BRAND EQUITY AND THE FOREIGN FAN

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INTRODUCTION

Professional team sport, like other forms of popular culture, has become a marketable commodity subject to the logic of the marketplace and marketing principles such as branding. Furthermore, the forces of globalisation and advances in communications technology have greatly expanded the potential marketplace for professional sports teams, especially for those whose sports are internationally popular. Manchester United, for instance, could have as many as 350 million supporters worldwide. Yet it is claimed only four percent of the published research in sports psychology and sociology actually studied spectators, and that was well before the accelerated growth in the number of foreign supporters. Despite their importance, the contribution these fans could make to a team's brand value, or brand equity, or the reasons behind their identification with a specific sports team remain unexplored. This paper will explore the creation of brand equity for professional sports teams in the international market.

METHODS

Literature review

Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service" (p.15). He created a model that identified four major determinants of brand equity: perceived quality; brand awareness; brand association; and brand loyalty.

As sports marketing has become increasingly sophisticated and professional sport has evolved into a marketable commodity, research has explored how teams are most likely brands, and how they may be able to enhance the value, or equity, of their brand in the context of Aaker's (1991) determinants. Such applications of 'brand equity' to sport has been largely confined to North America, specifically the U.S. major leagues and NCAA collegiate athletics (Boone, Kochunny & Wilkins 1995; Gladden & Funk 2001, 2002; Gladden, Irwin & Sutton 2001; Gladden & Milne 1999; Gladden, Milne & Sutton 1998; Robinson & Miller 2003). However, the concept has recently been applied to the European sports environment (Bauer, Sauer & Schmitt 2005; Ferrand & Pages 1999). None of the literature has examined the foreign fan.

RESULTS

A review of the literature has expanded upon existing conceptual models of brand equity (Gladden & Milne 1999; Gladden, Milne & Sutton 1998) to take into account how professional sports teams may create brand value in an increasingly-global entertainment marketplace. In Kerr & Gladden (2007), I have added additional determinants of brand equity and argued the case that this revised framework may be utilised by sports managers to understand how to capitalise upon branding opportunities across geographic boundaries. In turn, they can best exploit the market potential of the newly-termed 'satellite supporter'. Some of these antecedents were validated to a degree when they were discussed by independent brand consultancy reports, FutureBrand and Brand Finance when they ranked Europe's most valuable football club brands.

DISCUSSION

In the context of Aaker's model, a revised conceptual model may be used to shed light on the possible factors that drive a satellite supporter's identification with their favourite professional sports team. The consequences of brand equity share remarkable similarities to the consequences of fan identification, for instance, the purchase of team-related merchandise or ticket sales. Therefore, it is argued that it is possible that the antecedents of brand equity can suggest factors that drive fan identification. For instance, team performance or success is seen to positively enhance the brand equity of a sports organisation; however, sports psychology would also suggest that the same variable would be important in a foreign supporter's decision to embrace specific sports teams.

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