Brand Associations of Minor Hockey Tournaments: Understanding the Rep Hockey Parents' Perspective

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Hockey holds a significant place in the identity of Canadian culture (Dryden & MacGregor, 1989); however, it cannot be forgotten that the sport is also a business. Here, the Canadian hockey industry has been valued at over $11 billion annually (O’Reilly et al., 2015). One sub-sector of the industry involves the production of tournaments and was the focus of the current investigation. The competition to attract teams to participate in tournaments, which benefit the tournament organizers and the communities in which they reside, is significant. Given the proliferation of tournament offerings and the increased desire of many municipalities across North America to target sport tourism to promote the communities’ image and stimulate economic development (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007), this study is of particular relevance. Indeed, few communities will ever be selected, or have the capabilities, to host elite sporting championships (i.e., Olympic, Pan-Am, or Commonwealth Games); hosting small events like minor hockey tournaments, however, is certainly achievable and can have a significant impact on local economies. For example, the 2012 Bell Capital Cup—the world’s largest minor hockey tournament—attracted 268 out-of-town teams to the Ottawa-Gatineau region generating over $6 million of direct and indirect benefits (O’Reilly et al., 2014).

Hosting sporting events, such as minor hockey tournaments, provides an opportunity for their benefits to be cross leveraged with indirect stakeholders in the community (i.e., restaurant owners, hotel operators, entertainment/tourist attraction providers) (Harrison-Hill & Chalip, 2005). The long term success of these events, however, is directly related to the quality of the tournament experience for the tournament consumers. Within youth sport, the players and parents are both significant consumers. Parents are a unique consumer in this context; specifically, a form of proxy decision-making takes place since the children are the users of the sport service, but it is the parents who actually purchase the service (Green & Chalip, 1998). Indeed, parents are the ones paying the bills for their child’s sport experiences. As such, parents’ perceptions of experiences are vital for tournament organizers to understand. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to determine the key characteristics of an ideal tournament experience from the perspective of hockey parents.

In order to achieve the purpose of this study, hockey parents’ perceptions of tournaments’ brand associations were investigated. It can be argued that brand associations have the greatest impact on the profitability of a brand. Keller (1993) proposed that brand associations are the dominant perception formed by individuals through considering the attributes, benefits, and attitudes associated with a particular product or service that is under consideration. For any brand, these three elements of association are interrelated and come together to form the overall perception of the brand that guides purchase decisions. It is the relationship between tournament attributes and benefits that formulated the framework of this work.

To investigate the purpose of this study, 30 interviews were conducted with rep hockey parents from 10 minor hockey associations within Ontario’s Greater Golden Horseshoe Region. More specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the laddering technique. The laddering process assumes that the respondent has recently gone through the consumer decision making process in order to purchase the product or service in question (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Laddering is a probing technique that guides individuals to articulate “why and how product attributes are important” (Klenosky, Gengler, & Mulvey, 1993, p. 364). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to uncover the attributes and benefits that made up each interviewee’s ideal tournament experience. An implication matrix was constructed to identify the most commonly linked attributes and benefits identified by each respondents.

Respondents indicated that a quality tournament experience is not solely defined by on-ice results. Specifically, findings indicate that a tournament’s brand is most significantly impacted by the following attributes: competition, tournament operations, cost, travel requirements, and accommodations. Perceived benefits that significantly impact a
tournament’s brand include: bonding, value, fun, parity, and learning life lessons. Of the aforementioned attributes the most commonly mentioned were tournament operations and competition. Likewise, the most prominent benefits that hockey parents are trying to obtain from tournament experiences are bonding and value. The most frequently mentioned relationship exists between tournament operations and time management.

The findings of the study have utility in the practical application of tournament operations. Specifically, the findings of this investigation highlight that there are seven attributes and nine benefits that parents associate with an ideal tournament experience. The ability of tournament organizers to deliver each of the desired attributes and benefits identified by respondents is reflected in a tournament’s brand. Therefore, brand management should be a focal point for tournament organizers. In order to improve the management of a brand, managers must identify all of the points of contact consumers have with the brand and nourish those interactions (Aaker, 1991). Specifically, tournament organizers are advised to pay careful attention to the quality of the competition and the effectiveness of tournament operations—the most commonly mentioned attributes—associated with their respective events. Due to their significance, the attributes of competition and tournament operations lead to the greatest variety of attainable benefits for parents. Also, they consist of the most influential tournament touch-points including: athletes, coaches, organizers, referees, schedules, websites, and vendors. As respondents indicated, effective management of the aforementioned attributes and touch-points can lead to parental satisfaction with the tournament regardless of which teams win and lose.

In addition to the practical implications of the findings, this investigation contributes to the current understanding of the influence of brand associations in grassroots sport decision-making. Indeed, studies have identified that youth sport participation is regularly a product of specific parental motivations; however, limited research exists that has investigated the sporting decisions (i.e., travel to tournaments) that parents have to make once their child is enrolled in a specific sport. Further, limited research identifies whether youth sport brands truly reflect parental motivations. The insights garnered from investigating the attributes and benefits associated with the brands of minor hockey tournaments in this study indicate that the brand association approach is indeed useful for future research on this topic. Considering the economic significance associated with grassroots sporting events, it is imperative that event organizers and sport tourism academics continue to identify what parents—youth sports’ most significant stakeholders—are truly motivated by. Building upon the insights presented in this study can lead to a greater number of tournaments and other grassroots sporting events achieving the economic goals that are associated with them.