Brand image of French soccer was tainted by several scandals in few years. For example, during the last FIFA World Cup, “Nicolas Anelka” has been expelled from his team after refusing to apologies for a verbal attack on coach and French players returned to their bus after refusing to take part in a training. In any event, following the French national soccer team’s disastrous 2010 FIFA World Cup campaign, a major reconstruction within the French soccer federation resulted in the appointment of Laurent Blanc and then Didier Deschamps as new manager. They symbolize the glorious past of the French national team. In this context, the summer 2010 reflected a window of opportunity to develop a new marketing and sponsorship strategy. Indeed, since July 2010, the French soccer federation tried to: 1) internalize its marketing rights and 2) renew the sponsorship contracts for the next four years (between 2010 and 2014). Until summer 2010, the effectiveness of the French soccer federation sponsors seemed to be diluted by the increasing number of partners. Indeed, about thirty sponsors had some visibility for each game of the French national soccer team at the Stade de France. Hence, the new partnership model with only twelve brands seems to be more interesting for sponsors. The new marketing and sponsorship strategy of the French soccer federation is based on the central notion of “value”. Two key objectives were identified: 1) creating new values for partners and 2) restoring the old (good) values. It is essential to activate the sponsor’s brand as a catalyst by means of specific operations in order to optimize the sponsorship investment, « Sponsorship without activating is like buying an electronic device but not the batteries. Yet even when sponsorship is activated, all too often the batteries are the wrong size » (IEG, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, it could be noted that activation strategy should be implemented as part of the overall sponsorship activation plan to interact with consumers in ways that improve their experience with the brand and led to different sorts of interaction (Chanavat, Desbordes and Ferrand, 2013; Chanavat, Martinent and Ferrand, 2009). Overall, with activation playing a critical role in a sponsorship’s success, properties need to do all they can to help partners activate (IEG, 2013). For these reasons, we suggest to measure and propose one “ideal” sponsorship activation. If it is necessary to develop sponsorship activations, it seems to be important to determine both the expectations of consumers, sponsors and sponsees.

Review of relevant literature

Sponsorship activation communications (or leverage) can be defined as « the act of using collateral marketing communications to exploit the commercial potential of the association between a sponsee and sponsor » (Weeks, Cornwell & Drennan, 2008, p. 639). The authors defined sponsorship activation as « communications that promote the engagement, involvement, or participation of the sponsorship audience with the sponsor » (Weeks, Cornwell & Drennan, 2008, p. 639) and may include things such as event-related sweepstakes, event-driven mobile telephone competitions or event-themed brand web sites. Previous research investigating sponsors’ use of activation has generally been supportive (Sneath, Finney & Close, 2005; Bennett, Cunningham & Dees, 2006; DeGaris, West & Dodds, 2009). Activation has been described as valuable in promoting sponsorship awareness and correct sponsor identification (Quester & Thompson, 2001), in helping to enhance sponsor image and audience attitudes (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), in creating differentiation between sponsors and non-sponsors (Cornwell, Roy & Steinard, 2001).

Hence, these marketing tools have an impact on the three generic consumer psychology behaviour stages (cognitive, affective and conative) presented by Lavidge and Steiner (1961) in the hierarchy of effects model. Most of the academic literature makes no distinction between communications that actively engage audiences (activational) and communications that might be more passively processed (non activational) (Bennett, Cunningham & Dees, 2006). This apparent gap is important. Indeed, while sponsorship activation strategy should be developed, it may be relevant to measure stakeholders’ expectations and perceptions. In any case, to date, despite its importance to the field, no specific study was published to determine an “ideal” sponsorship activation”. In others words, it is
important to suggest concrete sponsorship activations that includes all the expectations of consumers, sponsors and sponsees.

Clarity of purpose/objectives of the study/timeliness

The purpose of this research is to determine an optimal sponsorship activation that combines both the expectations of consumers, sponsors and sponsees. This study measures the needs of: 1) sport consumers, 2) French soccer federation consumers, 3) French soccer federation’s sponsors and 4) officials of French soccer federation marketing department. The final goal of this study suggests “ideal” propositions of activation for stakeholders involved in the sponsorship activities. It focuses on the French soccer federation because it has developed a new marketing and sponsorship strategy based on the match up of stakeholders needs. In this way, the effectiveness of advertising an event is central, not only for the companies producing the event, but also for corporations sponsoring the event because of the emphasis on generating revenues. Scholars who analyse the sports industry also strive to understand what makes an advertising campaign strategy effective. In order to better comprehend the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, corporations and scholars have made exhaustive efforts to study consumers and investigate how advertising affects them and their decision-making (Bennett, Cunningham & Dees, 2006). Therefore, the research question of this study concerns expectations of the sponsorship stakeholders that could be combined to develop a successful activation.

Appropriate methodology and data analysis

We adopted an inductive research approach, in order to explore stakeholder’s expectations and in recognition of the little work that has been done on the topic so far. We collected primary data using qualitative methods, conducting semi-structured interviews with fifty-three persons according to the criterion of semantic saturation. The interviews were recorded as audio files. These were transcribed by an external transcriber. We followed the procedure of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) and Patton’s (2002) to develop the interview guidelines. First, twenty-four sport consumers (rugby, tennis, basket-ball, soccer, baseball, cycling, etc.) aged between 16 and 56 years (16 male, M age = 38.26, SD = 3.13 and 8 female, M age = 36.23, SD = 3.97) have been interviewed. The objective was to measure consumers’ expectations about the sports marketing activations set up by the sports sponsors. Second, the objective was to identify French soccer federation consumers’ expectations regarding sponsorship activations developed by its sponsors. Twenty fans of the French Soccer National Team aged between 21 and 81 years (14 male, M age = 41.36, SD = 3.93 and 6 female, M age = 44.21, SD = 3.02) have been interviewed. The participation of the consumers was voluntary, written informed consent was obtained from each individual before data collection, and the anonymity of the people was ensured. A demographic questionnaire assessed the age, gender, and nationality of the participants. Finally, in a managerial perspective, the objective was to compare the expectations of consumers with the constraints and expectations of the federation and its sponsors. Therefore, in order to give legitimacy to the results and to optimize the results of the study, we interviewed five officials of the French marketing soccer federation department and four official marketing sponsors.

Discussion/implications/applications

First, the results of this study highlight that sponsorship activations are not optimized. In this perspective, consumers want a more active sponsorship. The results of the analysis of interviews with sport consumers highlight three main themes. Indeed, it seems that sponsors must: 1) foster closer ties with the athletes; 2) award tangible prizes to consumers; 3) develop the show around the pitch before and after the game. Second, the results of the research show that fans of the French National Soccer Team want that the activations of the sponsors: 1) reduce the gap between brand image of amateur French soccer and brand image of professional French soccer. (For instance, the majority of respondents propose to amateur clubs to win the right to attend a day at the French National Soccer Center “Clairefontaine” to share time with the French national soccer team), 2) propose exceptional experiences during games, 3) restore proximity between professional soccer players and French fans, and 4) offer exceptional great deals. Third, the sponsee wants to: 1) develop cognitive and affective reactions regarding the French national soccer team, 2) develop new animations around the pitch, 3) help sponsors in terms of brand activation 4) satisfy fans, 5) develop an activation with several partners together. Fourth, the results show that sponsors want to: 1) optimize their visibility around the game, and 2) propose original sponsorship activation. Moreover, the sponsors want a proactive federation in terms of sponsorship activation. Overall, they wish to develop brand awareness, brand image, brand attachment and purchase. These findings are coherent and consistent with the cognitive/affective/conative aspects specified in the hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Therefore
they confirm previous study examining sponsors’ use of activation (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Quester & Thompson, 2001; Cornwell, Roy & Steinard, 2001). Finally, in the lights of this study, different propositions regarding activation were suggested to certain partners of the French soccer federation. Amongst the twenty suggested proposals, two were chosen and developed by the federation in the light of the results of this research: 1) “Training dream for young people to participate in training of National Soccer French Team”, 2) “The Team All Footballs” (in progress). Therefore this study wants to suggest ideal propositions of activation for stakeholders involved in the sponsorship activities. It could be noted that this study was conducted as part of a partnership developed with the marketing department of the French national Soccer Federation. The partnership established between the university and the federation allowed 250 students from the University Paris Sud to attend an international sporting event.