

Strategic Brand Management vs Brand Misconceptions in the English Premier League

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1. Aim of the research/project

This research aims to answer the following question: How is strategic brand management perceived and implemented in English Premier League (EPL) clubs?

2. Theoretical background or literature review

Branding has attracted significant attention in academic circles in the past five decades, with several, often contradicting views being expressed (Keller, 2003). While the idea of a rigid, company-controlled brand is being gradually replaced by the notion of a more flexible and consumer-focused personality, recent literature points towards a rather multi-stakeholder co-creation of brands (Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). This co-creation suggests that the brand is shaped through the interactions between the brand manager and its various stakeholders, which can trigger significant managerial implications. However, while aspects such as brand consistency, stakeholder overlap, traditional and digital medial proliferation and power shift from the organisation to the stakeholders have been studied extensively (Hatch & Schultz, 2003), the practical facets of these managerial implications have yet to truly capture our attention. On the contrary, it could be argued that the details of brand management processes and practices are yet to be fully uncovered, despite its acknowledged link with communications campaign effectiveness and brand market-based and financial performance (Luxton, Reid & Mavondo, 2015).

In line with the wider gap between academia and practice, the majority of studies on branding are conducted without practitioners' involvement, while myopically suggesting that branding is or should be managed strategically, without nevertheless offering insights on how this management can in reality be applied. Consequently, practitioners' current practice and understanding of branding and its management is not sought, potentially perpetuating non-strategic or erroneous practices. This study aims to respond to this gap by focusing on brand management in the most commercialised and '*most-watched*' sport league in the world (Deloitte, 2016), the EPL.

3. Methodology, research design, and data analysis

Criterion purposive sampling was employed to select the sample. The criterion selected was participation in the EPL in any of the five most recent consecutive seasons (2010/11, 2011/12, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15). All 30 clubs that share this criterion were selected and contacted for this study. Qualitative data was then generated from semi-structured interviews with all 30 individuals selected (the most senior employee in charge of marketing from each club), which were conducted in person between August 2014 and March 2015. Upon completion all interviews were transcribed allowing for the data to be coded manually and for the following themes to emerge.

4. Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions

Examining the findings in detail allowed for a thorough step-by-step mapping of the brand management process within the EPL to be conducted. Interestingly, a wide disparity of practices was presented by the interviewees, ranging from strategic brand management lead by detailed updated guidelines, regular training and strict control, to a complete lack of guidance, non-existing training and no control. As a result, three different patterns of brand management and understanding were identified among the 30 clubs; Five out of 30 clubs referred to the brand guidelines as the club's '*brand bible*' that is imposed and controlled by the marketing team which acts as the '*brand police*' of the club. 13 out of 30 clubs suggested that while they would aspire to view brand management as a strategic priority, their current practice focuses on '*picking things on the job*'. The remaining 11 clubs of the sample presented a rather erroneous view of what the brand is and how it should be managed, suggesting that misconceptions on branding still exist. According to these clubs, their brand was 'deemed' universally understood and widely appreciated, not only by the employees but also by the fans, and as a result, minimum to no effort was required and devoted on behalf of the clubs in order for the brand to be managed, promoted and protected.

Taking these findings into consideration, the current practice of brand management and overall understanding of branding in the EPL appears to be varying between a carefully built and meticulously sustained concept which demands for a detailed business-wide process, and a very strong '*self-maintained*' notion that requires no assistance from the club's employees. As a result, the optimistic view often expressed by academics that progress is made towards a strategic brand management era falls short in capturing the actual practice in one of the biggest sports brands. While brand misconceptions still prevail within it, the urge to conduct engaged scholarship involving and studying practitioners appears to be more relevant than ever.

5. References

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