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ABSTRACT

Research question: In response to calls for additional research on strategic brand management in sports, we examine brand governance practices in the novel and under-researched context of the World Rugby Sevens Series. In doing so, we expand the discourse on rugby in the twenty-first century and provide fresh insights concerning brand governance practices in an international recurring sporting event.

Research methods: Our qualitative case study design utilises in-depth interviews with eight rugby senior executives representing World Rugby and seven rugby unions. Using the constant comparison technique and reflexive thematic analysis, we identify 10 key themes to illustrate brand governance as it relates to the World Rugby Sevens Series.

Results and findings: The first three themes, which serve as a prelude to a deeper exposition of brand governance practices depict the World Rugby Sevens Series as a distinct, co-created sportainment brand, headlined by rugby matches as the primary consumption object. Fostering beneficial exchanges with brand partners, developing strong collaborative ties with host cities and venues, commitment to athlete welfare, adoption of scripted brand enhancing initiatives, championing brand co-creation, activating social media use, and providing a 360-degree feedback loop are the brand governance practices on which the World Rugby Sevens Series is built.

Implications: We depict branding from the brand owner's perspective and underline how the World Rugby Sevens Series incorporates global partners, local sponsors, rugby unions, host cities and venues, athletes, and fans in brand governance practices.

Introduction

The topic of strategic brand management in sport has been widely studied (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Helm & Jones, 2010; Hill & Vincent, 2006; Hoye et al., 2020). Helm and Jones (2010) suggest shifts in the branding landscape embracing fiercely competitive industry environments, empowered consumers, line and brand extension proliferation, multiple distribution and communication touchpoints, rising popularity of strategic

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partnerships in delivering brands to consumers, and the risks of using social media accentuate the value of studying strategic brand management. For instance, because sports provide drama, escapism, vicarious achievement and a source of solidarity (Chadwick, 2009; Funk & James, 2001), they compete not only with other sports codes but alternative forms of entertainment. Unsurprisingly, branding is vital for differentiation, fostering loyalty and, ultimately, increasing brand equity.

To date, most research on sports branding has examined brand management in the context of collegiate athletics (Gladden et al., 1998), professional sport teams (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden et al., 2001; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Underwood et al., 2001; Watkins, 2014) and sport events (Séguin et al., 2008) including recurring sports events (Parent et al., 2012). This body of scholarly work has largely focused on the development of internal branding capabilities to create brand equity including brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, brand positioning and how to understand, manage, and legally protect a brand.

Despite this preponderance of research in the domain of sports, recent studies (e.g. Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Manoli, 2020a; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020) indicate that an understanding of brand management in sport is incomplete. Hatch and Schultz (2010), Helm and Jones (2010), Ind and Bjerke (2007), Merrilees (2017) and Taks et al. (2020) propose the externally focused concept of brand governance as a new approach to strategic brand management. Brand governance refers to 'a system of building a brand that is guided by the vision, mission and values of an organisation and that systematically nurtures a brand value to become and remain a long-term strategic asset' (Séguin & Abeza, 2019, p. 368). It deals with how organisations pull together resources, structures, functions, and processes to guide an organisation's brand management in alignment with its vision, mission, and values. Séguin and Abeza (2019) note that brand governance can be understood as a system of rules, practices, and processes, directed and controlled through clear, actionable goals to establish and sustain an entity's long-term brand value. This conceptual definition implies that brand governance goes beyond simply developing and maintaining brand identity elements such as a brand name, logo, font type, symbols, colour, or shape, which are usually the responsibility of mid-level management (Zaichkowsky, 2010), and that a visionary approach is necessary to preserve the consistency and coherence of the brand which involves stakeholders in the co-creation (Ferrand et al., 2012) and governance of the brand (Séguin & Abeza, 2019). Renton and Richard's (2019) work on SMEs provides early evidence of the role of brand governance in protecting brand values, brand distinctiveness, strong positioning and value co-creation. However, there remains a paucity of research on brand governance in the context of sport (Taks et al., 2020) and whether leaders of sports organisations apply brand governance (Parent et al., 2012).

Against this backdrop and responding to calls for research on brand governance in sport organisations (Séguin & Abeza, 2019; Taks et al., 2020), our study examines the brand governance practices in a major international recurring sports event. While rugby commands the same research attention as soccer (e.g. Maguire & Stead, 1998; Markovits & Hellerman, 2014), baseball (e.g. Chen et al., 2012; Marcano & Fidler, 1999), basketball (e.g. Hoffmann et al., 2016; Huang, 2013), and cricket (e.g. Gupta, 2004; Maguire & Stead, 1996), most of the scholarship on branding in rugby (e.g. Harris & Wise, 2012; Jackson et al., 2001) addresses national team brands for rugby union. We focus on rugby

'sevens' and in doing so, we make several contributions to the extant literature on strategic brand management in sports. First, we add to the nascent stream of research on international sports marketing (see Ratten & Ratten, 2011; Richelieu et al., 2008; Richelieu & Desbordes, 2013) and recurring sports events, in particular (Parent et al., 2012), by examining an under-researched recurring international sporting event of the World Rugby Sevens Series (WRSS).

Second, we contribute to the small but growing literature on brand governance in sports (Manoli, 2020a, 2020b; Parent et al., 2012; Taks et al., 2020) by examining how brand governance is used by the WRSS to build brand equity as a long-term strategic asset. Given the nature of international recurring sport events in different cities and destinations, branding must be sustained to accommodate the diversity of international markets and venues (Harrison & Davies, 2016; Richelieu, 2014). Thinking long-term and strategically about brand governance is therefore crucially important to recurring sports events. The WRSS relies on multiple stakeholders which highlights the importance of establishing and adhering to rules, practices and processes to sustain the value of the brand over time.

Literature review

Strategic brand management in recurring sports events

Gladden et al. (2001) contend that building a brand demands a customer-focused relationship management drive. Four initiatives – understanding the consumer, enhancing the interface between the consumer and brand, reinforcing and rewarding brand loyalty, and developing consistent integrated communication – typify this approach. Parent et al. (2012) and Richelieu and Desbordes (2009) offer comparable integrative models of branding.

Research on organisational brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Hill & Vincent, 2006; Manoli, 2020b; Parganas et al., 2015; Richelieu, 2014; Schilhaneck, 2008) examines brand-related concepts such as brand identity, brand associations, brand personality, brand consistency, brand co-creation, brand loyalty and brand equity. For example, there is a cluster of studies anthropomorphising sports products through conferring brand personality (Schade et al., 2014). While the National Football League (NFL), a specific type of organisational brand, exhibits personality traits analogous to generic human mannerisms, other types of sports brands are atypical (Kang et al., 2016). For example, Schade et al. (2014) depict brash or rebellious sports brands which are unambiguously bold and 'alternative'. Other studies have identified brand associations that fans might have for their favourite sports team (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak et al., 2008; Parganas et al., 2015). In extending Aaker's brand building model, Hill and Vincent (2006), and Schilhaneck (2008) also suggest that a sports brand takes multiple forms which embody unique sports products or consumption objects. Regardless of the form, the strongest brand associations ensue from the benefits instead of the attributes of the sports product (Gladden & Funk, 2002). For instance, sonic branding (i.e. associations between sport and music) fosters a deeper emotional connection between fans and sports brands (Likes, 2013).

There remains strong interest in examining strategic brand management in (inter)-national sports brands encompassing the Olympics, UEFA Champions League, English Premier League (EPL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), NFL, and National Hockey League (NHL) (see Aguiar-Noury & Garcia-del-Barrio, 2019; Holt, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2018; Richelieu et al., 2011). Integral to this discourse is understanding the divergent fortunes of sports brands. For instance, Aguiar-Noury and Garcia-del-Barrio (2019) illustrate that while the North American leagues (i.e. MLB, NBA, and NFL) are not decidedly more lucrative, they command the highest online traffic and visibility. Holt (2007) suggests centralised marketing, profitable television rights, and corporate sponsorship are indispensable antecedents to the creation of the UEFA Champions League brand. For the French (Ligue1) and German (Bundesliga) soccer leagues, catalytic or transactional elements such as a rich history, winning tradition, passionate fans and iconic stadiums underpin effective brand building (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Wetzel et al., 2018).

The changing landscape for strategic brand management in sport

There are countless challenges inherent in managing a global sports brand. Kenyon et al. (2018) dissected the 2012 London Olympics and concluded that while the International Olympic Committee's and the London Olympic Games Organising Committee's brand values and messages were aligned, public perception and media portrayal of these events were incongruent with the messaging and values. Moreover, the EPL, one of the most globalised and sophisticated sports league brands offers fascinating ironies (Manoli, 2020b; Pritchard et al., 2020). On the one hand EPL teams elaborately layer sub-brands under the core brand (Pritchard et al., 2020); on the other hand, advanced brand management capabilities are confined to less than half of the league (Manoli, 2020b).

Increasingly, sports brands are co-created through 'the passion, excitement and involvement expressed by fans' (Kolyperas et al., 2019, p. 204). Co-creation occurs in the joint sphere (i.e. involving brand owner and fans) and in the customer sphere (i.e. fan to fan interaction) (Uhrich, 2014). It can be physical (e.g. in stadium activities) or virtual where it intersects with social media activities. Although co-creation increases fan engagement, customer-to-customer value co-creation culminates in loss of control for the brand owner, raising the risk of not only transforming brand identity to a version for which the brand owner did not intend, but of prompting value co-destruction (Kim et al., 2020).

Recent work on branding in sports (e.g. Hoye et al., 2020; Parent et al., 2021; Taks et al., 2020) acknowledges that the process of co-creation should involve all stakeholders and not just fans. Informed by Freeman (1994), Parent et al. (2012, p. 146) define stakeholders as 'individuals or groups who can affect the organisation or be affected by its actions'. They comprise community residents, athletes, fans, sponsors, media, government bodies, employees, volunteers, and other sports organisations (Hoye et al., 2020; Koutrou & Downward, 2016; Kunkel et al., 2020). Sports brands can be influenced and shaped by the action of stakeholders and it is these stakeholder inter-relationships that influence brand governance (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015b; Parent et al., 2018).

Social media is another externally focused activity that has relevance to the study of brand governance in sport. Social media can serve as a vehicle to achieve strategic

brand objectives in sport (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2020; Sanderson & Yandle, 2015; Taks et al., 2020), if it is well developed and properly managed (Naraine & Parent, 2017a, 2017b). Several studies have examined how social media is used to communicate a sport brand's value proposition, specifically how social media platforms create a direct, ongoing link to end-user consumers (Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Sanderson & Yandle, 2015). Given that fans today seek increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with sports organisations, it is not surprising that existing literature largely focuses on its centrality to building brand image and engagement with fans (Maderer et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020). However, to date, the use of social media by sports brands is ad hoc and intuitive and lacks integration with a broader strategic brand management thrust (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020). Recently, Ströbel and Germelmann (2020) offered a synopsis of strategic brand management that underscores the need for research to examine the role of social media in the brand governance process.

In summary, our review of the extant literature on strategic brand management in sports highlights the need to explore brand governance practices and the role of stakeholders and social media in this process. We now report a case study on the WRSS an international recurring sports event involving organisations and individuals. We answer the question; *How does the World Rugby Sevens Series manage brand governance*?

Brand governance is challenging given its links with destination branding, brand positioning relative other entertainment options, and tensions between 'local' and 'global' (Kenyon et al., 2018; Parent et al., 2012; Richelieu & Desbordes, 2013; Whitson & Macintosh, 1996). By examining the role of stakeholders and social media in co-creating the WRSS brand, we extend traditional strategic brand management practice and its focus on consumers and their perceptions of brand awareness, image associations and loyalty, to the externally focused concept of brand governance.

Research methods and analysis

Edmondson and McManus's (2007) work on methodological fit guided our research design and method. Given we focused on 'how' the *World Rugby Sevens Series* manages brand governance, a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2013) due to its capacity to generate rich data and detailed descriptions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Crick, 2021; Doz, 2011). Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1981) among others, informed our qualitative research design. To enhance the clarity and trustworthiness of our approach (see Doz, 2011; Sinkovics et al., 2008) we elaborate the case study method with emphasis on the role the case study plays, sampling method, and unit of analysis.

The choice of single versus multiple case study and the precise role the case plays are two of the most fundamental considerations in qualitative case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Siggelkow, 2007). Since we focused on an international recurring sporting event organised and held across multiple markets, our method constituted a hybrid single case study with embedded units. A case can serve as motivation (i.e. abductive logic), illustration (i.e. deductive logic), or inspiration (i.e. inductive logic) for qualitative research design (Siggelkow, 2007; Verleye, 2019). The first option focuses on theory refinement and verification/falsification (Baxter & Jack, 2008;

Siggelkow, 2007), whereas, the other two address theory development. Siggelkow (2007) indicates the difference between these latter approaches is a matter of sequencing. Rather than use a case to illustrate a theory, we employed it as inspiration (i.e. to generate theoretical insights from data). Because we summarised data, linked this data to the goal of our research, and constructed explanations from the resultant connections, our approach fits within the wider discourse on grounded theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gehman et al., 2018; Thomas, 2006).

We used purposive sampling to reach key informants representing the WRSS. To access a representative range of perspectives, we considered both traditional rugby-playing nations (e.g. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) and up-and-coming rugby destinations (e.g. Dubai, Japan, and USA). We approached senior rugby executives affiliated with each of these unions/events. That a co-author had a relationship with an executive at World Rugby, meant our study benefited from introductions to other rugby executives. Our aim was to interview one executive per chosen rugby union. Of the 12 rugby unions, we approached, eight executives representing seven unions and World Rugby agreed to participate in the interviews. Data were collected in October 2019. All interviews, except one, were conducted face-to-face online with each conversation lasting between 90 and 120 min. The semi-structured interviews were designed to flow from general to specific. They commenced with questions on the executives' role within rugby 'sevens', as well as, the sport's historical development. A series of prompting questions were used to elicit responses pertinent to strategic brand management. They included; How do you characterise rugby 'sevens'? Who are the key stakeholders and how do you manage relationships? How do you select host cities and venues? How do you handle the task of playing in different destinations? How did the opportunity to join the Olympics arise and what has it meant for rugby 'sevens'? What draws fans to a 'sevens' event? How do you keep fans engaged? How do you measure the success of an event? Where is rugby 'sevens' today and what are its prospects?

We recorded all interviews together with field notes before transcription for further analysis. Respondents had the opportunity to read the transcripts to validate correctness and completeness. Table 1 provides a synopsis of the interviewees. To preserve anonymity and reduce the chance of de-identification, we limit to a bare minimum the description of their roles and titles.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees.

Geographic market	Number of participants	Role/responsibility	Respondent codes	Respondent pseudonym
Australia	1	Rugby Australia	2	Hooker
Hong Kong	1	Hong Kong 7s	4	Prop
New Zealand	1	New Zealand Rugby New Zealand Rugby Players Association	5	Flanker
South Africa	2	Rugby South Africa	6,7	Fly half, scrum half
United Arab Emirates	1	Dubai 7s	3	Centre
United States of America	1	USA 7s	8	Wing
World Rugby	1	World Rugby	1	Fullback

We used triangulation to draw additional insights from sports websites (e.g. *World Rugby, host nation rugby unions,* and *broadcast partners*). Our focus was not so much on harvesting all data on the last 21 years of the WRSS as it was on extracting bits of information to allow us to construct a timeline, verify notable developments, and understand how the sport manages branding governance.

The WRSS is the case of interest, and individual series events (e.g. tournaments in Dubai, Hong Kong, or Las Vegas) constitute the embedded units. Thus, questions to a United Arab Emirates rugby executive focused on the Dubai Sevens. Likewise, our triangulation draws additional insights on the coverage of the event(s) on broadcast partners' and the WRSS's websites. To draw lucid themes from the data, we combine the constant comparison method with Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. We condense data based on text chunks, categorise, label, and reorganise text segments, before aggregating them into themes. Through iterative and immersive refinement, 10 themes encapsulating the strategic brand management activities of the WRSS emerged. Our findings are organised as follows: First, we provide a précis of key developments associated with the international rugby 'sevens' series. We rely on secondary data from websites to map the evolution of the rugby 'sevens' circuit. This is followed by a discussion of the first three themes which emphasise the centrality of rugby matches as the primary consumption object, the nature of the rugby 'sevens' segment, and the distinctiveness of the brand. We then delve into the seven brand governance themes on which the WRSS brand is forged. Our study triangulates each of these themes with insights from secondary sources. We include participant voice to augment the richness of the findings. The interviewees are denoted by rugby-based pseudonyms.

Results

The development of the world Rugby Sevens Series

Figure 1 provides a timeline for the development of the WRSS. Rugby 'sevens' dates to 1883 in the Scottish town of Melrose.[1] Ten years after its inception, the Scottish Football Union faced severe viability challenges. The union resolved to trim down each team to three forwards, two half-backs and two backs and to reduce the duration of each game
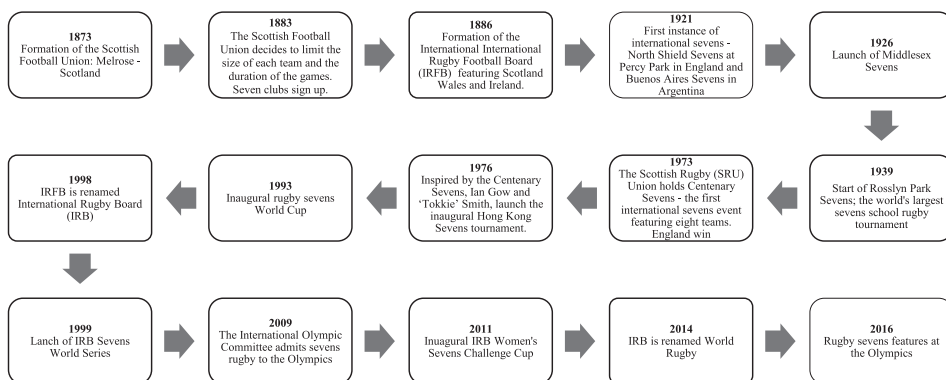

Figure 1. A brief history of Rugby Sevens.

to two 15-minute halves. From the imperative to keep traditional rugby union afloat, the 'sevens' format arose. The North Shield Sevens at Percy Park in England, and Buenos Aires Sevens played in 1921 are the first official accounts of international rugby 'sevens'.

For decades, rugby 'sevens' was viewed as an unrefined and less glamorous version of rugby union. That perception began to shift in the late 1970s and 1980s, thanks in part to the expat community in destinations such as Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. However, it was the advent of professionalism in rugby 'sevens', which opened the door for an international recurring series. Rugby 'sevens' evolved from a mere workout routine for athletes targeting rugby union, to a distinct professional sports code. *Prop* details the onset of professionalism:

> So, it took a few years for teams to understand about the nutrition and the weight training and everything else … that's obviously gone leaps and bounds from 10, 15, 20 years ago. And attitudes have also changed within rugby as well. So, you know, protein shakes and ice baths now.

'Sevens' became a professional sport with the start of the International Rugby Board (IRB) Sevens Series in the 1999/00 season, which saw 16 teams participate in 10 tournaments.[2] There are 15 core teams plus an additional squad chosen from regional qualifiers.[3] Australia, England, France, New Zealand, and South Africa, and other traditional rugby playing nations constitute the core teams. The series also features smaller or budding rugby playing nations including Kenya and the USA. New Zealand and Fiji are the most successful teams in the series. Both nations featured in the finals in the early years of the series, with New Zealand winning the first six straight before Fiji broke the run by winning their first of four titles in 2005/2006. New Zealand has since won 13 titles, with South Africa (three) and Samoa (one).[4]

In 2008, rugby 'sevens' was trialled as a potential Olympic sport at the Dubai Sevens event. The success led to rugby 'sevens' being granted Olympic status in 2009, and the Rio 2016 games became the first Olympics to feature rugby 'sevens'.[5] The women's circuit which began in 2012 commenced just in time for the Olympics.[6] Twenty-four national teams qualified in the men's and women's events (12 in each circuit) for the Rio 2016 games.[7] Respondents concur that participation in the Olympics has raised the international stature of rugby 'sevens'. For instance, *Hooker* explains:

> One of the biggest enablers for the series has been the inclusion in the Olympics without doubt. And that's the biggest positive I think everyone would say for the 'sevens' World Series … that's created genuine aspiration amongst the athletes and coaches and key people to want to be part of an Olympic campaign.

Lined up next to competing sports codes at the Olympics, rugby sevens' ability to combine 'the speed of the sprint track with the agility of gymnastics and the physicality of wrestling or judo' helped create a global fandom of nearly 17 million.[8] The growth of the series continues to attract commercial partners. HSBC are the series naming sponsors, Emirates airlines own the naming rights for the Dubai Sevens, and Capgemini and DHL are on board as global partners of the series.[9] Sports equipment manufacturer Gilbert is designated a technical partner. With support from key broadcast partners – Fox Sports, NBC, Sky Sports and Supersport – the WRSS is available in 145 countries and territories.[10]

Like most parts of society, 2020 was a difficult year for the WRSS due to the impact of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the 2020 series after only five of eight (women's) and six of ten (men's) events.[11] New Zealand – the early pacesetters in both circuits – were awarded the titles.

The Rugby Sevens brand

Three of the 10 themes emerging from the study capture perceptions of the WRSS from the perspective of the brand owner, a departure from most branding research which draws on consumers' views. Rugby matches are the primary consumption object, the WRSS brand is unique, and the personality of the WRSS brand encapsulates its distinctiveness. Profiling the brand lays the groundwork for a deeper discussion of brand governance practices associated with these characteristics.

(a) Rugby matches as the primary consumption object

The WRSS brand comprises multiple consumption objects. For instance, the Singapore Sevens list seven things fans can enjoy aside from rugby.[12] Yet responding to the relative importance of the matches compared to the surrounding fanfare, *Fullback* explains that the end-to-end action on the pitch is crucial for the rugby 'sevens' brand: 'Ultimately, it's the entertainment that they provide in the form of their athleticism and the beauty of the game that they play, particularly Fiji, which really is the biggest fan engagement piece'.

That the proportion of exciting and impactful plays is higher in rugby 'sevens' compared to other sports codes is a vital differentiating attribute. *Scrum half* articulates:

> I think the ratio of exciting activity in the game to duration is definitely something that presents [excitement] very often. And we're at a point now where it's … it's less than 90 seconds, on average for a try in rugby 'sevens' at the World Series level.

(b) Distinctiveness of the World Rugby Sevens Series

Respondents view the WRSS fans as a unique market segment. The demographics differ from those of rugby union. *Prop* explains:

> But a majority of those fans it was … it was approximately 60–40 split; 60% male 40% female, and the fan base was predominantly in the 18 to 24-year old brackets. That is something that is significantly different to the traditional rugby fan profile.

In markets such as Dubai and Hong Kong the rugby 'sevens' series also attracts an older segment comprising not only locals but expatriates and tourists. *Centre* describes the segment profile as follows: 'So, we can tell you that 62% of the people are over 40 years of age. And they are more likely from a Western culture, British, Australian, Kiwi, South Africans'. While the demographic profiles of fans may differ across markets, the psychographic and behavioural attributes are consistent. Rugby 'sevens' fans are a vocal bunch, which is not embarrassed to express itself. *Fullback* characterises 'sevens' fans as: 'I would say a sevens spectator is more passionate and vocal and non-traditional, than what a 15's spectator would be'.

(c) Brand identity/personality of the World Rugby Sevens Series

The identity of the WRSS brand blends the non-stop explosive action on the pitch and the entertainment or party atmosphere surrounding the events. *Fullback* states: 'I think if you would describe what "sevens" is, it's a party atmosphere where people can dress up and have a lot of fun with their mates'. There is an acknowledgement that fans come for the rugby (i.e. primary consumption object) and so much more. However, if left unchecked, the party atmosphere may be problematic and may detract from the primary consumption product or propagate ignoble fandom. This is imperative given the WRSS is often positioned as a family event.[13] *Flanker* explains:

> The host unions need to make sure that they are providing an entertainment experience headlined by rugby … you need to be careful that the entertainment experience is always headlined by the rugby [and] it doesn't get taken over by other entertainment.

Scrum half reiterates: 'We don't shy away from the fact that we actually promote the party element of our event. But in saying that we've also got to be very measured as to how we do that'.

The brand governance practices of the world Rugby Sevens Series

Fostering beneficial exchanges with brand partners, developing strong collaborative ties with host cities and venues, commitment to athlete welfare, adoption of scripted brand enhancing activities, championing brand co-creation, activating social media use, and providing a 360-degree feedback loop emerged from the data as key brand governance practices on which the WRSS is built.

(a) Fostering close beneficial exchanges with brand partners

Relationships with brand partners are fundamental to the WRSS brand. *Prop* underscores the significance of consulting brand partners in city and venue selection:

> … the destination is one that would appeal to fans, but also to the sponsor and partners. So our global partners, the likes of HSBC, DHL, Capgemini, Tag Heuer in the past, they would then give an indication to us as to how strategic that market is for them.

Scrum half reiterates:

> For instance – HSBC would also have a role to play in determining [the host city] … they're not going to be interested in a market that has no HSBC banking, investment or relationships. They can't make the overall decision, but it certainly plays a part.

Host rugby unions have discretion in selecting and engaging local brand partners. Local brand partners encompass event management companies, hotels and apparel partners.[14] *Centre* explains the intimate interaction as follows: 'Some of the sponsors have direct sponsorship with teams, and they utilise players during the tournament to come and visit their hospitality space'.

Probably owing to their stature as top destinations, Dubai and Singapore have especially been successful at securing local sponsors.[15]

(b) Building strong collaborative ties with host cities and venues

After winning a licence to host an event, the host rugby union plays a lead role in selecting host cities and venues. The competition is stiff. Commenting on the selection process for the Gold Coast Sevens in 2014, former Australia Rugby Union Managing Director and CEO, John O'Neill notes:

> Last November, we invited a range of interested parties from across Australia to submit proposals to host the Australian leg of the HSBC Sevens World Series and we received very competitive responses from Adelaide, Perth, Sydney and the Gold Coast.[16]

Flanker describes the criteria:

> Can the venue handle 25000-plus on the terraces and behind [the] scenes? Are the hotels to the right standard? Is there transport? What's the security like in the area? Is it a volatile area, or is it not? And what experience has this group of this country had in running tournaments or big sporting ventures?

Fullback states:

> I know some cities invest in the financial model to allow that to happen, you know, to be able to publicise the local city. So, Hamilton's a good example of [how] a local council would obviously invest money in the tournament to get [the] Hamilton brand out there.

The investment in an event (with tax/ratepayers' money) increases a host city's commitment to the success of a WRSS event. Dubai's tagline in promoting the 2021 'sevens' event that – 'The biggest mass-participation sports festival in the Middle East just got bigger' – captures the investment and excitement.[17] WRSS alone is incapable of creating this spectacle without strong collaborative ties with an iconic destination.

(c) Commitment to athlete performance through care and support

The third theme on brand governance practices underlines the WRSS's commitment to athlete welfare. *Scrum half* notes:

> Player welfare is the number one priority for World Rugby … the fact is that we need to abide by player welfare factors where they can't be two hours [or] less between games. So realistically, we're going to try and make two to five hours.

The fitness regimen including nutrition and exercise is a fundamental component of motivating athlete performance through care and support. A prime focus of the recommended diet for rugby 'sevens' players is recovery between matches.[18] *Fly half* states: 'The dietitian's very pedantic on the food that athletes eat, and try to spend a lot of money, making sure that there's 100% [compliance]'.

Hooker articulates the upside of focusing on athlete welfare:

> The quality of the athletes is really improving, and particularly in the female side of the game. I think that there's a real opportunity there where people become more engaged in the 'sevens' World Series and the game of 'sevens' through just the sheer quality and of what the athletes are about and what they do.

(d) Adoption of scripted brand enhancing activities and strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR)

The fourth brand governance practice is largely centralised, but local rugby unions have some discretion to suggest suitable CSR-related initiatives. *Flanker* offers the following example:

> We run a thing where the school can adopt a country and then two to three months before … that school learn[s] all about the country … There's a couple of handicapped children schools here, and we had NZ [the New Zealand rugby team] there last year, go and talk to them. It's really good.

The captain photo shoot, an opportunity for skippers of the rugby 'sevens' squads to be pictured with the 'sevens' trophy in the host city or country is generally considered standard practice. *Scrum half* states:

> There is something that is generally done by every location and that is a captain's call, which is involving a captain's photo. It involves all the captains in their uniform and the trophy. We try and get it [the photo] in an iconic location.

The photo shoot offers a chance to showcase what the host city offers particularly for travelling fans. Often it amounts to a sub-event or supplementary sport consumption object. *Wing* adds: 'We have the teams in Las Vegas walk down Fremont Street … and the Fremont Street experience is quite unique. It's multi blocks of TV screens that are about 60 feet above your head and a whole two-lane street wide'.

In this instance, the WRSS brand is exploiting the positive impacts of co-branding and corporate philanthropy on rugby 'sevens'.

(e) Championing brand co-creation

The WRSS is a co-created brand. Co-creation is evident in the dress-ups, sing-alongs, kiss cams and ongoing interface with the host city or venue. In some situations, the brand owners provoke co-creation while in others it is spontaneous. *Scrum half* explains: 'It is music, interaction on the big screens, dance cams, you know, all those sorts of things, you know, punters want to see themselves on the big screen'. Sport and non-sport celebrities, some of whom are passionate rugby 'sevens' fans, help co-create the brand. *Prop* describes their involvement:

> This year [2019] we got good marketing exposure from Sébastien Chabal, ESPN France International, turning out in front of the South stand singing five hundred miles in a caveman suit … We have had David Hasselhoff sing off [the] Bay Watch song in front of the stand.

The institutional profile of host cities complements the co-creation. *Wing* describes the Las Vegas stopover: 'If you want to have a party for a weekend, Vegas usually tops that list here in America. There's a multitude of things you can do in Vegas, and it's made for that'. *Centre* views 'Hong Kong's very vibrant nightlife [which] gives a very international flavour across the whole city' as pivotal to the co-creation. *Fly half* adds: 'There's so much spice in the event itself; you get the

Polynesian element and what they bring to "sevens"; you get the South Americans; you get the North Americans … '

Thus, 'the electric atmosphere created by the avid fans' fosters a vibrant cultural melting pot.[19]

(f) Activating social media use in brand management

Rugby 'sevens' constitutes a compressed action-laden version of rugby union, which lends it to the adoption of social media. With presence on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter, the significance of social media for World Rugby is well-acknowledged.[20] *Fly half* is unequivocal:

> It's almost a natural fit in that 'sevens' is quick and social media is quick. So, we at Cape Town 'sevens', as an example – we the last two years [have] done a speed tweet competition on the big screen where you could win some very nice prizes.

The popularity of social media and the fact that in some markets the WRSS targets the younger demographic, amplifies its potential as an engagement tool. *Scrum half* continues:

> Because a lot of the consumption, the people that attained the age group, they're a little bit younger than a test match, attendee. So, we do have [to] definitely try and do that [engaging via social media] as much as we can.

Social media is effective for disseminating highlights to get fans up-to-speed with a day's matches and events. This is critical given the differences in time zones for the fan base. *Prop* describes the use of social media to provide game summaries:

> … it's feeding that back in short form digestible format that people can engage with, after the live experience. If they're not going to watch it live on TV, because it's the middle of the night, can you give them short form easily digestible options to consume what has happened when they come back.

Uptake of social media by athletes varies across markets and *Wing* suggests USA's WRSS players are exemplary: 'It's easy for players in the USA to do, you know, we'll ask them to do a little bit of a shout out, and they're more than willing to do that'.

(g) Provision of a 360° Feedback Loop

The conclusion of a tournament initiates a sequence of brand governance practices courtesy of a feedback loop focusing on the event hosts, players, and team managers. *Full-back* explains:

> Post tournament there is a survey that's sent out; There is a tournament survey … and then the International Players Association will then send a survey out to the players for their feedback on the tournament as well.

Prop reiterates: 'We call it a 360-degree feedback mechanism … when we actually get into the hosting side of things, after each leg of the series there is quite a comprehensive feedback … It's captured in multiple different ways'. The feedback process is not mere

tokenism. It is the basis for continuous improvement on multiple fronts embracing event management, fan experience, and athlete welfare. *Wing* summarises this as follows: 'And so, I look forward to that every year, because you want to keep fine tuning your events to make as many people happy as possible'. It is likely the feedback from players has helped shape World Rugby's broader player welfare initiative.[21]

Discussion

Professionalism and acquisition of legitimacy through the Olympics, served as the cornerstones to the development of the 'sevens' brand. Professionalism laid the foundation to attract superior athletes, global sponsors and broadcast partners. Similarly, gaining acceptance to or hosting the Olympics augments legitimacy (see Tomlinson, 2010) in much the same way as opening a foreign subsidiary or obtaining foreign exchange listing does for a traditional multinational brand. Our findings are consistent with past studies documenting the impact of professionalism (e.g. Chadwick, 2009; Giulianotti & Numerato, 2018) and the Olympics (e.g. Davis, 2012) on the growth of sports brands.

Figure 2 provides an organising framework of the brand governance practices of the WRSS. To fully appreciate the brand governance practices, one must consider the primary consumption object, the target market segment(s) and the distinctiveness of the sports brand. Although, increasingly, the WRSS offers variety, the rugby matches constitute the primary consumption object. The talent on show, the up-tempo free flowing end-to-end action, and frequent scoring – all compressed in a comparatively
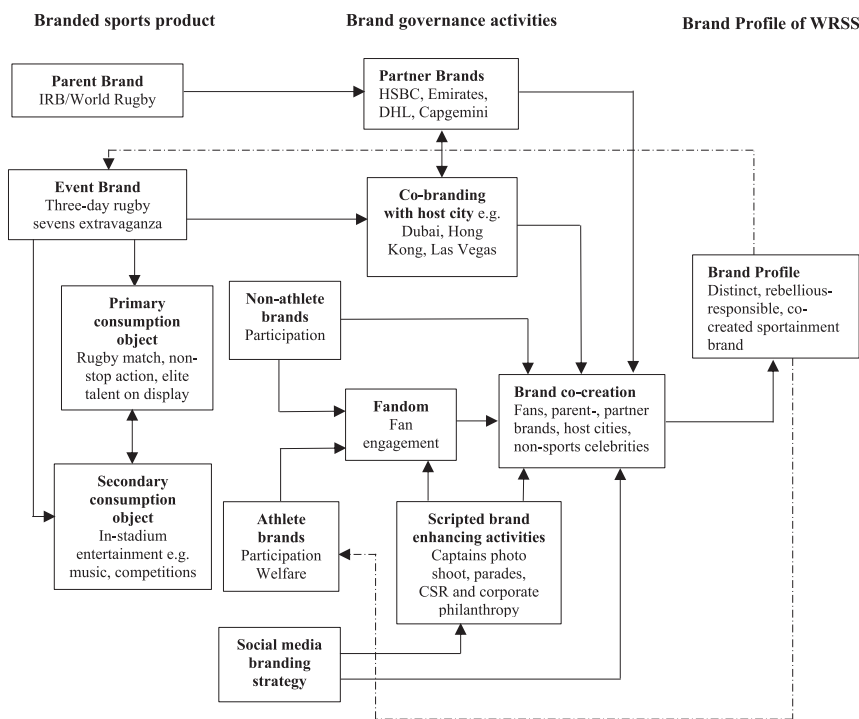

Figure 2. Brand governance practices of the World Rugby Sevens Series.

short game – frequently culminate in nail-biting finishes. The resultant outcome uncertainty drives fan involvement and engagement with a sport consumption object. Our explanation aligns with past research (Forrest et al., 2005; Hogan et al., 2017), which underscores the significance of energetic action and outcome uncertainty in increasing fan engagement with a sports brand.

The WRSS market segments diverge from other sports' segments. For instance, one segment comprises fans in their 20s and another includes families with young children. In destinations like Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore rugby 'sevens' appeals to an expatriate segment. Targeting such segments demands meticulous brand governance practices to set a single global standard without overlooking the local. Our observation is compatible with past research (e.g. Kenyon et al., 2018; Smith & Stewart, 2007) stressing the centrality of a consistent high-quality core product especially for international recurring sports event.

The bundle of sportainment products offers glimpses into the personality of the WRSS brand. The WRSS brand is a bold, brash and rebellious version of rugby union in much the same way as T20 cricket is for traditional Test and One-Day International cricket. We add to Kang et al. (2016) and Kolyperas et al. (2019) who highlight atypical sports brands. The brand is co-created through the activities of the brand owner, brand partners, host cities and vociferous fans. Our study contributes to a better understanding of sonic branding (e.g. Likes, 2013) and co-creation via sport and non-sport related celebrities (e.g. Lee et al., 2016; Xing & Chalip, 2006). Where David Hasselhoff shows up and sings the Baywatch theme song to elated fans or when the entire arena sings along to Sébastien Chabal's rendition of *500 miles*, co-creation through sonic branding involving sport and non-sport celebrities, is on full display. Also, co-branding with iconic host cities such as Dubai, Las Vegas, and Hong Kong, is pivotal for enhancing the sports brand. Our results are consistent with past studies (e.g. Smith & Stewart, 2007) emphasising the import of co-branding with a host city as part of a broader sport tourism endeavour. Specifically, the use of athletes to co-brand a consumption object with a host city (e.g. the captain's photoshoot in rugby 'sevens') is consistent with other sport codes. For instance, in the NFL, Tom Brady has tossed a pass from the *Great Wall of China*, while Russel Wilson threw another with *Christ the Redeemer* in the backdrop. Unlike these sports codes, rugby 'sevens' operates without high profile athlete brands. Reflecting on athlete brand equity (e.g. Arai et al., 2013, 2014), we surmise that while athletic performance and attractive appearance are often present, it is probably the lack of marketable lifestyles which limits the development of recognisable athlete brands in rugby 'sevens'.

Astute brand governance practices safeguard against dilution or inadvertent hijacking of the WRSS brand. At times, it is tough to completely extricate the WRSS from disorderly conduct, drunkenness and other forms of ignoble fandom. We concur with Gee et al. (2016, p. 280) on the imperative to rein in on 'the ritualized pageantry and carnivalesque culture', which is often culpable for value co-destruction (Kim et al., 2020). To counter this, WRSS attempts to foster the image of a rebellious brand but one that is also responsible. Scripted brand enhancing activities are instrumental in cultivating that sense of accountability. We corroborate recent research (e.g. Kim & Manoli, 2020) outlining the contribution of strategic CSR and corporate philanthropy to sports branding. Notwithstanding the close match between the WRSS and social media, its adoption is viewed more as an opportunity than an accomplishment. This is consistent with

extant research (e.g. Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020), which bemoans the lack of an integrated social media strategy in sports marketing.

Conclusions and implications

Responding to multiple recent calls for additional research on strategic brand management in and through sport (Manoli, 2020a; Manoli, 2020b; Parent et al., 2012; Taks et al., 2020), we examined the brand governance practices associated with the international recurring sporting event of the World Rugby Sevens Series. We demonstrate how the WRSS has strategically relied on government agencies, fans and sponsors for their resources, and the process that has been followed to build and sustain the value of the brand over time. From a marginal sport perceived as the proving ground for rugby union, rugby 'sevens' and the WRSS brand continues to grow. That tournaments are played across five of the six inhabitable continents speaks to the WRSS's global reach. Professionalism and recognition as an Olympic sport partly explain the increasing international stature of rugby, so too does the involvement of benevolent sponsors as global partners. Brand governance practices in the WRSS derive from the delineation of the primary consumption object, specification of market segments, and differentiation of the sports brand. Amidst the multiple consumption objects and sports products, the rugby matches are considered the primary drawcard. The short fast-paced matches with free-flowing action, provide the edge-of-the-seat entertainment, while capitalising on attention economics. The fandom is a loud and proud bunch, a characterisation congruent with the profile and persona of WRSS as an atypical brand. The unique international taste various national teams and their partisan fans bring to each event contributes to the co-creation of a brash, rebellious or non-conformist brand.

Brand governance requires the ability to collaborate with and serve the needs of key stakeholders including global partners, local sponsors, rugby unions, host cities and venues, athletes, and fans. The brand governance challenge for the WRSS is not so much capturing attention as it is about sustaining it for long periods. For WRSS, this is achieved through sportainment, combining the rugby matches with pomp and fanfare. It starts with careful selection of host cities to create opportunities for co-branding. Over the years, Dubai, Hong Kong and Las Vegas have been among the most popular stopovers. This matters as much to cities as it does to the WRSS. Indeed, recently, organisers of the Oktoberfest have expressed interest in having Munich host a rugby 'sevens' event. Once the event begins, competitions, jumping castles, water slides, kiss cams, and speed tweeting all contribute towards sustaining attention and ultimately engagement. Co-creation, both spontaneous and planned, helps bring the fans closer to the brand. It is this carnivalesque atmosphere which brings a tournament to life. Therein lies the ultimate challenge. On one hand the WRSS cannot afford to remove entertainment options from events given the sport competes in a broader market, which includes other sports codes, festivals, concerts and circuses. There is need to create a consumption constellation, that provokes and sustains interest and excitement. On the other hand, misconduct, unruly behaviour and drunkenness threaten to besmirch the brand and to discourage one of the segments (young families) from supporting the events.

Scripted brand enhancing activities help modify the perception of the WRSS from that of a reckless to a responsible brand. The corporate social responsibility and philanthropy initiatives with schools and the underprivileged help alter the narrative. We note though that branding in WRSS remains concentrated on the parent or association brand with much less focus on either team or athlete brands. In sport codes where team brands are highly visible, a storied winning history (see Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Wetzel et al., 2018) going back 100 years often precedes the teams. With only a 20-year history, the successful teams participating in the WRSS (e.g. Fiji, New Zealand, and Samoa) are still decades removed from developing such a legacy. Likewise, the athlete brand is not a focal point for the WRSS brand. In combination, these two elements probably explain the fragmented utilisation of social media in that it is difficult to fully exploit social media without invoking the venerable history of team brands or the iconic stature of star athletes. Thus, the leverage effect (see Wetzel et al., 2018), which partly explains the prosperity of major sports brands, is yet to manifest in the WRSS.

Our study comes with limitations. The dissection of branding practices is descriptive and lacks causal relationships. It would be informative to extend this study by adding testable outcome variables to establish the impact of these practices on brand equity or preference for the WRSS brand. Our study approached brand governance from the focal brand owner's perspective. Including fans, global partners, and host cities should provide a diverse view and a more rigorous method. For instance, the question of whether rugby matches are the primary consumption object or how rugby is positioned relative other sport and entertainment options can only be answered definitively when the fans' perspective is included. Nonetheless, we have provided initial insights to stimulate additional research on brand governance practices in the context of the international recurring sporting event of World Rugby Sevens Series.

Notes

1. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'
2. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'
3. https://www.sevens'.co.nz/about/about-the-series/
4. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'
5. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'
6. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'
7. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/news/173326?lang=en; https://www.olympic.org/rio-2016/rugby. New Zealand, Great Britain (Silver), Fiji (Gold), Japan, Argentina, Australia, South Africa (Bronze), France, Spain, Brazil, USA, and Kenya; https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/news/173326?lang=en; https://www.olympic.org/rio-2016/rugby. Australia (Gold), USA, Fiji, Colombia, New Zealand (Silver), France, Spain, Kenya, Canada (Bronze), Great Britain, Brazil, Japan.
8. https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/631124?lang=en
9. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/news/78453?lang=en; https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/news/306027?lang=en; https://www.dhl.com/nz-en/home/about-us/partnerships/sports/world-rugby-'sevens'-series.html
10. https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/where-to-watch
11. https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/standings/womens; https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/standings/mens
12. https://www.singapore7s.com.sg/7-things-to-do-at-the-hsbcs7s

13. https://www.singapore7s.com.sg/singapore-sevens
14. https://www.singapore7s.com.sg/singapore-sevens
15. https://dubairugby7s.com/partners/https://www.singapore7s.com.sg/partners
16. https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/26865?lang=fr
17. https://dubairugby7s.com/experience/
18. https://www.sportsdietitians.com.au/factsheets/food-for-your-sport/rugby-sevens/
19. https://lasevensrugby.com/about/about-the-la-sevens
20. https://www.world.rugby/news/283495
21. https://www.world.rugby/the-game/player-welfare

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