Exploring sport brand development strategies to strengthen consumer involvement with the product – The case of the Australian A-League

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ABSTRACT

The branding of sport leagues represents an emergent area of scholarship. The current research capitalised on an opportunity to explore the strategies sport leagues can implement to develop their brand and consequently better satisfy their consumers. The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) was used to guide the examination of sport brand development strategies recommended by consumers of a sport league. Mixed method data were collected from football consumers in Australia ($N = 230$). Seven themes were uncovered through qualitative content analysis representing three brand development strategies – market penetration, market development and product development. The study contributes to sport management literature by (1) identifying strategies that can be used to position sport brands; (2) indicating how these strategies may be used to influence consumers' brand associations; (3) demonstrating the close brand relationship between leagues and their clubs and (4) enhancing market research sampling knowledge. The study also provides sport managers with strategic brand management directions.

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1. Introduction

In this article, we explore sport brand development strategies within the context of a professional sport league. Professional sport leagues represent highly visible and valuable brands that require strategic development. These brands reflect consumers' overall evaluation of the league based on the attributes and benefits that the league provides (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). Existing literature outlines the developmental process that explains how consumers perceive (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002) and develop connections with sport brands (Funk & James, 2001, 2004, 2006). Within this developmental process, a number of external factors (e.g., culture, location) and internal factors (e.g., demographics, psychographics) influence the connection sport consumers may have with their favourite sport brand. In regards to attitude formation and change, external factors such as attributes (Gladden & Funk, 2001) or attractive characteristics (Funk & James, 2004) of the sport brand are more easily influenced than consumers' internal factors such as culture or motives. Conceptually, modifying the attributes or characteristics of a sport brand to better serve consumers' needs and wants may have an impact on consumers' connection with their favourite sport brand (Funk & James, 2001). To achieve this goal, strategic efforts to build relationships with consumers by developing overall perceptions linked with the organisation are crucial to the success of sport brands (Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 2001).

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The development of league brands represents a strategic approach aimed at expanding the league's consumer markets and strengthening consumers' involvement with the product. This, in turn, should assist clubs within the league in attracting and retaining consumers (Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013). Sport leagues can either add to, or alter, their offerings to appeal to new or existing consumers. To attract consumers, many sport leagues have run major rebranding campaigns designed to change the perceptions linked to their core offerings. Rebranding campaigns have been observed within North America's Major League Soccer (MLS), the Australian Football League (AFL) and in Australia's elite level football (soccer) competition, the A-League. In one such example of successful rebranding, the A-League emerged after the existing National Soccer League (NSL) was modified to remove the ethnic roots attached to member clubs and thus, make the new competition more attractive to a broad consumer market (Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009). Similarly, the AFL changed its structure as a closed competition, established expansion clubs in strategic markets and introduced its own television channel (Stewart, Nicholson, & Dickson, 2005). These attempts may be seen as strategies implemented to better serve existing consumer bases and attract new consumers. Thus, these changes demonstrate that league brand development strategies provide the framework to develop the league brand as well as to assist clubs in developing their individual brands. However, to improve their success, strategic brand development decisions should be based on a good understanding of the consumer marketplace (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2009).

The competitive nature of the sport marketplace necessitates that sport organisations attract and retain a significant number of consumers (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). The success of sport leagues depends on consumers as they contribute to the revenues of sport leagues and clubs through various consumption behaviours (Mason, 1999). Most leagues and clubs share revenues generated through broadcasting deals, corporate sponsorships, merchandise sales and game attendance. Consumers that demonstrate a strong psychological connection or identification with their favourite sport brand have been linked with increased consumption behaviour (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and thus form a key market segment that sport organisations aspire to attract and retain. Recent research indicates that leagues and clubs are closely linked in the mind of consumers and therefore have mutual interests in attracting consumers (Kunkel et al., 2013). Consequently, league brand development strategies aimed at increasing consumers' involvement with the league are beneficial to both the league and its affiliated clubs. Although researchers have identified characteristics that influence how sport brands are perceived (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2014), strategies that outline how sport organisations can manage these characteristics have not been investigated. This lack of research provided an opportunity to examine brand development strategies from a consumer's perspective, thus enhancing understandings related to how leagues and their clubs can attract, retain and develop fans.

The purpose of this study was to explore brand development strategies that sport leagues can implement to strengthen the level of involvement of existing consumers and to build connections with new consumers. The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk & James, 2001, 2006) provided the theoretical foundation used to understand how consumers connect with a sport brand. Complementing the PCM, Ansoff's (1957) market and product growth strategies were used to conceptualise how leagues may implement strategies concerned with brand development. To explore the purpose of this research, data were gathered from knowledgeable consumers of the A-League. The A-League provided a relevant context for this study as it is a relatively young league (i.e., established 2005) and must therefore adopt innovative brand development strategies to compete with more established national league competitors. Additionally, a number of A-League clubs have struggled to attract consumers and consequently experienced financial losses. Therefore, the A-League provided a theoretically and practically relevant context to explore sport brand development strategies. Having outlined the purpose of this study, a literature review starting with a discussion of the theoretical framework utilised in this study is now provided.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) functioned as the theoretical framework to guide our understanding of how consumers connect with sport leagues. The PCM represents a theoretically sound framework that has been applied to understand consumers' connection with sport brands (e.g., Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008; Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2013; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). Within the PCM, it is conceptualised that external factors, such as socialising agents, and internal factors, such as consumers' psychological needs, interact with each other and influence evaluative processes. Evaluative processes are largely determined by consumers' prior knowledge and involvement. These processes include motivation, perception, learning and memory, which each influence the evaluation of the internal and external factors and, therefore, create psychological and behavioural outcomes, such as involvement or game attendance.

Previous research has highlighted the relationship between brand associations and consumer attitudes (Funk, 2002; Funk & James, 2006). Although consumers generally gain initial awareness of the existence of a sport league through socialising agents (Funk & James, 2001), subsequent interaction with the league leads to the creation of beliefs based on attributes of the league and benefits that the league provides. These beliefs represent brand associations that consumers link with the league (Kunkel et al., 2014). If these brand associations are evaluated positively and the league meets consumers' personal and social needs, it is expected that consumers will develop positive attitudes towards the league (cf. Funk & James, 2006). Conversely, if these brand associations are evaluated neutrally or negatively and the league is not able to meet consumers' personal and social needs, it is expected that consumers will develop neutral or negative attitudes towards the league (cf. Lock & Filo, 2012; Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2013). Supporting this line of thought, Kunkel et al. (2014) identified 17 brand