Relationship Marketing in Sport: Perspective on the Scholarship and Directions for Future Research.

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Marketing - Other (Other)
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Relationship marketing (RM), as an academic field and approach to marketing, has attracted the attention of a great number of academics and practitioners in the last three decades (Gummesson, 2017). In academics, scholars started discussing the concept of RM in the early 1980s (e.g., Berry, 1983) and its rise in the 1990s was reflected through several academic infrastructures such as special issues in journals, RM centred books, RM focused academic conferences, RM dedicated research centers (Ballantyne et al., 2003). Over this period, RM challenged the dominance of transactional marketing as a theory and practice (Harker & Egan, 2006), including revisions to American Marketing Association’s definition of marketing in 2004, 2007, and 2013 (O’Malley, 2014). As Egan (2003) stated, RM has been “probably the major trend in marketing and certainly the major (and arguably the most controversial) talking point in business management” (p. 145).

The place of RM in marketing theory and practice has been debated among scholars and practitioners (c.f. Grönroos, 1994; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). A review of the RM literature (e.g., Tadajewski, 2015) informs that a solid and consistent body of theory of RM as well as a co-ordination in the topic area is severely lacking, which led to the publication of several review articles that attempted to organize the literature by examining: the history and evolution (e.g., Harker & Egan, 2006), the varied definitions —at least, 70—(e.g., Agariya & Singh, 2011), the different schools of thought —at least, four— (e.g., Ganguli et al., 2009), the state of what is known about RM (e.g., O’Malley, 2014), and the different research streams in RM (e.g., Yadav & Singh, 2014). Today, RM remains a diverse field with different schools of thought, with no clearly defined scope and domain, and, most particularly, the literature is a ‘melting pot’ of various theories. The whole phenomenon causes frustration among researchers and possibly lead to confusion.

RM in sport management, by extension, faces the same challenges. In fact, several sport-related research works have been conducted on the topic area since SMQ’s 1997 special issue on RM (e.g., Bee & Kahle, 2006; Harris & Ogbonna, 2008; Kim & Trail, 2011; Shani, 1997; Stavros & Westberg, 2009). This body of work reported that the value of RM is well recognized among sport practitioners. Yet again, all of these studies, for example, adopted a different types of RM perspectives, definitions and theoretical applications.

The purpose of this work is, therefore, to bring attention to the complex nature of RM literature, to uncover how RM has been researched and understood in sport-related research works, and to outline specific directions for future research pertinent to sport management. To do so, the work will adopt an integrative literature review. The work helps to inform, familiarize, and guide researchers about the intricate nature of the literature by articulating the ‘big picture’ of RM while cataloguing its parts. Such endeavours are also hoped to provide direction for the production of research that has managerial relevance and application in the sport industry.