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# Strategic brand management in and through sport

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## ABSTRACT

Within the extended academic literature on strategic marketing, brand management appears to be high on the agenda of scholars in the past seven decades. Despite the continuous enquiry over these years, the way in which a brand can or should be managed in a strategic manner appears to still attract academics' and practitioners' interest, with novel and often unexpected ideas and practices emerging. Among these, brand management within sport and through it remains a unique area for further enquiry, and one that is bound to yield interesting insights due to the social, political, geographical, cultural, and historical peculiarities of sport, granting it a natural 'marketing' advantage. This article explores the evolution of brand management, its manifestation in and through sport, and its potential future directions within and beyond the ever-developing sport ecosystem.

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## Introduction

The topic of brand management has attracted remarkable attention within academia throughout the past seven decades, with numerous scholars attempting to define, explore, and even reconceptualise what a brand is, how it is developed, how it is perceived, and ultimately how it can be managed (Aaker, 1989; Fulmer, 1965; Keller, 1993). Within these seven decades, attitudes and paradigms have shifted; debates have been created, analysed, and sometimes abandoned; schools of thought have been formed; and questions have been asked, answered, and sometimes re-formed and re-emerged, with one thing remaining unchanged; brand management has yet to run its course in academia. Among the various forms and shapes brand management can take, brand management in sport or through sport appears to attract increasing interest by both academia and practice (Bauer et al., 2005; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Richelieu, 2016). This introduction to the special issue of Strategic Brand Management In and Through Sport discusses how brand management has evolved over time, how it materialises in and through sport, as well as the shapes it can be expected to take in the future.

## Brand management over time

In the early discussions focusing on a brand and its management, the former was often perceived to be a rather rigid instrument value, created by an organisation and managed strictly by them, or more precisely by the 'brand-man' within each company as Fulmer put

it (Fulmer, 1965, p. 65). The brand at that point was often viewed as an additional asset a company held, which was of some, undefined value, that was nevertheless part of a company's strategic portfolio.

With similar ideas persisting for a few decades (Lear, 1963), it was not until the late '80s and '90s that the strategic value of a brand was brought to the forefront for analysis (Aaker, 1989). The discussions emerging at that point presented the brand as a key asset to an organisation, assisting it in acquiring a competitive advantage over its competition. At the same time, it was also suggested that the brand's value was intrinsically associated not only with the way in which a brand was formed and managed but also most importantly with the way in which it was perceived (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). It is the ability of the brand to bring this competitive advantage that emphasised its strategic value and therefore the importance of its management to an organisation. Around this time, the pivotal research of two scholars, David Aaker and Kevin Lane Keller, set the foundations of our modern-day understanding of a brand and its components. In fact, it is worth noting that their work – dating back to the 1990s – is still being quoted and used in brand management research worldwide as the starting point of re-conceptualising and dissecting a brand to the various elements it comprises. The brand at that point in time was beginning to be perceived as more consumer focused; putting the spotlight on the customer rather than the brand manager, diverging from previous research (Aaker, 1991, 1997; Keller, 1993, 2003). That new perspective unlocked an array of new concepts and vocabulary through studies that addressed topics such as brand identity, brand meaning, brand response, brand relationships, brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand equity. One could argue that these terms, the frameworks in which they were being introduced, and the way in which they captured how a brand is perceived as a strategic asset for an organisation, marked the beginning of the reconceptualisation of brand management. It was a catalyst for change, as forwarding thinking organisations recognised the value of dramatically broadening the purview of brand management. It was no longer simply a marketing function with strategic value, but a strategic management function with significant potential to influence the profitability and success of an organisation (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Studies conducted in the 2000s have further emphasised the strategic value of brand management by once again rethinking how the brand is created and who should be considered the key target group of a brand. At that point, the appreciation of brand management progressed from being considered a linear paradigm or a monologue from a brand to its customers, to an interactive paradigm or a dialogue between a brand and its audience. Research at that time highlights the flexible nature of the brand, which is attributed to the way in which it is co-created among all relevant stakeholders, who are no longer limited to the customers (or prospective customers) and the employees of an organisation (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015). Instead, a wider realm of stakeholders is being considered, broadening our understanding of what a brand represents, and further expanding the nature of brand management. According to these recent studies, brand management is no longer confined to simply managing a brand but expands to managing people, processes, channels, and results connected with a brand, further emphasising the re-positioning of brand management as a strategic management function (Keller, 2016; Manoli, 2020). It is within these studies that the idea of strategic brand management is linked with another emerging area of study and practice, integrating marketing communications *throughout* an organisation and *over time* (Luxton et al., 2017; Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2020).

As the above discussion has illustrated, interestingly, after almost seven decades of analysis and exploration, we find ourselves still asking questions about how to better understand a brand, its value, its development, and its management. Questions that are further emphasised by new enquiries on brand consistency, or inconsistency, among different stakeholders, stakeholder overlap, traditional and digital medial proliferation, and power shifts from the organisation to the stakeholders (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Kenyon et al., 2018; Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2020) as well as the strategic managerial implications that arise from these issues. It is in fact within these strategic implications, both theoretically and managerially, that this special issue aims its focus, while concentrating on the exciting and ever-evolving sector of sport.

Sport is now considered one of the most quickly and steadily developing sectors worldwide, with growth noted amidst numerous national and international crises. As a result, sport has and still is attracting remarkable attention from scholars and practitioners alike, as a previous special issue in this journal illustrated (see Manoli, 2018). Sport brands, their unique characteristics, audience generated importance, and subsequent emotional attachment have been capturing significant interest, not only within academia but also within practitioners who have been exploring ways in which to develop and manage brands, both in and through sport (Bauer et al., 2005; Henseler et al., 2011; Richelieu, 2016). As a consequence, strategic brand management in this special issue is examined through two lenses: strategic brand management in sport (i.e. within the sector) and strategic brand management through sport (i.e. with sport used as a platform for the strategic management of other brands). More specifically, this special issue – comprising six selected peer-reviewed articles – aims to enrich the ever-developing branding and sport branding literature, by exploring some of the forms that strategic sport brand management can take while bearing in mind its strategic nature, the rapid development of the sport sector, and the wider social, technological, and financial environment.

### **Strategic brand management in sport**

As is often argued in management practices within the sport ecosystem, the modern sport industry developed at an extremely fast pace, reacting to the increased interest it received from various stakeholders, such as the public and the media, as well as from other corporate partners (Manoli & Hodgkinson, 2017; McCarthy et al., 2014). Following this rapid increase in interest – and paired with the wider pressures brought over by the commercialisation, commodification, and globalisation of the broader environment – the sport industry was called to develop almost overnight, reacting to the demand and not pro-actively planning for it. As such, appropriate procedures and protocols were often found to poorly implemented or even entirely absent. However, and despite these original challenges, the uniqueness of sport and most importantly the efforts of the individuals employed within it have allowed the sector to develop its strategic marketing practices to an arguably highly advanced state. It is in fact these unique characteristics that have set sport apart in terms of brand management (Gladden & Funk, 2001).

Sport has the power to evoke strong emotions in its fans (customers), which is a key ingredient in building their loyalty. In brand management terms, this would translate to a very high brand loyalty, in which any switching costs are too high for a customer to consider any other competitor brand (Fawbert, 2017). This high identification with a brand can often be considered rather unique to sport, especially when compared to consumer brands who might

struggle to achieve lower levels of loyalty, based on quality or price differentiation. At the same time, the social, political, geographical, cultural, and historical aspects and associations incorporated and surrounding sport give it a natural 'marketing advantage' as Manoli and Kenyon (2018, p. 89) argue in terms of building brand equity. This in turn makes strategic brand management in sport rather unique and, as a previous special issue in this journal illustrated (see Manoli, 2018), a fascinating area of study.

The ample existing literature on brand management in sport has provided extant analysis on remarkable practices in both applying 'traditional' brand management practices in sport and creating unique approaches to building sport brands and extending them. The following three articles included in this special issue shed further light on such practices adopted within the sport sector, further enriching our understanding of strategic brand management in sport.

The first article by Doyle et al. (2021) examines brand associations in the quickly developing women's sport. Using brand architecture and brand association knowledge, their work explores the perceptions of consumers of women's professional sports team brands in Australia. Interestingly, as their study argues, historical, economic, and societal conditions or pre-dispositions influence consumers' perceptions both positively and negatively, with the latter appearing to be unique in women's professional sports teams' brands. In terms of the former, positive associations, the study offers insights to distinctive favourable associations, which help highlight opportunities for how strategic brand management in sport (of the teams) and through sport (of the teams' associated stakeholders, e.g. sponsors) can further develop.

In the second article of this special issue, Kim and Manoli (2020) focus on strategic brand management in sport, and in particular the mechanism through which a sport team's brand equity can be built through customers' (fans') perceptions of the team's corporate social responsibility. Their study centres on a South Korean baseball club and adds the additional layer of fans' identification, both with their team and with an online community of which they are members, in order to further explore its influence on brand equity. Through this exploration, it is argued that a team's socially responsible image cannot by itself result in building brand equity, despite its importance in building fans' identification. This suggests that fans' identification and the use of online communities might be the key to strategic brand management in sport.

In the third article of this special issue, by Richelieu and Webb (2021), the creation of 'sportainment' is discussed as the result of the merger of sport and entertainment, as seen through the lens of the society of the spectacle where entertainment is made the focal point of any experience. By focusing on a polar or extreme case study, their research introduces a strategic sportainment mix which encapsulates how strategic marketing and brand management, both in and through sport, can adapt to better respond to the needs and opportunities of the current era and the modern consumer of sport. The proposed sportainment mix can then assist in increasing both the value of the sport consumer and the customer- and financial-based brand equity of the organisations involved.

## **Strategic brand management through sport**

As it has been argued over the past two decades, a number of relatively new challenges exist for modern strategic marketing. The multiplication of media and the rapid growth of social media, paired with their often remarkably quick popularity and short life expectancy, have

resulted in a dramatic increase in messages and information offering, leading to what we can call marketing 'noise' for the consumers (Schultz et al., 2013). This endless stream of information, coming in many forms and sizes, from text and images to videos and interactive content, landing directly into people's pockets, hands, and eyes, appear to be 'bombarding' consumers. This increasing 'noise' in the eyes and ears of the consumer has resulted in audiences becoming better accustomed to filtering and often simply ignoring information presented directly to them and has spurred a new more challenging era for marketing, the era of permission marketing (Tezinde et al., 2002). In this era, as it is argued, brands have to request the audience's permission and win their attention in order for their messages to be heard and seen. As a result, an additional effort or sometimes struggle is required from brands to attract (potential and existing) customers, win (or 'fight' to win) their attention, and promote their message in a way that could resonate with them.

It is because of this increasing difficulty, and the corresponding struggle, that some brands have re-focused their brand management efforts on differentiating themselves in the eyes of the consumer; through the promotion of their brands' unique characteristics (Ehrenberg et al., 1997). In this effort to build or re-shape their brand image to something more unique, non-sport-related brands have often found sport to be the ideal vehicle. Sport, with its unique brands, high brand awareness, remarkable brand identification, emotional attachment, and strong sociological, cultural, and historic brand associations (as discussed above), becomes a platform on which a non-sport-related brand can build their strategic brand management in order to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Therefore, strategic brand management through sport encapsulates a number of activities through which a non-sport-related brand associates themselves with sport in order to gain memorability and uniqueness in the eyes of the consumers and consequently gain a competitive advantage in today's challenging marketplace.

The following three articles in this special issue explore this practice further, offering valuable insights on strategic brand management through sport.

The fourth article in this special issue by Ireland et al. (2021) explores the topical issue of unhealthy brand promotion through sport, by examining the marketing references and exposure of brands of (what are perceived to be) unhealthy products in the live broadcast of the 2018 FIFA Men's World Cup tournament on UK television. By focusing on the contemporary topic of unhealthy products and their promotion, the study offers details on the wider strategic, ethical, and societal implications of brand management through sport (for example through sponsorship and advertising). It also highlights that the strategic and monetary value of brand management through sport can act as indicators of the globalisation and commodification of sport in today's world, offering a different conceptual understanding of the present and future of strategic sport marketing.

In the fifth article, Webb and Orr (2021) focus on strategic brand management through sport for development, linking the ever-evolving area of strategic marketing through sport with corporate social responsibility. By exploring how non-sport-related organisations partner with other stakeholders in order to improve the lives of individuals identifying with intellectual disabilities through sport, this study sheds light on an interesting and challenging practice which has received little attention within the marketing literature. Their research enhances our conceptual understanding of how corporate partners can be activated in such a multi-stakeholder partnership, in order to further develop their brand value and achieve their strategic brand management objectives through sport.

The final article of this special issue by Tsordia et al. (2021) focuses on brand management through sport, by exploring the lessons that can be learned from the outcomes of sport teams' sponsorships on satellite fans, who are the fans (customers) of a sport team that are not local to the area in which the team is based. The study examines how fans of Manchester United FC who are based in Malaysia perceive the sponsor of the club, shedding light on the wider brand management effects for non-sporting companies who opt to strategically engage with sport team sponsorship to manage their brand, while similar studies exploring the effects on a sponsor's perceived brand quality and word-of-mouth deriving from their decision to sponsor a sport team have been conducted on local fans examining that satellite fans allows this study to highlight the wider, global effects, of such a decision, further emphasising the value of strategic brand management through sport.

### **The future of strategic brand management in and through sport**

While it needs to be highlighted that this special issue by no means exhausts the ever-developing issue of brand management in and through sport, the articles included within it offer novel and valuable insights in the area. The articles included in this special issue address the topic from diverse viewpoints, contributing to our conceptual understanding of the subject that can help better pave the way for both future research and practice, both on and in, the area. While the sport ecosystem is bound to keep developing in potentially unexpected or unpredictable ways, being driven forward by both its international growth and the external pressures and opportunities with which it is faced, new practices and trends in regard to strategic brand management in and through sport are also expected to emerge. We can safely assume that these will involve the development and further utilisation of evolving sport, such as women's sport, e-sport, and new or alternative sport, as areas to advance or platforms to help advance the strategic brand management within and beyond sport. In addition, existing popular practices in the area, such as commercial partnerships between sport and non-sport-related organisations, are bound to be further explored and 'exploited' in the coming years, while incorporating new elements emerging from the environment in which the organisations operate and the demands of the people around them. Among such elements, the ever-developing digital world is bound to offer novel avenues and tools to manage brands within and beyond the world of sport, allowing or even forcing brands to re-evaluate their offerings and potential audiences and target markets. At the same time, with the boundaries of sport and entertainment increasingly fading, a redefinition of sport and its brands might be already overdue, calling for a re-evaluation of strategic brand management in and through sport. Similarly, with questions on integrity and ethics being brought on the forefront, increasing pressure is expected to be placed on how brands respond, while their responsibility and actions on wider issues of the environment, the community or social activism can be also envisaged to influence brand management practice. As the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated, sport brands might also have a key role to play in the promotion of physical and mental wellbeing, potentially reshaping the ways in which future brand management can occur. True to the discipline's roots, the examination of these elements – alongside new unpredictable elements that will emerge – in strategic

brand management in and through sport cannot but add to uncovering new and exciting aspects of sport marketing's theory and practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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