or even international significance, while being rewarded with greater public interest for their coverage of these events.

Commenting on the history of this relationship, Rowe argues that it was the media that played the largest role in transforming sport from ‘folk-based physical play into industrialized professional sport through the progressive

intertwining of two institutions produced out of, and helping to make, modernity' (Rowe 2013, 134). Sport has progressed from mere physical activities with significance limited to the locality in which it was played to events of international financial and cultural significance. What was once 'folk-based physical play' is now highly regulated sports, governed by centralised organisations, codified by universal sets of rules and practised by full time professionals.³ Sport is more popular and wide reaching than ever, and yet the media and organisational models which facilitate this popularity has also created something of a gulf between those professionally involved with the higher levels of sport and the fans who follow it. Fan alienation is a continual possibility, and the latent nostalgia for the folk-based roots of the sport is potent material for advertisers. It is arguable that advertising's use of sport constitutes an attempt to affect a temporary representational elision of the process Rowe outlines; blurring the boundaries between sport's folk-based roots and its professionalized reality. In doing so, advertising can avail of the diverse qualities of sport (the 'sepia-tinted nostalgia' and excitement of contemporary live action outlined by Rowe above), allowing it to tap into the symbolism attached to particular sports (or teams) on a

³ This is, of course, a very general assessment of sport. Different sports have widely divergent degrees of the professionalism described above – and, indeed, many are still played on a part time or amateur basis in many countries. However, the assessment is pertinent with regard to the international state of both rugby and football, and also should be understood as a contrast with the amateur roots of sport, rather than an objective commentary on the state of contemporary sport.

historic level while still gaining publicity from the 'vortextual' qualities associated with significant contemporary sporting events.

However, while sport offers advertisers visibility, a sense of significance and a variety of ideologically potent qualities to draw from, it nevertheless poses unique complexities. Some of them were alluded to in the introduction, but having now established sport's distinct abilities to symbolize and channel conceptions of national identity, it is now worth considering the potential pitfalls this presents for brands who seek to employ it. National identity is a contested and nebulous concept, particularly so in the case of Irish national identity, and advertisers attempting to trade upon its appeal face the dilemma of trying to depict it in a way which will be recognizable and appealing to a national audience while also being distinct enough to distinguish the brand from previous or contemporary competitors employing national identity or sport in advertising campaigns. The strategies and processes behind the commodifying of national identity through sport will be further explored below, examining how Three and its advertising partners negotiate these pitfalls. Through employment of Henri Lefebvre's 'new scarcities' concept (and drawing somewhat from Ernesto Laclau's idea of the 'empty signifier') the process of how such a complex, contested and nebulous concept as national identity is rendered tangible enough to form a commercially effective element of Three's brand identity will be explored. The analysis of the content of the specific ad campaigns themselves will

outline the particulars of the versions of idealised Irish identity presented and interrogate the factors which determine these particulars.

Theoretical Framework

‘New scarcities’ was a concept first outlined by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his 1974 book, *The Production of Space*. This work was primarily concerned with exploring the ideological implications of the composition of physical space; the connection between ideological space and the urban and architectural surroundings which dictate the social interactions of individuals. Approaching architecture from a Marxist perspective, Lefebvre examines how economists traditionally relegated naturally abundant qualities (such as water, air, light and space) from the sphere of political economy as, he claims, their very abundance nullified their potential exchange value.

He then goes on to describe how the conditions of modernity have greatly altered notions of abundance and scarcity, rendering qualities that were once abundant scarce and vice versa. He cites the decline of bread functioning as a symbol of vital sustenance in European society as an example of the latter, arguing that despite its prominent place in prayer and in historical labour struggles, the industrialisation of agriculture has created the impression that food is permanently plentiful in Europe. According to Lefebvre, the obsolescence of these once-valued commodities is

deliberate; a planned move to further blur the distinction of use and exchange value by replacing political economy with ‘market research, sales techniques, advertising, the manipulation of needs, investment-planning guided by consulting-firms, and so forth.’ (Lefebvre 1974, 329) The result of this dialectal shift is the new scarcity.

Lefebvre describes the ‘new scarcities’ as ‘formally abundant because they occurred ‘naturally,’ which had no value because they were not products, have now become so rare, and so acquired value. They have now to be produced, and consequently they come to have not only a use value but also an exchange value. Such commodities are “elemental” – not least in the sense that they are indeed elements.’ (1974, 329) In this manner, commodification of the natural (as opposed to the produced, which hitherto accounted for the majority of commodified products) becomes possible in the event of socio-economic circumstances cultivating the belief that it has become rare, in decline or under threat in some other fashion. The result of this conversion of natural qualities into commodified new scarcities results in a postmodern flattening in which nature in urban planning is reduced to ‘a few signs and symbols’ in which it is ‘reproduced.’

Drawing from this, it could be argued that Lefebvre’s concept can be applied to ideological qualities as well as natural ones. It is an idea alluded to by Rowe in his discussion of a ‘values vacuum’ – a cultural condition of

increased feelings of alienation in which ‘many people [...] no longer [believe] deeply in anything [...] or [feel] committed to any cause outside the immediate interests of themselves and their significant others’ (Rowe 1999, 72). This alienation can then be played upon by commercial bodies engaging in what Rowe describes as the ‘consciousness trade.’ In this examination, the concept is applied to national identity, arguing that Three are a notable example of a brand playing upon the ‘consciousness trade’ by using sport to tie themselves to this ‘new scarcity.’ It has been widely argued that globalisation – and the rising consciousness of it – has undermined confidence in the concept of a distinct national identity, therefore creating a latent anxiety about the possibility of global cultural homogeneity.⁴ National identity therefore is omnipresent but increasingly nebulous; ‘naturally’ occurring yet apparently rare – an ideological new scarcity. Therefore it can be brought into the realm of political economy by advertisers in a similar way to how Lefebvre’s architects and property developers utilised physical new scarcities.

⁴ In his *History of the Media in Ireland*, Christopher Morash describes the impact of the belated onset of cultural and economic globalization on Ireland: “Effectively, these changes reversed what had been two of the dominant features of Irish culture since at least the end of the nineteenth century; the sense that, through a combination of geography and history, Ireland was insulated from the rest of the world and hence from the transformative powers of modernity (or indeed post-modernity).” (2010, 221). Elsewhere, John Fanning has argued the point from a wider, international perspective, writing that “All the evidence we have therefore suggests that the globalization process will continue but will be met with equally determined resistance from people all over the world, but especially in smaller countries who will become fiercely attached to their own identity and seek tangible methods of demonstrating this attitude.” (2006, 218)

In the case of Three, the process of converting national identity is somewhat complicated by the fact that it must present different versions of national identity for two separate ad campaigns, which though they may overlap with one another must remain distinct enough to not detract from the campaign's commercial appeal by making it seem overly derivative. Therefore it becomes useful for Three to tacitly transform Irish identity into what Argentinean philosopher Ernesto Laclau describes as an 'empty signifier.' Laclau described the concept as 'stabilis[ing] the floating of the existing signifiers by "fixing" the relations between them'. In this manner, the 'empty signifier' can render a potentially contested concept digestible within the limited timeframe of an ad and relatable to a wide audience (who may have very different opinions on the concept) by standing for 'the impossible fullness of community' through 'divest[ing] itself of its particularity' (Laclau 2004, 100). In their depiction of an apolitical, largely ahistorical version of Irish identity characterised by generalised qualities such as loyalty, bravery and a vague sense of community (which will further be expounded on in our analysis of the ads themselves below), Three construct broad texts which can comfortably accommodate the distinct conceptions of Irish identity held by consumers.

Sport arguably represents an ideal vehicle for commercial interests to package this new scarcity. Sport transforms the semi-defined conception of national identity into the tangible form of the team or athletes competing

under the nation's flag, staving off the possibility of global homogeneity through difference being continually reiterated through the very act of pitting different nations against one another. By facilitating a distinct time and place for national identity to be performed, sport creates a palatable sense of community (through fans watching together in the stadium or in a pub or other public viewing area) which furthers the sense of a shared identity. However, through the very act of rendering national identity so tangible, sport thus consigns the day-to-day experience of national identity all the more tenuous and difficult to define in comparison. Sport, increasingly, becomes one of the viable forms for the expression and experience of a vivid conception of national identity. It facilitates the transformation of national identity into an ideological new scarcity by acting as a form of expression of that identity so direct and vivid that tacitly diminishes other forms of expression and thus heightens the sense that national identity is increasingly rare or under threat.

Analysis of Three Sport Sponsorship Campaigns

An Ode to Fans was released in 2013, in the build-up to matches against Austria and Sweden, upon which the Republic of Ireland's hopes for qualification for the 2014 FIFA World Cup were dependent. The television advertisement features a montage of Ireland fans intercut with surreal imagery which acts as a deliberately exaggerated visual metaphor for the

activities of the fans. Ireland fans are depicted travelling to away matches, cheering their team on despite extreme weather conditions, watching matches on television, discussing tactics with one another and engaging in other visible shows of support; while the narration – a poem recited solemnly by actor Emmet Kirwan – lauds their loyalty.

One of the more notable features to emerge from an analysis of the ad and its ancillary material (press releases, behind-the-scenes video, etc) is that while the importance of the team's success is minimized, the significance of the ad's use of genuine Ireland fans is emphasized. The ambivalence towards success is not only implicitly present in the ad itself (Kirwan's narration mentions fans looking out for that "rare glimpse of Celtic gold" – its rarity apparently having little effect on their dedication celebrated in the rest of his poem) but is also directly stated in Three's official press release. Boys & Girls creative director Rory Hamilton asserts that "support isn't about winning or losing, it runs much deeper than that." The press release is also quick to mention that rather than seek out the services of agency actors, Three employed Ireland supporters groups 'You Boys in Green' as "the genuine stars of the ad." Three CCO Elaine Carey says that the fans were "amazing" because "they didn't need to act" (Three Press Release, 12/3/13) – a claim she repeats in the behind-the-scenes video posted to the brand's official Youtube channel.

The relative importance of success and the perceived authenticity of those featuring in the ad are also notable features of *All it Takes*, an ad released in preparation for the Irish rugby team's participation in the 2015 Six Nations Championship. *All it Takes* features three Irish rugby internationals (Robbie Henshaw, Paul O'Connell and Johnny Sexton) engaged in surreal displays of strength and fortitude against a stark, minimalist background – a clear contrast with the gaudy, cartoonish aesthetic of *An Ode to Fans*. Ireland manager Joe Schmidt provides narration, outlining the effort involved in succeeding at the highest level of the sport. Schmidt's narration provides another noted contrast with *An Ode to Fans*, the analytical rhetoric of the team coach contrasting with the romantic poetry of the actor fan. The emphasis of the narration on success through effort is echoed by the press release, which claims the ad demonstrates “how it takes 100% effort to play elite rugby at the highest level” (Three Press Release, 2/2/15). Elsewhere, the official description of the ad on Three's Youtube post claims the players are operating “at the highest level.” This lauding of the team's abilities and standing within the sport forms a noted contrast with the de-emphasis of success throughout *An Ode to Fans*. This disparity is also underlined through a contrast of the appearance of those depicted in both ads. *Ode* emphasizes the ‘ordinariness’ of the Ireland fans (notably beginning with shot of a plump fan in a dull sitting room) while *Takes* demonstrates the extraordinariness of the Ireland rugby team through special effects (Paul

O'Connell shatters an enormous charging rhino, while Robbie Henshaw bursts into flame as he lifts weights).

These differences demonstrate the complexity in marketing an apparently all-inclusive identity as something distinct and appealing in a crowded marketplace. They also serve to illustrate how the unpredictability and results-based nature of sport dictate – to a certain extent – the narratives built around advertising campaigns in a way in which other intangible communities or identifiers don't. This latter point is certainly something Three is conscious of; a sponsorship executive at the company conceded that the teams' success (or lack thereof) is the "one thing we definitely can't control." Instead, Three insist it focuses on more dependable – though intangible – qualities: "it has to be about the qualities of the team or what they've done to get where they are or the style that they play in." Indeed, in the case of the football team, we see that the qualities focused on extend beyond the team to the fans, whose dedication and loyalty appear unaffected by the team's on-field misfortunes, and are therefore a more reliable attribute for the brand to leverage. The football team has experienced more success in the intervening years, but this has not detracted from the appeal of the fans' loyalty. Notably though, the Irish rugby team suffered some disappointing defeats in the World Cup and Six Nations Championship of 2015, a relative downturn in their fortunes which may yet see Three shifting from its championing of Irish players succeeding "at the highest level."

Another complexity involved in the process arises from Three's persistent emphasis on authenticity. The behind-the-scenes video of *Ode* sees Elaine Carey claim that the fans "didn't need to act" over shots of the fans being directed to cheer by the ad's production crew. There's an 'authenticity anxiety' at play; an eagerness to demonstrate that, despite the constructedness of the ad and the financial motives involved, Three are tapping into a 'truth' about Irish sport, and, perhaps, about Irishness itself. This 'authenticity anxiety' is present in a different variety in the *All it Takes* campaign. The stark, surreal aesthetic of the ad forms a significant contrast with three biographical mini-documentaries focussing on the three players featured in the campaign.⁵ These videos firmly ground each of the players in traditional Irish culture (focussing on Henshaw's interest in traditional music, O'Connell's work in the village shop, Sexton's frequent childhood trips to his godfather's rural pub) and depict their transition from schoolboy or amateur level to the top of the sport as a relatively seamless one. Elite rugby, represented in the main ad by a dreamscape populated by supermen, is depicted in these videos as not so different from the community based grassroots of the game – a point that is emphasised by repeated assertions in all three videos that the respective players have not been changed by the fame or pressure they must cope with.

⁵ The mini-documentaries are available on Three's YouTube channel and – at the time of writing – have each attracted over 50,000 views.

Therefore what emerges from a close examination of both campaigns is that despite superficial aesthetic and tonal differences between the two, they ultimately portray similar, intersecting conceptions of Irishness. The selfless dedication of both fans and players, their apparently authentic sense of passion for, and connection with, their community and wider country and an assortment of prominent cultural symbols form an 'empty signifier' of Irish identity. It unifies the disparate and sometimes conflicting conceptions of Irish identity into a version that is at once readily digestible to a national audience but also flexible enough to shape into two distinct ad campaigns. Sport is key to these qualities; its easily recognisable goals creating a sense of unified purpose which works to mute potential discord concerning clashing conceptions of Irishness, while the prominent differences between rugby and football work to palpably distinguish both campaigns from one another in public perception. Sport's potential to facilitate such a conversion was touched upon during an interview with figures from the marketing and sponsorship departments of the FAI who repeatedly noted that "football ticks every box" and possesses "that universal appeal" (FAI Sponsorship Manager, 8/12/15) which can accommodate any message which a brand wishes to communicate and do so to as wide an audience as possible. Similarly, an interview with a sponsorship executive in Three revealed that the company views their sports sponsorship as a way of winning national support and affirming their status as a market leader within Ireland rather

than a medium to convey any specific qualities about the brand or the country itself (Three Mobile Sponsorship Executive, 26/2/16).

Discussion

Viewing both campaigns as efforts to champion an idealized version of Irishness within the context of an increasingly contested national identity, they can be argued to be undertaking the process of transforming Irish identity into a new scarcity. Anxiety surrounding the cultural and economic impact of globalization works to create the impression of distinct national identity as perennially under threat and yet infinitely valuable. John Fanning characterises this anxiety as an awareness of the inevitability of globalization existing alongside a strong desire to resist it and a subsequently increased attachment to local identity and methods of expressing it (Fanning 2006, 218).

Within this context, Three need to do little to contribute to the idea of Irishness under threat of global homogeneity, but instead concentrate on constructing a tangible and appealing way of expressing that identity. Sport provides an excellent vehicle to manifest Irishness in this manner, providing clear visual signifiers and prominent expressions of triumph, joy and togetherness. Notably, a Three sponsorship executive describes the company's football sponsorship campaigns as an attempt to "try to tap into that moment [...] putting up flags in your house and decorating the car and

kids in the street and whatnot.” Speaking of the upcoming campaign centred on Ireland’s qualification for the UEFA European Championship, the executive describes Three’s intention for the campaign: “the hope is that once again you help unify the country in a certain way, build upon all the passion and get everyone on board, and you want to capitalise on the excitement that’s going to be in Ireland around that time” (Three Mobile Sponsorship Executive, 26/2/16).

Sport – and by extension advertising representations of it – serves as an effective way for fans/consumers to palpably experience the new scarcity of Irish identity. Its vortextual qualities and direct signifiers of national identity serve to effectively – if perhaps only temporarily – rebuff fears of encroaching insignificance in the wake of globalisation. However, sport also carries considerable complications for brands and advertisers wishing to trade upon the appeal of the new scarcity of national identity. Indeed, many of these complications and potential pitfalls arise from the very same factors which make sport so attractive to its commercial partners.

In the case of Three, the organized and passionate fan base of both Ireland teams offers the brand a clear target audience, but an audience that is by no means passive. While no audience is unanimously compliant with the narratives imposed on them by advertising brands, sports fans could be argued to be particularly suspicious and stubborn in cases when these

narratives affect their team. Sports fans possess a keen sense of ownership of their team and are well versed in passionate outbursts against those perceived as opposing or hindering it. They have the opportunity to publically voice their discontent not only at matches, but also via social media – an arena where there exists the chance that their remarks will be caught up in international sport’s vortexual quality and attract significant attention. As national team sponsor, Three must present an optimistic public view of both teams, even in the face of disappointing results. This often clashes with fans’ views and in some cases results in disgruntled fans conflating their view of the team with that of the brand. After Three posted a picture on their official Facebook page pertaining to the football team’s disappointing 1-1 draw with Scotland one fan sarcastically estimated the chances of Ireland qualifying for the European Championship as “About as much hope s [sic] getting a decent signal or response from this tech team” (Three Ireland Facebook Page, 15/6/15). Fan cynicism seems rarely far beneath the surface in the realm of sports sponsorship. In 2014 when Guinness posted a description of their latest ad – which focused on the Munster rugby team’s historic win over New Zealand in 1978 – its factual errors were derided by disgruntled rugby fans. One of them notably conflated the errors with the brand’s attention to its own product: “Guinness researcher prob [sic] never played rugby in their life and would not be

surprised if they'd never had a Guinness" (Guinness Ireland Facebook page, 21/11/14)

This risk is something the parties involved in Three's sponsorship are conscious of, though it remains adamant that they can navigate it. FAI officials joke about how the organization will always inevitably incur fan discontent, but maintain that they frequently liaise with supporters' clubs to ensure that they do not cause too much offense (FAI Sponsorship and Marketing Officials, 8/12/15). Similarly, a Three sponsorship executive opines that "you'll always get someone ranting on social media" and dismissed potentially disruptive "diehard fans" as "a small minority," but still conceded the importance of fan perception of their relationship with the team. Speaking of Three's desire to "unify the country in a certain way" through their support of the team, the sponsorship executive agreed when the FAI's assertion that the fans view the team and governing body as distinct from one another when it comes to forming opinions and attachments was reiterated to them (Three Mobile Sponsorship Executive, 26/2/16). Therefore, it could be argued that to effectively reap the benefits from their sponsorship arrangement, Three must publically portray itself as more of an 'official fan' of the Irish team than a commercial partner of the FAI or IRFU. This was a theme that was touched upon by one of the leading figures for both campaigns at Boys & Girls, who claims that fans "want [sponsors] to kind of recognise what it means to be a fan" and that this

recognition would win the sponsor the fans' respect. Reflecting on *An Ode to Fans* and the then recently aired #*makinghistory* campaign⁶, the advertising professional points out the importance of “draw[ing] the line between encouraging people to support and showing them how to support. You don't want to be patronising to people, you don't want to be condescending and wag the finger and say ‘you've got to be a better supporter.’” Instead, the interviewee argued, the brand should portray the fans as role models of support which they themselves wish to emulate (Boys & Girls Advertising Strategist, 27/4/16). Thus, it seems the brand must win the loyalty of the fans by depicting themselves as a mediated extension of them; effectively, accruing commercial benefit from the sponsorship arrangement by drawing attention away from – if not quite disguising – the financial arrangement at the heart of it.

The other, and perhaps more obvious, complication for a sports sponsor brand such as Three is that the fundamental unpredictability of sport gives the lengthy process of designing, filming and promoting an effective advertising campaign some distinct difficulties. Again, it is a difficulty that all the parties involved are well aware of, though that should not diminish the complications it presents. The fan-centred football campaigns were

⁶ Released in April 2016, *Three's* campaign for the Irish football team's participation at Euro 2016 follows its predecessor in focusing on the Irish fans rather than the team (though the latter do feature, albeit very briefly, in the ad). This is notably curious given that FAI officials, when I interviewed them before the campaign had been pitched to them, seemed confident that *Three* would be eager to feature the players as a consequence of the team's historic wins against world champions Germany and play-off opponents Bosnia-Herzegovina.

designed specifically with the team's erratic on-field fortunes in mind. While *All it Takes*, focusing on the dedication of the featured players, relies on the public's esteem and respect for the players, but is undoubtedly rendered all the more effective by the team's success. Having won the Six Nations Championship in the year of the ad's release and the year prior, the Irish rugby team is now in a period of transition following a disappointing defence of their title. Three and its advertising partners must now tread somewhat more warily in their lionizing of the team. In examining the emerging risks faced by advertisers in the internet age, John Sinclair notes that 'Young consumers in particular are inclined to participate in ruthless parodies and spoofs of branded advertising that they discern to be manipulative and inauthentic, and new social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter allow the diffusion of such material on a global scale' (Sinclair 2012, 45). The unpredictability of sport perennially threatens to render advertisements fodder for such parodies by creating a clear dissonance between the idealized fantasy of the ad and the occasionally underwhelming reality on the pitch. A recent prominent example of this would be an ad made by Nike in anticipation of a Grand Slam win for England in the 2011 Six Nations Championship. After England were unexpectedly defeated by Ireland in their final game, an edited version of the ad was circulated online, depicting Ireland players Brian O'Driscoll and Paul O'Connell laughing at the portentous platitudes of the original ad. This is something Three are

conscious of: “it’s very dangerous to just link a campaign to the success of the team, because it’s the one thing we definitely can’t control.” Thus they strive to make the less tangible elements of the team (“the qualities of the team or what they’ve done to get where they are or the style that they play in”) into marketable features (Three Mobile Sponsorship Executive, 26/2/16).

Conclusion

Despite the above-detailed complexities, Three have been significantly successful in leveraging their sponsorship of both Irish international teams into commercial gain. As outline above, their sales rose by 214% in 2013, while the Three sponsorship figure interviewed claimed its share of the Irish mobile phone market was just 1.5% less than that of Vodafone, the leading brand. In November 2015 they claimed the Irish Sponsorship Awards deemed them ‘Best Sponsorship Team.’ The appeal of the sport-nation nexus continues to thrive and Three has managed to negotiate the process of transforming this complex and intangible quality into something commercially viable.

With this commercial success – and its subsequent social and cultural ramifications – in mind, the process by which sports sponsorship reshapes the contested and ever-shifting concept of national identity into a commercially digestible quality is all the more significant. Through the example of Three’s sponsorship of both Irish teams, we see the conversion of

national identity into an ideological new scarcity; an apparently naturally occurring rarity that can be marketed to a public anxious at the prospect of global cultural homogeneity. In addition the transformation of national identity into an empty signifier allows Three to reach as wide an Irish audience as possible without arousing serious criticism for its depiction of the country through its sports teams and fans. Again, sport is key to this transformation. Chief among the commercially attractive features of Irish football, according to a sponsorship figure within the FAI, is its flexibility: “Football ticks every box. [...] It has that universal appeal.” Through limiting their depiction of idealised Irishness to a few broad cultural signifiers and heroic qualities, Three transforms Irish identity into an empty signifier; instantly recognisable and almost equally palatable to the majority of the disparity of views on the country’s cultural identity. In viewing Three’s sponsorship of both Irish teams as an example of these ideological processes, we not only gain a clearer understanding of the cultural significances of ‘concept sponsorships,’ but also the particular factors unique to sports sponsorship and the commercial employment of the sport-nation nexus.

Three’s transformation of national identity into an ideological new scarcity also helps them to navigate the potential commercial pitfalls caused by the unpredictability of sport. Through its advertising campaigns, Three create the impression of Irish sport as the ultimate expression of national identity.

If a distinct and appealing national identity – a balm for the cultural alienation aroused by the perception of a monolithic globalised culture – is a rarity that can only be satisfactorily experienced through sport (and Three's representations of it) then the result of the sports match diminishes in importance. The experience of the match itself as a rare outlet for idealised national identity works to ensure that the cultural cachet the brand attain from linking themselves with the team is not entirely dependent on positive results.

What emerges from this study is the notion that contemporary national sports sponsorship exists in a state of perennial flux. It can theoretically appeal to great swathes of an entire community in a way which few 'concept sponsorships' or 'tribal identities' can in the culturally fragmented, globalised, postmodern age. However, the unpredictability of sport and the vague, and continually shifting levels of association between not only the sports team and its governing body continually threaten to reduce the potentially nationwide effectiveness of sponsoring a prominent national sports team. In the empty signifier and new scarcities concepts, there is an apparently viable route for brands to pursue in order to gain considerable commercial benefit from their sponsorships. The example of Three demonstrates the commercial consequences of this approach, but the wider cultural consequences remain less certain, and therefore would be an interesting object of future research.

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