

ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER

Creating a Brand on the Identity of a Sports Club: Preliminary Report Creating a Brand on the Identity of a Sports Club

Nenad Bulovic¹ and Neven Seric¹¹University of Split, Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, Split, Croatia**Abstract**

Creating a sports club brand is an important strategic marketing activity. The quality of the content of a sports club brand can be communicated effectively by promoting its key features. A sports club's identity is a critical marketing feature that significantly contributes to differentiation on the market. The paper aims to argue the importance and the marketing practice in Croatian sport of implementing a sports club's identity in its brand image. The research has been conducted during year of 2019 using qualitative and quantitative methods through different sport case studies of three famous basketball and two famous football clubs from Croatia. Although communication of the brand image through its identity is increasingly encouraged in recent scientific literature, it is not yet a common practice in sports in Croatia. Results shows there are no clear links between the brand image and the identity even in Croatian famous professional sport clubs. The sports club's identity is recognized in terms of its existence, social significance, activities, and development to date. The sports brand identity should communicate the core values of the sports club identity. A distinct brand of a sports club is imperative for desirable positioning in the wider environment. The identity of a sports club is a valuable marketing and strategic element of its brand. The distinctiveness of a sports club brand significantly depends on the implementation of its identity in its image. In sport marketing practice in Croatia it needs to be change.

Keywords: brand, creating, sport, club, identity

Introduction

The brand is a useful marketing tool in market communication, so the redefinition and management of sports club brands have received increasing research attention (Serić & Ljubica, 2018). These tendencies are particularly pronounced in the area of professional sports (Serić & Ljubica 2018; Jan-kovic & Jaksic-Stojanovic, 2019). In marketing terms, it is not advisable to generalize about the creating and managing of a sports club brand (Mehmeti & Halilaj, 2018). Sport is a specific social phenomenon (Dwyer & Edwards, 2008; Serić & Ljubica, 2018). As a subject of research, the focus on the sports club brand raises dilemmas in the context of its characteristics that are useful and desirable in communicating with the public.

In the practice of managing sports clubs, there are frequent conflicts of opinion regarding on which to base a brand, on its image, or on its identity (Seric & Ljubica, 2018). Recent research findings show the consequences of a disagreement on the image and identity of a sports club on the perception of its brand (Serić & Ljubica, 2018).

In the scientific approach to this issue, it is necessary to analyse the image of the sport subject with possible repercussions on its defined vision and mission. If there are some conflicts regarding that, the possible existing image of a sports club is not a recommended platform for brand management activities (Raju, 2009). How current is the integration of the sports club marketing story and its history into its existing im-



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age? What are the links between the targeted mission and vision of the future of a specific sports club? These are some important questions that need to be answered before designing sports club brand management activities. Professional sports clubs prove that the subject's vision should be implemented in their brands (Serić & Ljubica 2018).

This research focuses on identity as a platform for creation and brand management activities, which was the starting point of the research problem: the process of the development of the sports club's branding on its identity. Considering that a sports club's identity is more than its image, it is necessary to investigate how its followers perceive it, in terms of their loyalty, regardless of the current sports results. It is necessary to determine whether the followers of the sports club's expectations and aspirations are connected with its vision and mission (Janković & Jaksic-Stojanović, 2019). Sport, like tourism, is a specific social phenomenon; therefore, in such research, it is necessary to understand the causes of differences in the perception of the image and identity of a particular sports club (Janković & Jaksic-Stojanović, 2019; Prorok, Serić, & Peronja, 2019).

The identity of a sports club represents its past, present, and targeted future. The image of a sports club represents the public's current insight into its reality. Significant repercussions for a sports club's image can be the consequence of past and present sports results and all things related to its members, fans, and official representatives. The image is subject to change (Candela & Figini, 2010). The current image of a sports club may result from specific circumstances and events of interest to the general public and the specificities of a particular sport (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2007; Chulhwan, 2019). These are just some of the reasons that the actual image of the sports club could be different from its vision and mission. All these causes indicate that in a sports club's brand management activities, the question of whether it should be based on its existing image should be evaluated.

The sports club's identity enables broader marketing leeway in brand management activities (Serić & Ljubica, 2018). Consequently, it is possible to bring the sports club brand closer to the vision and mission: the target perception of the same in public. Since a sports club's identity comprises its past, present and future, identity-based brand management activities provide a broader scope. A plethora of content and facts representing the identity of a sports club are commercially usable features in brand communication (Jaksic-Stojanović, Janković, & Serić, 2019). A sports club brand should be based on the specific desirable and attractive features of the content to which it is presented to the public (Janković & Jaksic-Stojanović, 2019). In analysing the identity of a sports club, the basic marketing content of a club story needs to be recognized (Serić & Ljubica, 2018). Current sports scores and the current image of the sports club should also be taken into account. Based on these insights, it is possible to decide on the characteristics of a sports club brand that are recommended to communicate frequently. A sports club marketing effective brand should integrate multi-criteria features (Prorok et al., 2019). Creating and managing a sports club brand are strategic marketing activities (Kyongmin, Yong Koo, & Kang-Won, 2020). The content of a sports club brand should be practical for communicating with target segments of the public. The effectiveness of brand management activities will depend significantly on the commercially exploitable specifics of its features (Jan-

ković & Jaksic-Stojanović, 2019). Based on all these facts and analysis of recent scientific papers, research hypotheses were defined:

H1: *A recognizable sports brand adds loyalty to followers and fans;*

H2: *The recognizable identity of a sports subject contributes to its positive image in public;*

H3: *An identity-based sports entity brand attracts broader segments of followers and fans.*

These hypotheses focus the research problem on considering the argumentation of creating a sports club brand on its identity. The paper aims to scientifically justify the implementation of a sports club's identity in its brand and its image in public.

Methods

In the conducted research, the authors used selected qualitative and quantitative methods that have proven to be scientifically acceptable in the analysis of social phenomena, since sport is such a phenomenon (Serić & Ljubica, 2018). In the first phase, a survey was conducted of several examples and business cases of sports club brand management and the repercussions of these activities on the loyalty of followers and public attitudes towards the entities represented by these brands. The preliminary research aimed to determine the repercussions of various sports club brand management activities on how they are perceived by the public. In this phase of research, the descriptive method, the inductive and deductive methods, the method of abstraction and concretization, the methods of analysis and synthesis, the method of classification and comparison were used. Sports club brand management activities were analysed using the case study method to select the brands that would be the subject in the primary research. The questionnaire, in the second phase of the research tested the attractiveness and loyalty of the selected brands on the research sample of competent respondents. The competence, that is, the selection of respondents for the research sample, was conducted based on the pretest - respondents selected in the research sample proved that they are well informed about these sports club and their brands, which are a consequence of the perception of their current image. In the sample of brands surveyed, there were those based on identity, but also those based primarily on the current image of the sports club (three famous Croatian basketball clubs and two famous Croatian football clubs). Identity-based brand features are time-based, while image-based brand management is often based on recent trends in a particular sport and the current results of the entity the brand represents. Identity-based brand features often imply a perspective on the future of the sports club. Such a perspective points to the goals pursued by the current management of the sports club. Identity-based sports club brand management activities drive research curiosity as loyalty to such brands is evident in several market segments. Loyalty to brand image-based sports clubs is overwhelmingly recognized in one segment: the fans of a particular sports club.

The survey was conducted during 2019. Hypothesis testing was performed on a sample of 435 persons. The sample included pretesting individuals who fully understood the research problem and expressed a high level of familiarity with the sports brands of three basketball and two football clubs presented and the image content they represent. The study sample was dominated by a population over 30 years old; it

was 74% male and 26% female. The questionnaire contained 28 questions related to the presented brands of three famous basketball and two famous football clubs from the Republic of Croatia. The collected data were processed.

Results

The findings of the study revealed that identity-based sports club brands lead the way for a higher number of demographic segments, while club loyalty to image-based sports clubs depends primarily on the sports results of those entities. Brands of sports clubs based on the image of loyalty are expressed exclusively by the fan segment, while loyalty to brands of sports clubs based on identity is also expressed by members and other public segments, many of whom cannot be classified as fans of a specific sports entity.

During years of a club's inferior sports results, the loyalty of fans to the club brands based on image is significantly diminished, which is not the case with the loyalty of fans and others toward the brand based on the identity of the sports club.

Furthermore, the research findings have proven to be more appealing to sports club brands based on the identity of the entities they represent to the public. Loyalty to these sports clubs' brands is also based on the traditions associated with them, social significance and social action from its founding to the present time. Respondents mostly stated that identity-based sports club brands communicate the broader social values of the entities they represent. The following weaknesses were identified in brands based on the image of a sports club:

- Brand amnesia: the public has the impression that the sports club ignores the mission for which it was founded;
 - Ego brand: the public regards the sports club as arrogant because it expects the fans to have patience and understanding for the continuing inferior sports results;
 - Brand megalomania: the public considers the sports club to be the only one worthy of the attention of fans and the public in the environment in which it acts;
 - Brand deception: the public believes that by such communication of the brand, the management seeks to conceal the real situation and relations in the sports club, which are neither representative nor desirable;
 - Brand wear: a sports entity neglects social responsibility even in periods of stagnant performance;
 - Brand paranoia: a sports entity neglects communication with the public, believing that there are no conditions or opportunities to achieve better sports results and valuable social action.
- The identified weaknesses of the brand based on the image of the sports club in communication make it inferior to the brand based on the sports subject's identity. Regarding the hypotheses, the following can be concluded from the research findings:
- Sports brand recognition contributes to fan loyalty and a positive image of the sports club in public;
 - The distinctive identity of the sports club in its brand contributes to the positive image of the subject in public;
 - An identity-based sports entity brand attracts broader segments of followers and fans.

Discussion

The research findings proved that the identity of a sports club in its brand significantly contributes to its differentiation and visibility and the image of the subject that represents it.

A brand based on a sports club's identity and the frequently used features of that identity in its management activities contribute to maintaining the loyalty of existing and growing numbers of new followers in various public segments. Such a brand contributes to a higher recognition of a sports club, both nationally and internationally. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the identity of a sports club is a valuable and commercially viable foundation for its brand. The identity of a sports club is practically communicated through brand management activities. Professional sports clubs are a good example of maintaining visibility and effective brand management. In the practice of amateur sports clubs, brand management activities are modest and often not carried out. The brands of many amateur sports clubs have been created based on the image of a particular sport, neglecting many of the useful local features that would make such brands more visible. The findings of the research also proved that sports club brand management activities cannot be a substitute for the poor sport results of the subject if it significantly deviates from the expectations of followers, fans and the local public.

The identity of a sports club is a consequence of its overall existence. Social activities are particularly important. In this regard, when managing a sports club brand, it is advisable to communicate the basic social values of its identity. Considering the multitude of commercially usable features in the identity of a sports club, it is commercially valuable in both branding and brand management activities.

Despite these insights, sports club brand management activities, apart from professional and globally renowned entities, are rare and modestly developed. Due to such prevailing practices in amateur sport in the Republic of Croatia, brands have no significant market visibility or value, which results in the disinterest of local sponsors and growing problems in maintaining amateur sport. A more significant implementation of a sports club's identity in its brand and its management activities can be realized by using the characteristics of tradition, social action, highlighting locally known athletes/members of the sports club and information on the continuity of the loyalty of local followers, working with youth and openness to recreational activities of the local population.

A recognizable and differentiated brand of a sports club is an imperative for desirable public positioning that will make the entity visible and potentially attractive to sponsors to invest in it. The distinctiveness and differentiation of a sports club's brand significantly depend on the implementation of the identity of the sports entity it represents.

Accordingly, it is advisable to implement as many characteristics as possible in the brand management activities of the sports club's past, present, and future. In this sense, the findings of this research may be a useful starting point for the dilemma of whether identity is the only recommended platform for creating and managing a sports club brand.

The research findings proved that the competitive performance of the sports club is not a sufficient feature in the activities of brand management and maintaining the desired image of the subject. A sports club brand should communicate its social mission and social values, as well as evidence of sports club involvement in society.

A sports club brand in which all of these characteristics are effectively implemented will be attractive to a wider number of social segments and will significantly contribute to the market visibility of the entity. Such a brand of a sports club grows into

a symbol of concrete social reality, for both fans and other segments in the environment in which the subject operates, and even worldwide.

Limitations of the research are the coverage of brands of only five sports clubs from the Republic of Croatia, on the basis of which brands a survey was conducted. These five brands were extracted based on the long sporting tradition of the entities they represent, their social influence, and the large numbers of registered and organized fans.

A further limitation of the research is that some of the

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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respondents are not fully aware of the beginnings of certain sports clubs whose brands and management activities have been discussed. Some respondents were not more familiar with the earlier international successes of one or more sports clubs whose brands were the focus of the survey.

The relatively small sample of respondents can be considered to be a limitation of the survey, since these five Croatian sports clubs have thousands of registered fans and supporters groups without other local followers and those who support them or otherwise express their loyalty to them.