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The brand architecture of professional football leagues from a consumer's perspective - A co-driving relationship between leagues and teams

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The management of professional sport brands (e.g., leagues and teams) is complex and “involves decision-making at a number of levels, in a number of markets” (Mason, 1999, p. 404). Hence, knowledge about the architecture of an organisation's brands can help with the management of the involved brands, and determines their overall performance (Rajagopal & Sanchez, 2004). Brand architecture describes the organising structure of an organisation's brand portfolio and the relationship between the brands in this portfolio as perceived by the consumer (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). The current study investigates the brand architecture of professional sport leagues to provide new evidence for consumer-based brand associations' linked to leagues and their teams.

Literature Review

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2006) functions as a theoretical framework to understand how consumer involvement with sport objects progressively develops. In addition, the framework allows for the integration of relevant theories on brand management (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993) to guide application of brand architecture literature (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), which allows the exploration of the relationship between professional sport leagues and teams. For example, prior research has identified various team-based brand associations that consumers' link to professional sport team brands (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). However, neither league-based brand associations nor their relationship to team brands has been investigated. Theoretically, three different brand architecture types of relationships between a league and team brand can exist for a consumer: a) League Dominant where consumer involvement with the league is higher than with the team; b) Team Dominant where consumer involvement with the team is higher; and c) Co-Dominant where the league and the team co-drive involvement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to empirically verify the three brand architecture groups by examining the relationship between leagues and their affiliated teams, as perceived by consumers. Additionally, to identify which brand architecture type can explain the most variance, the influence of league-based brand associations on consumer involvement with their favourite team is examined within the three brand architecture groups. This knowledge can improve the communication and decision-making on the multiple levels of leagues and teams.

Methods

A multi-attribute online survey was sent out to 5000 sport fans in four Australian metropolitan areas to assess their involvement with teams and leagues. 682 surveys were completed for a response rate of 13.6 %. A three-step segmentation procedure using an algorithm was employed to determine the level of involvement with both team and league (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009). The level of involvement was subsequently utilised to create the three league-team brand architecture groups. Descriptive and multivariate statistics were employed to explore the most applicable brand relationship structure on explaining the influence of brand associations on consumer involvement with their favourite sport team.

Results

The segmentation procedure revealed that 63% of respondents were in the co-dominant group, 23% respondents were in the league dominant group and 14% were in the team dominant group. Regression analyses revealed that league based brand associations explained 68% to 78% of the variance in involvement with the favourite team for each brand architecture group. Notably, the highest level of involvement could be explained for the co-dominant group.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that consumers' have both team-based and league-based associations with professional sport brands. In addition, level of involvement with each reveals three unique brand architecture types of professional sport leagues. Most respondents showed the same level of involvement with their favourite league and their favourite team within the stages of the PCM framework and, therefore, were segmented in the co-dominant group. Furthermore, the influence of league-based brand associations on consumers' level of involvement with their favourite team was identified for the three league-team relationships. The strongest influence of brand associations on consumers' level of involvement with their favourite team was found for the co-dominant group. Theoretically, this study identifies the most common brand architecture type of professional sport leagues, which is suggested to be a co-driver relationship where the league functions as the master brand of the teams which represent sub-brands. In this case, leagues and teams are mutually dependent on each others performance and brand associations.

Managerial Implications

The findings can support league managers in creating a strong brand as well as helping their teams to develop their brand and, therefore, create a bigger consumer base. Brand associations that were influential on consumer involvement with their favourite team can be utilised to leverage marketing and sponsoring investments and enhance the brand relationship between leagues and teams.