Sporting shades of green: a comparative analysis of sponsored national mythmaking in Irish rugby and soccer

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Abstract

This paper derives from an ongoing study of how modern sports contribute to the (re)definition of national identities in the context of increasing marketization and mediatization of sport at different levels. In this paper, we examine the symbolic tensions surrounding Three Ireland's concurrent sponsorship of the Irish international football and rugby union teams via an analysis of two television commercials commissioned by the sponsor. We suggest that although different signifiers of Irish identity are employed in the football and rugby commercials examined – and that each ostensibly represents a different 'version' of Irish identity – both campaigns draw largely from a common fund of cultural authenticity. Our analysis suggests that Three Ireland has constructed broad texts that comfortably accommodate differing signifiers of Irish identity and that permit the sponsor to trade in limited and controllable degrees of cultural difference. More broadly, our paper demonstrates how national identity can function as a 'multi-directional symbol'.

Introduction

A significant body of academic work has examined mythmaking through sport and the mythologizing role of the media, which in recent times includes new media environments as part of an expanded 'media sport content economy' (Hutchins and Rowe 2009; See also Whannel 2002, 2009; Tuck 2003; Silk, Andrews, and Cole 2005; Free 2005; Blake 2011; Wang and Zhou 2015). Sports scholars are increasingly turning to concepts like 'mediatization'1 to explain the growing influence of media in sport and to help make sense of contradictory dynamics at work in this field (such as between localism and globalism). Frandsen (2015), for example, suggests that sports organizations are increasingly restructuring as a result of the perceived importance of digital media. Her research finds that Danish national sports federations typically spend about 50% of their communication budgets on maintaining their websites and a further 20% on social media and push communication. On the one hand, new platforms and online channels enable greater levels of interactivity and relationship building between sports companies and fans, yet on the other hand, they also present difficulties in terms of relational (and reputational) management and in dealing with critical feedback – and in extreme cases, with instances of fan activism (see Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins 2010; Delia and Armstrong 2015; Hutchins 2016).

In this paper, our interest is in national mythmaking through sport in the context of this expanded media sport content economy. New media environments and their globalizing tendencies make the symbolic process of national mythmaking through sport increasingly

complicated, though no less pronounced. Indeed, Rowe (2015, 693) notes that 'as sport becomes more global and transnational in nature, the national is constantly re-asserted as a locus of collective identification'. Taking this suggestion as our point of departure, this paper examines the particular and somewhat precarious business of national sports sponsorship. This precarious business activity is made all the more complicated and precarious when the company involved sponsors two different national sports teams at the same time – as is the case reported here. In what follows, we examine Three Ireland's concurrent sponsorship of the Irish international football (soccer) and rugby union teams. Three Ireland is the Irish branch of international telecommunications company Three. (In Ireland, the company is chiefly involved in providing mobile phone network services). Central to this paper is an examination of the tensions that lie at the heart of the operation and performance of Three's role as sponsor. We contend that the arrangement, while offering significant potential commercial benefits, presents various complications for the sponsor, notably at the symbolic level.

Our analysis centres on a comparison of two television commercials commissioned by Three: 'An Ode to Fans' (football 2013) and 'All it Takes' (rugby 2015), and compares the myths about Ireland and Irishness at work in these texts and the complications which arise from them. To different degrees, sports such as football, rugby and Gaelic Games2 in Ireland have all reflected and contributed to the redefinition of the contested meanings of 'Irishness'. Nevertheless, we suggest that although different signifiers of Irish identity are employed in the football and rugby commercials examined and that each ostensibly represents a different 'version' of Irish identity, these texts and the wider campaigns of which they are part rely heavily on entrenched notions of Irish cultural authenticity which emphasize communal ties and local allegiances and a shared national habitus or Yeatsian cultural whole (Graham 2001), and which have guided the marketing of Gaelic Games in Ireland (cf. Arrowsmith 2004). Indeed, Michael Cronin (2007) argues that the marketing of Gaelic Games in Ireland illustrates particularly well the attempt to present modern, global Irish identities which are at the same time predicated on a kind of communitarian anti-globalization. In a similar vein, we suggest here that sports sponsorship attempts to commodify national identity by trading in limited and controllable degrees of cultural difference. Furthermore, we suggest that the commercial benefits of sponsorship are contingent upon the sponsor working to obscure the financial arrangement that lies behind it, instead enacting a public performance as 'official fan'. Similarly, in his study of the 'social alliance' between brands and sports teams, Robert Madrigal (2000) asserts that the former's most effective method of deriving commercial benefits is to create meaningful social situations in which the brand and team seemingly coexist in a friendly informal relationship, characterized by apparently non-reciprocal gestures of support by the brand. Again, however, it is important to recognize that this performance of 'official fandom' is increasingly unstable in the social media era, owing to the increasingly prominent platforms for fans to subvert commercial narratives.

In the case of Three, this unstable 'performance' is exacerbated by its simultaneous sponsorship of two different national sports teams, each with its own particular history, class origins and fan bases (which overlap to some extent). This paper is part of a larger ongoing study of how modern sports contribute to the (re) definition of national identities in the context of increasing marketization and mediatization of sport at different levels. Here, we concern ourselves only minimally with institutional dynamics and audience responses to the

sports media texts analysed; however, these are central pillars of the overall study and each will form the basis of a future publication. In the next section, we examine the evolving relationship between sport and Irish national identity, particularly from the period of the 1990s onwards. Our intention here is not simply to establish a historical context for our study but to also chart the particular symbolic trajectories of Irish rugby and Irish football. Historicizing the Irish sporting nation (brand) Messner (1988, 198) argues that sport – and the broader culture of which it is part and to which it contributes – 'is a dynamic social space where dominant (class, ethnic, etc.) ideologies are perpetuated as well as challenged and contested'. Messner's reflexive-historical study of gender in sport depicts sport as a kind of glue in uncertainty and offers, we suggest, a helpful way of thinking about attempts to 'preserve' national cultures in the face of the conjoined forces of globalization and mediatization.3 Rowe, McKay, and Miller (1998) similarly insist on the importance of historicizing the intersections of media, nation and sport, and on the need to approach the media sporting nation as 'a profoundly ideological formation' that rests on a series of contradictions, most notably between historical continuity and immanent social change. In a useful suggestion, Rowe, McKay, and Miller (1998) claim that the media largely operate in the space between tradition and custom – the former providing lines of historical unity, while the latter allows for novel variations or changes 'on the ground' as it were. Rowe et al. therefore argue that pronouncements on the death of nationalism in conditions of advanced globalization are wholly premature and misunderstand the importance of sport as a vehicle for creating and maintaining (imaginary) national unity amidst ceaseless change. Indeed, they argue that 'the more that national-political, economic, and military sovereignty is undermined, the greater the need for states to construct a semiotically potent cultural nation' (Rowe, McKay, and Miller 1998, 133).

In many respects, the Republic of Ireland exemplifies the kind of contradictory dynamics that Rowe et al. and Messner describe. The Irish State transformed from a so-called 'emigrant nursery' in the 1980s (MacLaughlin 1994) to one of net immigration4 throughout the 1990s as a consequence of the labour market demands of a booming economy (the short-lived 'Celtic Tiger'). While on the one hand, Celtic Tiger Ireland suddenly enjoyed newfound confidence and unprecedented economic growth, the combined forces of increased immigration and intense globalization prompted considerable debate about what it means to be Irish. The hitherto predominant conceptions of 'authentic' Irish identity, calcified in the early part of the twentieth century and revolving around cultural isolationism, a distrust in modernity and a fetishization of rural life (Gibbons 1996), were increasingly seen as incompatible with the lived reality of modern Ireland. Even the Irish 'nation brand'5 found itself forced to adapt, shifting from bucolic imagined ideal to globally successful smart economy to a nation brand that, as of 2016, presents itself as a harmonious fusion of tradition and modernity. In this context, it is also important to note that brands (notably Guinness) and marketing texts in general have also played a crucial role in evolving representations of Ireland and Irishness (Fanning 2006; O'Boyle 2011). For example, in her analysis of Guinness advertising, Barbara O'Connor (2010) points to the dominance of a largely masculine and consumerist sense of Irish national identity, while O'Brien's (2009) analysis of a different Guinness advertisement emphasizes its polysemy and suggests that it hails 'postmodern, intelligent, cosmopolitan subjects'. In short, the representational struggle for Irishness since the 1990s has played out in various ways but has in many respects been re-

energized by globalization. Inglis (2008), in fact, suggests that Irish culture is not only surviving but thriving in conditions of advanced globalization.

As noted above, the Celtic Tiger economic boom of the mid-1990s saw the gulf between pervading perceptions of what constituted 'authentic' Irish identity and the dominant sociocultural conditions of contemporary Irish society. In this period of cultural flux, sport acted a site of negotiation for the shifting discourses surrounding Irish culture. Even prior to the onset of the Tiger, the successes of the Irish international football team under Jack Charlton (1987–96) functioned as a symbol of an Irish national pride divorced from what Aidan Arrowsmith (2004) describes as 'unpopular Catholic nationalism and … the spectre of nationalisms in Northern Ireland'. By representing the 26-county 'Republic of Ireland' on an international stage, and with a number of British-based players winning their place through Irish ancestry, the team appeared to offer a vision of Irish identity decidedly closer to the reality of the socio-economic conditions of modern Ireland than the bucolic Da Valerian ideal which had for so long set the cultural priorities of Irish governments. Arrowsmith (2004) argues that this earlier, seemingly outdated conception of Irish identity was rooted in the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which represented a kind of stagnant parochial parallel to the relative cosmopolitanism of the football team. In contrast to the Irish football team, which represented Ireland 'as a nation to be identified, respected and even celebrated against other nations', Arrowsmith argues that the GAA represented an 'older, nationalist version' of Irish identity that became 'progressively less and less relevant, less and less popular' (465–466). However, as Ireland's economic fortunes rose through the 1990s and immigration overtook emigration, the discourse of Irish identity constructed around the football team began to be implicitly dismissed as outdated in certain quarters of the media. Free (2013) has discussed how the increasing scepticism with which British-born players for the Irish team were greeted by many Irish sports journalists bespoke not only a sense of embarrassment over continued reliance on the contribution of the diaspora, but also a renewed anxiety about the parameters of Irish identity. Free links this to the 2004 amendment to the Irish Constitution, which denied automatic citizenship to anyone born on the island who did not possess an Irish parent. With greater financial benefits and international prestige on offer, 'Irishness' became an increasingly tightly contested commodity. In contrast to its football team, the Irish rugby union team – with a majority of Irish-born or Irish-based players, and with links to the middle-class media and political establishment and, by no means least, increased success on the international stage – was suddenly championed as symbolic of a new, confident Celtic Tiger Ireland. Moreover, the trajectory of Irish rugby neatly paralleled that of the economy: the sport was professionalized in 1995, with Ireland achieving significant international success in the early years of the new century. The Irish rugby team and the dominant ideals of Celtic Tiger Ireland were conflated to such an extent that Free argues the team was effectively regarded as a distinctly 'native' exemplar of the Celtic Tiger economy, especially in its professionalism: [To] quote RTÉ television rugby presenter Tom McGurk:

'This is a fully professional team. You could call it a Celtic Tiger rugby team.' … This interplay between economic and sporting discourse was implicitly oriented toward Ireland's professional-managerial class … the regular reduction of the state in Irish business and media discourse to the national economy, and its reduction in turn to a 'plc.' Variants on the phrase 'wearing the green jersey' were increasingly used in the 2000s to signify the patriotic commitment of Irish businesspeople. (2013, 220)

The notion of the rugby team being symbolic of a confident and successful Ireland has not significantly diminished following the collapse of the Celtic Tiger economy. Indeed, it can be argued that the continued success of the team has acted as an ideological balm for the country's economic woes of recent times (Free 2013). However, rugby's success did not entirely drain the football team of cultural cachet. Ironically, given that it had once been viewed as emblematic of a modern Ireland emerging from the shadows of De Valerian fantasies, the Irish football team and its supporters were now frequently employed to assuage anxieties of Ireland completely abandoning its traditions in the wake of the economic upheaval of the 2000s. While notable efforts were made (and continue to be made) to connect the Celtic Tiger confidence of the rugby team with traditional perceptions of Irish identity, the football team (and particularly its supporters) were more easily depicted as representative of the traditional values of 'bravery, self-mastery, and devotion to Ireland' (Nugent 2008, 600). These values, Nugent argues, calcified as the foremost qualities of idealized Irish masculinity during the cultural revival and independence struggle of the late nineteenth century and remained prominent throughout the majority of the twentieth century owing to the abiding sociocultural influence of the Catholic Church. In turn, Debbie Ging (2009) contends that the values outlined by Nugent still carry considerable cultural weight in modern Irish society and that sport functions as a prominent manifestation of them. Similarly, Cronin (2007) describes how the GAA successfully repackaged itself to capture the confident globalism of the Celtic Tiger period while also reinforcing an 'imagined organicism' that bound country and city, parish and nation and which ensured that 'the GAA continued to prosper as a safe repository for a traditional, yet largely uncontroversial, Irishness'.

In their different ways, therefore, sports such as football, rugby and Gaelic Games in Ireland have continued to reflect and redefine what it means to be Irish. While Gaelic Games remain immensely popular and attract huge viewership, our interest in the remainder of this paper is in analysing efforts by the corporate sponsor Three Ireland to unify the nation's interest behind the football and rugby teams. International success is crucial to this. As Mike Cronin argues, 'without it [international success] the sport might prosper domestically in terms of spectator numbers or participants, but it cannot galvanize a nation and become representative of a successful competitive identity' (1999, 128, see also Giulianotti 1996). Therefore, we limit ourselves here to examining the Irish international football and rugby teams not only because their shared sponsor offers us a particularly succinct and illustrative case study of the flexibility (and limits) of sponsored national mythmaking, but also because the potential for Gaelic Games to represent Irish national identity is somewhat complicated by their lack of an international platform. Rugby and football remain intensely popular sports in Ireland. In 2015, 7 of the 10 most watched programmes on Irish television were sports related: these included Ireland's four matches in the Rugby World Cup (against Romania, Italy, Argentina and France) and Ireland's two matches in the Euro 2016 football qualifiers (against Poland and Bosnia) (Brady 2016). In the remainder of this paper, we examine how Three Ireland has attempted to negotiate the complicated symbolic terrain of Irish sport and the particular tensions which arise from concurrent sponsorships. First, however, we describe the broader ongoing study from which the analysis presented here derives.

The study

The analysis presented in this paper derives from an ongoing study of the nexus of sport, national identity and sponsorship in Ireland. Taking sports sponsorship as the locus of our overall study, we follow Rowe (2004) in examining the interrelationship of: (i) specific sites of media sport production within the broader political economy of sports media – with a particular focus on relational and power asymmetries between the various institutional actors; (ii) media sports texts – with a particular focus on how these are inscribed with ostensibly different 'versions' of Irish national identity; and finally, (iii) critical reception of these media sports texts by fans and audiences – with a particular focus on their semiotic and ideological instability or 'contestability' (Free 2013, 6). The empirical core of the study focuses on sponsored advertising campaigns for Ireland's national rugby and football teams by Three Ireland from 2013 to 2015. As noted, a central aim of the study is to investigate the relative autonomy of the institutional parties involved in the making of these sponsored texts. For example, the study considers if and to what extent governing associations – which are responsible for curating images of sports teams and leasing sponsorship rights – hold a power of veto concerning how their respective teams are depicted by sponsors. Equally, our study investigates the extent to which the sponsor takes (or does not take) into account fan discontent about their commercial treatment of national sporting teams (including online feedback). Fans are sometimes confined to the rather passive role of consumers in studies in this field, but they are uniquely positioned to publicly disrupt advertising narratives and sometimes do so wilfully. In this paper, however, we concern ourselves primarily with analysing how national identity is commodified through sports sponsorship and the symbolic complications of national mythmaking in this process.

The ongoing study from which this paper derives employs a number of investigative methods across a number of institutional sites. First, in order to develop a sense of institutional and relational dynamics – as well as to better understand the production process and intended meanings of the campaigns under investigation – we are conducting semi-structured interviews with staff at Three Ireland, the governing associations of both sports (IRFU and FAI), and the Boys & Girls advertising agency. Interviewing with staff at the corporate sponsor and the rugby and football associations has already begun, with interviews with staff at the Boys & Girls advertising agency planned for summer 2016. Second, in order to assess audience responses to the sponsored ads and to investigate national identification amongst Irish sports fans, we are: (i) analysing Youtube feedback (already underway); (ii) administering a face-to-face pilot survey to generate broad themes for the audience research (already completed); and (iii) conducting focus groups with Irish rugby and soccer fans, organized through supporter groups (planned for autumn 2016). Finally, in order to situate our study in terms of Irish national mythmaking more broadly – our primary interest in this paper – we are undertaking textual analyses of Three-sponsored advertising campaigns for Irish rugby and football between 2013 and 2015 (already underway). We are using thematic qualitative analysis (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) to categorize findings and are subjecting these to critical discourse analysis (Richardson 2007). This means that we intend to:

> Offer interpretations of the meanings of texts rather than just quantifying textual features and deriving meaning from this; situate what is written or said in the context in which it occurs, rather than just summarising patterns or regularities in the texts; and argue that textual meaning is constructed through an interaction between

> producer, text and consumer rather than simply being 'read off ' the page by all readers in exactly the same way (Richardson 2007, 15, author's italics).

In the next section, we critically analyse and compare two television commercials commissioned by Three Ireland. Our interest in analysing these texts – beyond their formal compositions and dramatic narratives – is chiefly to uncover what has been 'projected onto them in ideological and mythological terms' (Rowe 2012, 2231). Although the discussion which follows rests primarily on our analysis of these two commercials (and some supplementary materials), we support this with selected findings from the administered pilot survey and with testimony drawn from the interviews already completed.

Findings

'An Ode to Fans' was released in 2013 as part of Three's '#supportworks' campaign. The commercial was released 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 Irish fans intercut with surreal imagery which acts as a deliberately exaggerated visual metaphor for the activities of the fans. 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 most striking features of the ad is its pointed de-emphasis of success. The narration admits Irish success ('Celtic gold') is rare, but champions the fans for sticking by the team despite disagreement with the manager's decisions, while in the official press release, Boys & Girls' creative director Rory Hamilton asserts that 'support isn't about winning or losing, it runs much deeper than that' (Three Press Release 2013). A spokesperson for the FAI – Irish football's governing body – similarly commented in an interview: 'We never operate on the basis that we're going to win all our games because we're not. And the sponsors aren't involved on the basis that we're going to have a really successful team, because we might not. It's a bonus then for sponsors when we are successful' (FAI Spokesperson 2015). A Three Sponsorship Executive concurred: 'I think 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' (Three Sponsorship Executive 2016).

The few examples of success within the 'Ode to Fans' commercial are conveyed in notably oblique fashion (a comic strip overlaid with a commentary clip, a famous moment recreated with Legostyle toys). While success is characterized as fleeting and unimportant, supporter loyalty is depicted as direct and authentic. Travel to away matches is portrayed as a hardship to be endured rather than a modern luxury, which is later emphasized by a shot of arctic penguins enduring extreme weather conditions. Similarly, watching the match on television is depicted as unglamorous; fans' living rooms are dull and largely colourless with grainy, poor-quality televisions. In such apparently unappealing conditions, supporting the Irish football team becomes an act of pure loyalty and patriotism, transcending the affluence and materialism associated with the Celtic Tiger. Key to this is the discourse of authenticity which runs throughout the campaign. The press release lauds the fact that the fans depicted in the

commercial are ‘genuine fans’ drawn from supporter’s group ‘You Boys in Green’ (Three Press Release 2013).

In a ‘behind the scenes’ video of the making of the commercial (issued on Three’s Youtube channel), Three CCO Elaine Carey claims that the fans ‘didn’t need to act’ – a claim that is swiftly undermined by footage of the fans being directed by the ad’s film crew. Claims to authenticity, of course, often rest on dubious ground, but what is significant in the contradictions at play in Three’s employment of Irish fans for their commercial is their confidence in the popular appeal of the apparent authenticity of the fans. In some respects, this confidence appears to have been well founded. As noted above, we administered a classroom-based pilot survey in 2016 (n = 76) to generate broad themes for the larger phase of the audience Figure 2. Travelling to away matches. research. The survey was administered to students taking a second–year optional module at an Irish university. Respondent ages ranged primarily from 19–22, with only 4 in their mid-late 20s. The majority self-identified as upper middle or middle class, with only four respondents identifying as lower middle or working class. All bar three respondents identified as white or other white. The optional module was chosen because students taking it come from a range of business, arts and media programmes, and though most students are Irish, the class also includes a sizeable cohort of overseas students – hailing from a range of countries (Australia, France, China, Sweden and the United States). We considered this internal diversity useful for a pilot exercise. Although this survey was purely exploratory, findings nevertheless offer tentative support for the above reading of this commercial. For example, the vast majority of respondents claimed to enjoy the commercial and every respondent bar one6 perceived a strong sense of Irish identity in it, the parameters of which appeared to very clear insofar as the written responses of respondents (including overseas students) repeatedly used a narrow range of terms, such as ‘community’, ‘relatability’ and ‘authenticity’.

The following written responses to the question ‘Does this commercial suggest anything to you about Irish identity?’ are illustrative of this: I think that we, the Irish, have a very strong sense of community and I think that this ad uses this to make us feel proud to be Irish. I feel proud to be Irish when I watch it. (Female, 20, White Irish) That we’re a predominantly white middleclass patriotic nation. (Female, 20, White Irish) It suggests a togetherness, that sport unites us all. Also brings in the ‘saints and scholars’ thing with narrator using poetry. Suggests we will support no matter what. An undying love for Ireland. (Female, 20, White Irish) It’s a very relatable, well cut advertisement featuring quintessentially Irish things. (Male, 20, White Irish) As a nation and enduring the shite weather, showing the dedication we as Irish people give to what we love and what we are passionate about. Irish people are passionate and family orientated. (Female, 25, White Irish) Yes, I think it shows how passionate Irish people are and how excited we get when the country is on a global stage. Also how we reminisce on the past good times. (Male, 21, White Irish)

Released two years after ‘An Ode to Fans’ in spring 2015 and in conjunction with Ireland’s participation in the Six Nations Championship, ‘All it Takes’ is in marked contrast to ‘An Ode to Fans’ in focusing on players over fans. The commercial features a sleek, minimalist aesthetic rather than the garish nostalgia of its football predecessor and places a notable emphasis on winning. The commercial depicts three Irish rugby internationals (Johnny Sexton, Robbie Henshaw and Paul O’Connell) engaged in surreal tests of their physical and mental strength – such as Paul O’Connell confronting a rhino at speed – while Ireland

manager Joe Schmidt provides narration, outlining the effort involved in succeeding at the highest level of the sport. In the following passage, a Three Sponsorship Executive explains the differing rationales for 'Ode to Fans' and 'All it Takes': 'Because rugby is such a rough, physical, brutal game – you're putting your body on the line, you're putting everything on the line – and that was really the essence of the campaign. Whereas 'Support Works' is a totally different concept, and the research for that was coming from [the fact] that we could rely less on the performance of the team – it was just a little more volatile – so we had to tap into the passion of the fans a little more on that side with the football' (Three Sponsorship Executive 2016). Ireland manager Joe Schmidt's narration of 'All it Takes' is particularly significant, as Schmidt's New Zealand accent functions as a tacit reminder that Ireland has moved from emigration to immigration, attracting a manager from one of rugby's premier nations, rather than – like the football team – being forced to export its own best players to other countries. Furthermore, the ad strives to elevate the achievements and prowess of the Irish team to an international standard. The description of the commercial on Three's official Youtube channel claims the players are operating at 'the highest level', while the official press release claims the ad showcases 'how it takes 100% effort to play elite rugby at the highest level' (Three Press Release 2015).

However, when one considers a number of supplementary materials produced as part of this campaign, one can infer an awareness (by Three) of the difficulty of fitting this metallic, dark aesthetic and dauntless confidence of international quality with traditional perceptions of Irish identity. In three supplementary videos comprising biographical mini-documentaries of each of the three players involved in the commercial7 , elements of traditional Irish culture and community are emphasized: Robbie Henshaw's interest in traditional music, Paul O'Connell's previous job in a village shop and Johnny Sexton's relationship with playwright John B. Keane (and his pub) are notably stressed. In Sexton's case, this is particularly notable, as the locale focussed on in the video – John B. Keane's pub in Listowel, County Kerry – is chosen over his family home in an affluent South Dublin suburb; a choice that could be viewed as a tacit acknowledgement that the latter is too closely linked with the Celtic Tiger in public consciousness and thus not sufficiently 'authentically' Irish to merit focussing on. Another significant inference drawn from our analysis of the three supplementary videos is the emphasis placed on the 'rootedness' of the players: each video ends with assertions from interviewees that the player in question has not 'let the fame go to his head' and has remained in touch with the community. Notably, Henshaw's grandfather says that 'Every time you pick the paper up, he's there and he's looking out at you, but it never made a bit of change to him', as the viewer sees shots of the player himself signing autographs for children. Elsewhere, Sexton's godfather maintains that 'he's still the small boy at the back of the pub here, playing at his grandmother's house, just kicking the ball up against the wall'.

In a similar vein, the transition from local rugby to school rugby to the professional game is depicted as relatively seamless, creating the impression that the ultra-modern and successful superstars of the commercial are not so far from the grassroots of the sport. Thus, while the main television commercial presents a modern, success-driven vision of Irish identity, the supplementary videos of the campaign arguably demonstrate an anxiety about entirely discarding more traditional forms, and instead emphasize the unglamorous dutifulness and sense of community which 'An Ode to Fans' foregrounds. Again, our survey findings – once

more in response to the question ‘Does this commercial suggest anything to you about Irish identity?’ – offer some support for the above reading, while also reminding us that advertising texts are polysemic. It is noteworthy that although some respondents readily identified a sense of Irish identity in this commercial, many viewed it as more ‘universal’ in its appeal, and some were confused (even irked) by Schmidt’s voiceover (which some – presumably non-rugby fans – mistakenly interpreted as Australian): We are not the stereotypical Irish man anymore we can be powerful and we are ready to take anything on. (Female, 19, White Irish) It suggests we are passionate and strong and fighters. (Female, 23, White Irish) That we will carry on, no matter how difficult the challenge is. The ‘nationalistic Irish’ struggle against the British could possibly be read into this – although I wouldn’t have read that much into it if I hadn’t of been asked this question. (Male, 27, White Irish) It’s more of a universal identity in reference to sport. (Female, 19, White Irish) Not really, rugby as a sport is known for its physical endurance and strength. Regardless of identity, rugby is a worldwide sport and this ad doesn’t really give any sense of Irish identity. (Female, 25, White Irish) I found it harder to connect due to the voiceover and that none of the situations resonated with me/were relatable. (Female, 19, White Irish) Why ozzie voice over?? (Female, 20, White Irish) I don’t understand why they don’t have an Irish person saying the voice over. (Female, 20, White Irish) No not really. They have a New Zealand accent narrating it. (Male, 20, White Irish) Not sure about the voiceover actor’s voice/accent. Doesn’t sound Irish when it should be if it’s about Irish rugby team. (Male, 20, White Irish) Rugby fans are usually more upper class and the elitist style of the ad could probably tie that to them easier. (Male, 21, White Irish).

While the producers of these sponsored texts are guided by research on what will resonate most strongly with Irish sports fans (and users of Three’s services), it is important to remember that as individuals, of course, they are prone to make distinctions in terms of a given sport’s cultural authenticity. In the following interview passage, for example, an FAI spokesperson highlights that more Irish people watch football than rugby. However, the subtext of his comments – underscored by the point about his mother’s emotional reaction to the football team losing, as opposed to her indifference when the rugby team loses – suggests that in his opinion at least, football has a deeper cultural resonance for Irish people:

> ‘It’s a bigger voice, the volume is higher, because there’s more people watching [football] and there’s more people engaged with it. And I just think there’s a bit more feeling, so they care a bit more. Say for example, my mam would have watched all the rugby matches, but when they’re not doing well she doesn’t really care, she’s not bothered. Whereas she’d be sad if we [football team] don’t do well in the Euros. She’d be sad for “poor old Martin O’Neill and poor old Shane Long”’ (FAI Spokesperson 2015).

To some extent, this sentiment is supported by the following comments from a Three Sponsorship Executive in an interview: ‘When fans get behind football… traditionally when Irish fans get behind football they’re very passionate. Even if you’re not a football fan, it gets the passions rising across the nation for the big tournaments’ (Three Sponsorship Executive 2016). However, it is worth noting that at another point in the interview – when the discussion moves to Ireland’s more recent image change as a global success story – the Three Sponsorship Executive emphasizes rugby’s professionalism: ‘A lot of countries up until recently did think of us as diddly-aye and twee. It’s only projected in a certain way in the media; green fields and funny accents, so if we’re performing on the world stage in a very

professional manner and we have these really amazing sports ambassadors like Brian O'Driscoll and Paul O'Connell, who speak so well and so intelligently and articulately, it's only going to help us on the world stage, I think' (Three Sponsorship Executive 2016).

Discussion

Maguire (1994, 410) suggests that 'sport plays an important role in embodying multiple notions of identity' – a role that is compounded by the mediatization of sport and which makes it ideally suited to contemporary capitalist requirements for speedy change and customization. One can add that media sport also illustrates particularly well the multidirectionality of mediatization: mediatization not only connects the world in a process intrinsically linked to globalization, but it also facilitates seemingly contradictory processes like individualization, nationalization, and localization (Hjarvard 2008). Indeed, where national identity is involved, sports media appear to play a key role in 'the simultaneous articulation of national unity and difference' (Rowe, McKay, and Miller 1998, 125). Though rugby and soccer currently occupy somewhat different positions in the complex representational space of mediatized Irish identity, their differences should not be overstated, and these sports can hardly be considered emblematic of some sort of 'chaotic, hybridic diversity' (Rowe, McKay, and Miller 1998, 133) where Irish identity is concerned. Indeed, how these sports impact upon wider discourses of the Irish nation is unclear, but for us they compellingly demonstrate that 'new' and 'old' versions of Irishness are not necessarily divergent (cf. Arrowsmith 2004; Free 2013). One could argue that Irishness has become an ideological version of what philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991) has termed a 'new scarcity' – a previously abundant, natural quality which has become commodifiable through its perceived rarity. What both of the above-mentioned campaigns share is the tacit idea of 'Irishness' as a desirable quality only accessible to a chosen few. By framing Irish fans and players within an international context, these commercials contribute to transforming 'Irishness' into a new scarcity. Within the cultural context of a country increasingly anxious about the parameters of its national identity and with a history of discomfort surrounding displays of nationalism, the signifiers of Irish sport in both commercials differ and they appeal to Irish rugby and football fans in differing ways. Yet despite the apparent differences in these depictions of idealized Irishness, Three has managed to play upon the sport–nation nexus to good effect. Apart from the visual impressiveness of these commercials, this has much to do, we suggest, with Three's successful strategy of dialling up and down oppositional aspects of Irish identity and yet preserving a core sense of cultural authenticity. Indeed, as Colin Graham points out, the trope of authenticity is wonderfully accommodating in its defiance of definition: 'Authenticity combines the prioritization of 'origins' with the 'pathos of incessant change' – again moving steadily through history. Its definition is a set of contradictions; static but changing; conservative but adaptable; originary but modern' (Graham 2001, 63).

In a cultural climate in which distinct national identity is seemingly nebulous and declining in the face of globalization, it has become a new scarcity; packaged, glamorized and commodified by Three – and yet just as important, it is also a flexible scarcity. In its depictions of an apolitical, largely ahistorical version of Irish identity characterized by

generalized qualities such as loyalty, bravery and a sense of community, Three has constructed broad texts which comfortably accommodate differing signifiers of Irish identity. And yet central to this successful marketing of national identity through two different sports is the suggestion of 'a base of sameness to the variety of difference' (Inglis 2008, 72). A 2014 case study by ad agency Boys & Girls – the advertising agency behind both commercials – reveals that the 2013 campaign (of which 'An Ode to Fans' formed a significant part) contributed to a 214% rise in sales for Three (Three Mobile ADFX Case Study September 2014). We contend that the marriage of Ireland's most successful professional sporting team and its international telecommunications sponsor Three exemplify not only the mediatization of Irish sport but also the core theme of professionalism in Irish nation branding more generally (despite the recent economic collapse).

To a great extent, Irish rugby's winning professionalism symbolically demonstrated that Ireland had 'arrived' on the modern global stage, in political, social and especially economic terms (cf. Free 2013). Moreover, Three's network and digital platforms – as well as the Three Arena itself as one of Ireland's premier sporting venues – constitute a material and immaterial environment that feeds into the wider branding of Ireland as a high-tech, modern nation. Conversely, football, in the manner in which it is presented by Three, appeals to more traditional conceptions of Irish identity. The focus of 'An Ode to Fans' on the selfless loyalty of fans and the uncertainties of success acts to assuage cultural anxiety about Celtic Tiger materialism and greed and posits football fandom as a legitimate channel for idealized displays of nationalism. Through their '#supportworks' campaign, Three has managed to conflate the relationship between the Irish team and its fans with the relationship between the brand and their consumers. Three – like Ireland – may have grown and changed exponentially in recent times, but '#supportworks' assures us it will not lose touch with its sociocultural roots. Thus, both sponsorship campaigns function to purvey the image of a brand – and, indeed, a whole country – that is thriving, modern and efficient without having lost sight of its cultural heritage or sense of traditional community. Taken together, these campaigns suggest that flexibility and stability are not distinct or oppositional but closely interrelated (O'Boyle 2011). Rowe's (2012) analysis of three different East Asian Olympic Games (the Tokyo 1964, Seoul 1988 and Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics) is apposite here. Rowe's aim was to trace how each Olympic event demonstrated in different ways and to varying degrees that its host had 'arrived' as a global force. As he puts it: It is argued that each was subjected to a test that extended well beyond the event to a measure of whether, in the context of Asia after the middle of the twentieth century, the host could be said to have matured and joined a 'club' founded in the West (2012, 2232).

To a great extent, the fortunes of Irish rugby have helped buttress the still somewhat emergent (and at times struggling) image of Ireland as a modern, global force, while Irish football initially helped rehabilitate Irish identity in the wake of the negative association of 'The Troubles' and the reductive De Valerian ideals which had for so long dictated Irish cultural priorities. The football team's relative lack of success in recent times has undermined its potential to serve as a symbol of modern successful Ireland in the way the rugby team has, but – as we have outlined above – it retains potent value as a representation of Irish community and rooted identity. However, considered together, these sports are more accurately interconnected facets of an Irish national identity that is best thought of as a

‘multi-directional symbol’ (Rowe 2012) that exists in the complex interstices of custom and tradition, triumphal globalism and humble localism.

Conclusion

This paper presented an analysis of how modern sports contribute to the (re)definition of national identities in the context of increasing marketization and mediatization of sport at different levels. We explored the sponsorship appeal of international sports to commercial brands, while also examining the symbolic factors which complicate Three Ireland’s efforts at leveraging this appeal via its advertising campaigns. Although our scope has been limited to studying two campaigns produced for, and circulated within, the Irish domestic market, our findings have relevance in the wider field of sports sponsorship and nation branding. Indeed, while the case of Three Ireland is an unusual one owing to the company’s concurrent sponsorship of two popular national teams, the representational flexibility described here is not wholly unique to Three’s dual sponsorship. However, we suggest that this particular case demonstrates particularly well how national identity can function as a ‘multi-directional symbol’ (Rowe 2012). In an era of advanced globalization beset with anxieties about cultural homogenization, national identity can be regarded as one of Lefebvre’s (1991) ‘new scarcities’ – an apparently ‘natural’ or abundant quality rendered commodifiable through its perceived rarity – yet we suggest that what is equally important about such new scarcities, for those in the sponsorship and marketing professions at least, is that they remain flexible. Indeed, the large domestic demand for media coverage of Irish football fans at the recent 2016 UEFA European Championship in France – and the considerable international coverage the fans attracted8 – serves to reiterate not only the commercial potential of the sport–nation nexus, but also its flexibility.

While the coverage of Irish fans was refracted through the lens of stereotypes of alcohol-fuelled bonhomie, the violent behaviour of English fans was tied to the Brexit referendum and their uneasy position within the European community. The actions of these fans on a significant international platform may risk disrupting an advertiser’s national narrative, but they can also be shaped to further bolster these narratives – as demonstrated by Three’s mediated lionizing of Irish football fans at the recent European Championship. In this paper, we argued that Three trades upon different, though not wholly divergent signifiers of Irish identity, allowing the sponsor to present (and preserve) a cultural touchstone which resonates with the great majority of their intended audience, while maintaining the flexibility to not only distinguish individual campaigns from one another but to also fit these within the shifting narrative the brand projects about itself.

Notes

1. Hjarvard (2008) describes mediatization as ‘the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic’. Frandsen (2015) elaborates on this definition and follows Hjarvard’s institutional approach to mediatization in

suggesting that this process occurs in historical contexts and in arguing that it should be investigated in terms of three dimensions: (i) institutional perceptions of the increased importance of the media; (ii) structural responses on the basis of this perception, e.g. the reallocation of resources spent on the media and (iii) behavioural changes, measurable by the changes in amount and form of communication output (Frandsen 2015). In addition to examining the mediatization of sports organizations, some scholars have also examined its impact on sportspersons themselves. For example, Birkner and Nolleke (2015) recently conducted a content analysis of 14 footballer autobiographies with a view to uncovering how athletes perceive the influence of the media in their everyday lives and work. Their findings suggest a keen awareness amongst athletes of the enormous earnings potential media brings, but also a high level of discomfort with what they perceive as the intrusiveness of media in their private lives.

2. When we refer to Gaelic Games here, we refer to the sports of Gaelic football and hurling, the two most popular sports organized under the authority of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which also promotes other sports such as handball and camogie.

3. Messner uses a historical/relational conception of gender within a broader reflexive theory of sport to demonstrate that organized sport is a crucial arena of struggle over conceptions of masculinity and femininity, and in which power relations between men and women are also contested. He notes that symbolic representations of the male body emphasizing strength and virility increased at a historical point in time when inequalities between the sexes were actually being contested; in other words, that the re-emergence of assertive masculinities in sport occurred just as male dominance in wider society was increasingly under threat. It is in this context that Messner describes sport as collective ideological glue for socially uncertain men.

4. It is worth noting that the number of persons born outside of Ireland and yet living in the country increased by 25% during the period 2006–2011, despite the deepening economic crisis (Ireland more Diverse 2012).

5. Nation branding represents the latest stage in the marketing of places and involves the application of corporate branding techniques to countries. Some observers are highly critical of what they regard as nation branding's inherently reductive and centralizing imperative. Jansen (2008), for example, argues that standardization remains the governing principle of nation branding, while Aronczyk (2008) similarly argues that 'diversity' can prove troublesome for nations trying to project a singular image in an increasingly cluttered attention economy.

6. An Australian respondent answered the question 'Does this commercial suggest anything to you about Irish identity?' as follows: That Irish love supporting their national sporting teams. But I didn't feel like it was particularly Irish except from the colours of the jerseys and the 'Celtic Gold' reference. But other than that you could play this in my country and get the same reaction.

7. The mini-documentaries are available on Three's Youtube channel and – at the time of writing – have each attracted over 50,000 views. 8. The behaviour of the Irish fans attracted considerable attention in the domestic media. National newspapers deemed it worthy of mention (http://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irishnews/euro-2016-garda-says-

behaviour-of-irish-fans-making-job-easy-1.2681530), while online media outlets were even more eager to celebrate the Irish fans, with popular culture website Joe. i.e. creating a new section for their site dedicated to the antics of the 'fans in green' (http://www.joe.ie/sport/fansingreen). The good reputation of the Irish fans attracted notable coverage from the international media, with the Guardian – amongst other UK media outlets – contrasting it favourably with the violent antics of the English fans (https://www.theguardian. com/football/2016/jun/14/euro-2016-republic-of-ireland-fans-solidarity-northern-irelandfan). This media lionizing eventually culminated in the Irish fans being awarded (jointly with their Northern Irish neighbours) the Medal of the City of Paris in July 2016.

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