

MARKETING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES THAT FOSTER INTEGRATION IN FOOTBALL CLUBS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The football industry is a rapidly developing industry that has been experiencing significant growth even through troubling financial times (Szymanski & Smith, 2010), while investing extra effort and placing further emphasis on the marketing and communications functions (Brown, 2003). Brand management, a key aspect considered often synonymous with integrated marketing communications, has received significant attention in regards to the sports industry, often due to its close connection with a number of marketing communications practices, such as sport sponsorship. Sports brands and the way they have been managed over time, as well as the unique characteristics the sports industry in general and the football industry in particular, have been addressed by academics such as Bridgewater (2010) and Beech and Chadwick (2007). Even though the importance and potential of strategic brand management was underlined by the academics, their views suggested that this could only be achieved if additional research was conducted on the topic and informed the current practices. Consequently, it can be argued that even though the strategic value of brand management practices has been underlined within the research conducted, their link with integration, the implementation of integrated marketing communication practices that can foster strategic brand management (Reid, 2003), has not been identified in the literature available.

This study investigates the marketing communication practices in football clubs in an attempt to understand the extent to which integration is implemented in them. Based on the close link between integration and marketing communications, it can be argued that this study examines the current practice in an effort to access the strategic focus of the marketing communications practices encountered. In other words, the aim of this study is not only to create an account of the marketing communications practices in football, but also to identify and assess whether the current practices implemented foster strategic integration, which is a key aspect of strategic brand management.

For this reason, a qualitative research design is employed, in order for rich information to be collected, allowing the author to gain an insight to both the practices encountered and their underlying structures. Critical case purposive sampling was employed in order to select the sample which consists of cases that share an important characteristic or set of characteristics (participated in the Premier League). In order for the potentially sizable sample to be limited to a manageable number, the shared characteristic was further limited to clubs that participated in the Premier League in any of five consecutive seasons - 2010/11, 2011/12, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15), 30 in total. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the individuals in charge of marketing or marketing and communications in the complete census of the population selected, all 30 clubs. The interviews took place between August 2014 and March 2015 and were conducted in-person in either the office or the training ground of each club. The duration of each interview ranged from 25 to 55

minutes, while following a coherent interview protocol. A thematic template approach was followed for the analysis of the data collected, which enabled the author to identify the underlining structures behind the marketing communications practices encountered.

Through the analysis of the findings a number of patterns were identified in the existence and nature of an overall marketing strategy and relevant marketing goals of each organisation, in the cross-functional communication within each club and in the ways in which outward communications are aligned. At the same time, the discrepancies noted on each of the above mentioned topics, allowed for a detailed mapping of the practices encountered to take place, which could potentially assist in marketing communications current appreciation and future progress.

Examining the current practices allowed for an account of integrated marketing communications' implementation to be acquired, by allowing the author to identify the patterns and structures within them, and enabling for a holistic and thorough view to football clubs' marcom practices. This account could then prove useful in providing support and potentially guidance to the current and future marketing communications management practices that inform integration and therefore foster strategic brand management, by suggesting the course of action through which strategic integration can be achieved.

IMC; integrated marketing communications; strategic marketing; marcoms; sports marketing

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