A Qualitative Investigation on Sport Consumer Brand Associations: The Relationship between League and Team brand associations

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Marketing Abstract 2011-042
Thursday, June 2, 2011
1:45 PM
20-minute oral presentation
(Room 35)

Football consumption around the world is mainly linked to team game attendance and team merchandise sales. However, many examples suggest that fans follow and support the league as well as their favorite team. This phenomenon can be seen when sport fans in England meet in pubs Saturday afternoon to watch the English Premier League and US sport fans view televised broadcasts of ‘Monday Night Football’ regardless of the teams playing. These fans can be classified as consumers of the league as well as of teams. In this context, the league represents the master brand whereas the teams can be classified as subbrands (e.g., Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). This implies a close relationship exists between the league brand and their affiliated team brands. Given that brands in a close relationship with each other can impact on one another’s brand association (e.g., Andres, 2003), it is suggested that brand associations linked with a sport league might affect those of an affiliated team and vice versa. For example, consumers perceive a league to have a long history and their favorite team contributes to this history, while the history of the league also contributes to the history of the team. Yet, it remains unknown how consumers perceive the relationship between team brand associations and league brand associations.

Prior research has examined consumer-based brand associations linked to sport team brands. Sport teams have associations linked to specific attributes, benefits and attitudes (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Gladden and Funk (2002) measured 16 associations with their Team Association Scale (TAS) and Ross and colleagues (2006) introduced the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) and measured 11 associations linked with sport teams. Building upon this work, Kunkel, Funk, and King (2010) measured 19 brand associations linked to sport leagues. This study builds upon this research and explores how consumers perceive the relationship between league brand associations and team brand associations. A sport league, for example, is associated with a specific style of play and if this style is not delivered by teams it could impact negatively on consumers’ perceptions of the league. Furthermore, the reverse is also true. The success of a subbrand (the team) is largely determined by the consumer evaluation of the master brand (the league) and its perceived performance (Bottomley & Holden, 2001). Thus, brand associations sport consumers have towards the league are important to develop favorable attitudes with affiliated teams. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how consumers perceive the relationship between league brand associations and team brand associations.

Based on Aaker and Joachimsthaler’s (2000) brand relationship spectrum it is suggested that there is a strong connection between the league brand and the team brand, where the two brands co-drive each other’s brand associations. To investigate this link, qualitative data were collected from consumers of four different sport leagues. Twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with consumers of Australian and English football leagues. Participants were randomly approached at games of the specific sport and interviewed. An interview guide with questions was prepared to lead the conversation. The questions were based on the brand association literature and structured to further elicit brand associations linked to sport leagues as well as their relationship with brand associations linked to sport teams. Each interview lasted between 15 and 27 minutes and interviewees were asked identical questions. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis was employed in a three-round coding sequence (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) by two judges independently. Direct quotes were selected to represent the emergent themes. Furthermore, the themes were classified according to their relationship with the league brand and the team brand, based on three categories; (a) league-dominant, (b) team-dominant, and, (c) co-dominant (equally dominated by the league and team). NVIVO software was utilized to assist in the analysis, and the level of agreement between the judges was 85% (Holsti, 1969).

In total, 21 brand associations were identified to be linked with sport leagues, confirming the 19 existing league brand associations (Kunkel et al., 2010). Associations that were mentioned most were the favorite team, the level of competition within the specific sport and intervi

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league. For example, one EPL fan stated that he followed the league because of the “factor that anyone can beat anyone in the league”. The associations of favorite team and nostalgia, on the other hand, were mainly linked with teams. One fan elaborated on the most memorable football moment in his life “I’d say probably when we won the 1993 grand final”. Overall, 21 different brand associations were revealed, and participants linked the associations with their favorite league, their favorite team, and both. Although, there was an overall trend towards a co-dominant relationship, each brand association was evaluated differently.

This study provides new knowledge regarding the relationship between the master brand and subbrand in the category of professional sport. For sport leagues and teams, a co-dominant relationship is suggested to exist for the majority of brand associations from a consumer perspective. Balachander and Ghose (2003) reported similar findings for two connected consumer brands for which they found a reciprocal spill-over effect between the perceived brand associations. In general, as suggested by their brand architecture, many brand associations are shared between leagues and teams. Thus, league and team managers need to cooperate in the creation and the marketing of a strong brand, to be beneficial to both entities. Additionally, findings can be utilized by sponsors to better identify which level to support the sponsored sport. For example, the league brand on the master brand level or team brands on the subbrand level, depending on the brand associations the sponsor wants to be linked with.