

The sport marketing philosophy and practices between adoption and hesitation (Comparative study between Iraq and Saudi Arabia)

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Abstract

Sport marketing has attracted the attention of a lot of researchers around the world the last two decades. Its adoption and implementation within the teams' strategies is still under investigation since managers are divided into acceptance and adoption on one hand and hesitation and doubt relating to results on the other hand. In this exploratory study we addressed this dilemma in a comparative way between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Among the main findings of our

qualitative research, two factors impact directly the adoption of the marketing philosophy: the financial state of the team and the manager's mindset and perception of marketing in general. From total believing in the role of marketing within the teams to the refusal of its incorporation, Iraqi and Saudi teams are still hesitating.

Keywords: sport marketing, communication mix, budget allocation, qualitative research

*** Introduction**

As long as you are in the market, you communicate with your audience. Sport brands (team, specific player, event) are among those entities that should communicate with their clients named also fans. However, communicating under the umbrella of sport has some specificities that do distinguish this marketing area from other fields. Marketing your team has some goals as boosting the purchase of sporting goods (such clothes and smart phones), season tickets, match tickets... The question that rises the curiosity of academicians is the effectiveness of communication mix in sport. In other words are the sport marketing practices like sponsorship, publicity, advertising, PR the only factors that lead to the pre-cited objectives. Are there other drivers that lead to the corporate targets ?

The simple observation of the sport field and teams' fans rise another parallel truth that was highlighted by Machado de Freitas et al (2017) which is the winning titles and the elite status of the team. Hence, this study revealed that many factors help reaching the marketing goals can be found outside the umbrella of the corporate communication mix. In this study, we

aim to shed light on the two poles that interact in order to lead to the improvement of the team perceived personality: The exposure to the communication mix versus the team attachment.

This article is orchestrated as follows: In the first part, we will expose a literature review about sport marketing practices and perspectives in general and in Saudi Arabia and Iraq specifically. In the second section, we will present the qualitative research that was undertaken between the two pre-cited countries. Finally, we will expose the main results of our study.

*** Theoretical part**

*** Sport marketing**

According to Bernstein (2015), sport marketing is not a new phenomenon in the world of business. In fact, it dates back to 1860s when a lot of companies recognized the importance and the huge popularity of the emerging game « Baseball » and started pasting the teams' photographs on their products' packagings in order to attract this game's fans, improve their products' awareness, boost their image and consequently increase the company turnover. Nowadays, sport marketing is growing in importance and business

flow all over the world, the fact that led Ratten (2015) to say that « *sports marketing contributes to the future of the global economy because of its linkage to other industries including manufacturing, tourism, education and technology* »

According to Pitts and Stolar (2002), sport marketing is « *the process of designing and implementing activities for the production, pricing, promotion and distribution of a sport product to satisfy the needs or desires of consumers and to achieve the company's goals* » (p 80). This sport product can be a team, a simple player or an event. All those marketing activities can be easily noticed when negotiating an athlete or a player contract, this latter is usually presented as a product with distinctive physical characteristics, with a unique profile of past achievements as medals in diverse competitions that will be reflected on the contractual clauses such as the transactional value (the price of the player transferring or selling to another team). Sport marketing is also the use of a certain sport or a sport culture to sell a product or a brand.

Sport marketing was also defined as « *building relationships with fans through sponsorships and*

corporations, special events, endorsements, licensing and brand awareness » (Bursh 2015). From this definition, we can deduce that sport marketing has not only that instantaneous transactional objective but further than this, it aims the creation and the maintain of a long bond between the team or the athlete on one side and the fans or businesses on the other side. Thus, it is obvious that it is a win-win relationship. This point was highlighted by Sofia Papadopoulou (Olympic athlete from Greece) when she said « *I need more sponsors to have my best preparation for Olympics, and they need a very strong brand to promote their products.* ». In other words, companies while sponsoring a team or a athlete for instance, they win in terms of image and sales. From the other side, teams win money to recruit new players and enrich their history with titles.

Hatfield (2015) cited three main functions of sport marketing. First of all, making consumers aware of the available sport products (new hired player, T-shirts, season tickets...). Second, modifying attitudes and behaviors of current and potential sport products' consumers. Finally, reinforcing currently positive attitudes

and behaviors. Those goals are almost the same ones of any communicational campaign since promotion longs to informing, persuading, reminding and reinforcing (Habib and Chdoukhi, 2013). In the same wave of ideas, Lazarus and Wexler (1988) said that marketing in sport is so important since it finds up the best and most appropriate way to reach consumers.

From the precedent presentation, we can conclude that sport marketing is practiced by two operators : the first one is composed by all those people working in the sport sector (teams and athletes) and the second one is all the businesses operating in diverse sector activities. This latter operator opt usually for sponsoring the first operators' events, players and team in order to gain in awareness, top of mind, image and turnover. In this article, we will focus on the first operator and how it uses the multiple marketing elements in order to reach cognitive, affective and conative objectives.

*** Communication mix in sport marketing**

Like any marketing field, the sport communication mix is composed of those main elements : the advertising, the publicity, the direct

marketing, the sponsorship, the sales promotions, the webmarketing and the Public relations. Despite the big number of communication factors but in the field of sport marketing, the sponsoring seems to be the most influential and the most present in the promotion basket. Hence, it is so normal to find a huge number of prior researches focusing on the sponsoring, its importance in the field and its consequences.



The communication plan (Source : www.pinterest.com)

As it is clear in the above figure, every communication action should start with an analysis of the brand situation (in which life cycle phase the brand is? what are the main characteristics of our market? What distinguishes our consumers from the competitors' ones?...), then the

attention should be paid to the goals that you intend to reach : Cognitive (just informing consumers of an event, a product' attributes...), Affective (creating an emotional bond with the product) or Conative (leading consumers to purchase a specific product). Once those first bases are set, the communication mix will be chosen according to the corporate tangible and untangible capabilities as well as the audience preferences.

From another angle and according to Ratten and Ratten (2011), sport is different from any other marketing product since « *consumers will have a subjective valuation of sport marketing based on the teams they support or the athletes they identify with* ». In other terms, team love, attachment, past relationship and emotions developed toward the team play a huge role in perceiving positively all the marketing efforts. Supporting this viewpoint, Handelman (1990) argues that sporting events, team and athletes are polysemic since they generate diverse affective behavior going from mere deliberate exposure to communication to team love and commitment.

Consumers see their future projection in their preferred team

values, position and status. Emphasizing this point, Chalip (1992) says that sport marketing can benefit from a strong persuading linkage between psychology and marketing practices. Thus, marketers should take as a starting point the fact that sport is a culture and a mindset where subjectivity seems to have the heavier impact on preferences, attitudes and behavior. To shoulder this viewpoint, in Tunisia for instance it is well applied in the marketing strategy of The Tunisian African Club (CA) where they use this marketing slogan in all their communication campaigns « *CA is a mentality* ». In the same context, after each victory, the spokesperson of the EST (Taraji tounsi) Riadh Benour applies the same strategy by underestimating the new title and reminding the whole public that « *EST is the titles team* ». A slogan that provokes the adversary especially their potential fans in the emerging generation on one side and reconfort and remind the fans of the team's historical culture which is winning on the other side.

*** Research methodology and empirical part Research questions and objectives**

As it was presented above, sport marketing is an interesting topic that

attracts both researchers and practitioners. However, understanding what leads teams' managers to adopt the marketing practices is still ambiguous and many blanks still to be filled in (Ratten, 2015).

In fact, sport managers see clearly the positive effects of their efforts and to which extent marketing contributes really to their success (Brooksbank et al, 2012) but knowing which practice is the best for the team is still something that needs to be dug into empirically.

Some researchers (Ferkins et al, 2009 ; Brooksbak et al, 2012...) attribute this lack of understanding to many factors among them the absence of strategic planning in the sports organaizations. This strategic planning is crucial in the sense that it helps companies knowing where they are and where they should be and if they are following the right path.

In this paper, we will try to give answers via a qualitative research to the upcoming questions:-

First : To which extent the sport organizations have a real perception of the sport marketing importance in Iraq and Saudi Arabia?

Second : To which extent sport organizations think seriously to allocate a fixed budget to all marketing practices more specifically communication ?

Third : To which level sport organizations' managers believe that emotions toward the teams (love, attachment...) and their status can complement the marketing practices outputs ?

* **Qualitative research : Content analysis**

As we in an exploration stage and we intend to analyze the pre-cited research questions from the teams' angle, we proceeded to a qualitative study. In fact, we contacted diverse marketing managers in Saudi Arabia and Iraq in order to bring answers and understand in depth the importance of sport marketing for teams. The interview's questions investigate the importance of sport marketing practices in the eyes' of teams' managers, the budget allocated to marketing especially communication tools, the effectiveness assessment methods as well as a comparison between the emotions toward the team and the impact of marketing in building or maintaining them.

* Results discussion

As it was pre-cited, all the brands do marketing either all the time or occasionally. However, the perception of sport marketing varies from a team to another depending on many factors. This study revealed that sport marketing is not seen equally by modest teams to well-known ones. Those latter are involved deeply in all the marketing practices as it was said by the manager of « Al Ourouba club » in Saudi Arabia. He said literally that “*Big teams invest a lot in sport marketing since they have a high financial potential to vary their promotion basket*”. Hence, a crucial factor appears to impact the sport marketing practice which is “**The team budget**”, as long as you have funds from sponsors or the government, you are able to be engaged in practicing marketing and especially the communication mix. Despite this financial condition, he insisted on the importance of sport marketing to enhance the team awareness, to make it known and why not one of the top of mind teams in the Kingdom.

* Importance of marketing

Either in Iraq or in Saudi Arabia, the teams’ managers do agree about the ultimate importance of having a clear

marketing strategy that highlights the strengths and history of the team and its players. Respecting the anonymous aspect of the team, one manager in Jeddah argues that “marketing is so important nowadays and it is compulsory to adopt its techniques and strategies to build and strengthen its image in the eyes of the current clients or fans and the potential ones”. In Iraq, almost all the managers do approve the importance of marketing adoption in their teams but do mention also the poor education and knowledge in the country and agencies which makes marketing not so effective contrary to the countries where marketing does have a good background and mental infrastructure. Comparing the managers’ viewpoints in both Iraq and Saudi Arabia, we can notice easily that marketing education and expertise are so important in assisting teams. All the managers insist on the marketing role but in a country like Iraq professional marketers are rare which makes its adoption a little bit difficult. The interviews also shed light on the relationship marketing-big teams, in other words many managers both in Iraq and Saudi Arabia said that marketing is compulsory in big teams that have a lot of fans and a strong history.

*** Budget allocation**

Regarding the budget allocation to marketing practices in the studied teams, one more time the economic circumstances do interfere in marketing strategies adoption. While one team's manager in Iraq more precisely in Nadjaf said clearly "We don't have a budget dedicated to marketing" another manager in Bagdad said "we do have a budget but it is still insufficient because the overall team budget is dedicated to players prospection". Moving to Saudi Arabia, the situation is totally different, the 3 studied teams in Jeddah and Taif mention that they do have a fixed budget and barely the focus is on the social media platforms to attract fans and strengthen their relationship with the team. Through this comparison, we can say that marketing budget is not always planned in Iraq, it depends on the excess of money at a specific period of the champions league contrary to Saudi Arabia where a budget is planned at the beginning of the season.

*** Effect assessment**

Regarding the measurement of the marketing effectiveness once adopted. There is a consensus between managers both in Iraq and Saudi Arabia that new subscriptions and the

increase of tickets in matches are the two factors that reflect the effectiveness of the marketing practices and the mass communication. Here we can notice that the emotional and cognitive effects are not as important as the conative reaction or the tangible profit, in other words increasing awareness about the team, creating attachment and love as well as developing positive image are not so crucial in the sport marketing field, simply all is measured through income and material profit analysis.

*** Team history and past victories vs Sport marketing**

Investigating this dilemma of history versus marketing, past victories versus mass communication, the answers were variegated. While a manager in Saudi Arabia gave us a very interesting opinion "According to my own experience, I do believe that they are complementary the history is important for old fans but marketing attracts new fans, introduce the team to a new audience", almost all the other managers insisted on the marketing role but highlighted that "the teams' titles and name come in first". Another manager said "the old fans don't focus on marketing and communication because they are loyal to the team even

in difficult times where the victories are missing”. In Iraq, a manager gave us this appealing opinion “ for sure the team reputation, the well-known players that it has, its titles and concrete results are the pillars of a strong team. I do think that marketing is for new teams lacking history and image”. Despite the variety of answers but no manager mentioned that marketing solely is important for the teams but it needs to lay on the history, victories, players’ values, reputation and titles of the team and how it behaved among years.

*** Conclusion**

Marketing has become the backbone of many companies all over the world, it has intervened in diverse sectors since the beginning of the 20th century (but this does not say that marketing practices did not exist before). Marketing has helped companies to build awareness, image and reputation as well as attracting consumers and increasing consequently profits. Sport is also a sector that started respectable years ago to adopt marketing strategies, techniques and practices to reach cognitive, affective and conative goals.

Teams almost everywhere have become adopting this tool to stand in

the crowd, create or maintain a relationship with the fans. In this article, sport marketing attracted our attention especially from a comparative perspective between two countries where the infrastructure, the education, the marketing knowledge and the economic circumstances are different namely Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Some of the results were surprising especially the ones concerning the importance of marketing in teams philosophy and strategies implementation and the budget allocation, we were not ready to hear that in some teams no money were planned to marketing and that the managers count exclusively on titles and players prospection. Other results were so logic from the angle that marketing complement the history of the team and strengthen it or simply makes it visible to new generations.

The overall result is that in the Arab countries especially Iraq and Saudi Arabia, marketing is in its infancy phase, managers are not quite sure about the effectiveness of marketing and how the investment in its practices will have concrete benefits and will turn into profits, in other words how allocated money will bring

money. The dilemma that our article started from (marketing vs history) needs to be reinvestigated in the coming years since what we are experiencing in Saudi Arabia those last months in the big teams like Nasr and Hilal and others is a pure adoption of marketing.

Despite all the effort allocated to this article, we do think that in further studies we need to focus on bigger teams. Besides, we think that as we focused on the teams' viewpoints we need to go to the other side composed of fans and assess their perception of the mass communication and marketing practices of their favorite teams. Furthermore, it is important also to focus on the individual sport like athletics and how marketing is practiced in that niche field.

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