Exploring the Managerial Perspective on Developing a New Sport Team Brand

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An emerging body of literature exists to explain the brand development process among new sport teams (Daniels, Kunkel, & Karg, 2019; Du, McLeod, & James, 2020; Kunkel, Funk, & Lock, 2017). It’s important to consider the ways in which consumers are attracted to sport teams so that teams and leagues can design strategies that encourage and sustain consumer engagement and attendance (Kunkel, Funk & Hill, 2013). Lock (2011) and Kunkel, Doyle, and Funk (2017) have focused on the role the league plays in consumer connections to sport team brands. Meanwhile, Kunkel, Funk, and Hill (2013), point out that teams and leagues need to consider blending of league reputation while establishing team identities in order to build strong brands to attract consumers. Strong association with a brand can lead to many favorable outcomes for teams, including brand loyalty, increased consumption, and positive word-of-mouth marketing for the team (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, LeCrom, 2015). While much of the research to this point has focused on the consumers’ perspective of team and league development, this study aimed to explore the managerial perspective in the cultivation of the team brand as it relates to league expansion and sport fan market share.

Expansion teams across Major League Soccer (MLS) were selected to analyze team brand development for this study due to its continued expansion efforts across North America and the fact that the MLS continues to compete for market share against other “Big Four” sport teams in their respective cities. Senior sales and marketing executives from seven of the most recent MLS franchises were recruited using snowball sampling to participate in this study to gather a range of perspectives to explain the brand development process within the MLS from the perspective of the team executives. Managers who agreed to participate were interviewed using semi-structured interviews lasting between 29–37 minutes.

Data were then coded using both open- and axial-coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in relation to the original research questions which focused on exploring both the opportunities and challenges faced across expansion franchise development and to determine the extent to which marketing initiatives and brand decisions were team-led vs. market-led (Du et al., 2020). While interviews are ongoing, findings from completed interviews have revealed that managers engaged in a variety of team-led marketing campaigns, but also supported the market-led initiatives and let fans drive several team brand characteristics. Managers referenced the time spent researching the locals and trying to create brands that were rooted in the respective city. When discussing some of the challenges faced by teams during the brand development process, managers explained that they had to educate their markets about certain soccer traditions such as revealing simple team names (e.g. United) and logos. Additional findings will be discussed during the presentation. Implications from this study can help advance our understanding of sport team branding both theoretically, by bolstering our understanding of team- and market-led branding, and practically by highlighting how team executives have been successful in reaching and engaging with a new fan base.