Changing the Sport Product: Marketing Implications for Championship Rugby League Clubs in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose

Professional sports teams and leagues, such as the Rugby Football League (RFL) operate in a crowded market; thus, have made league structure changes to attempt to remain competitive in the marketplace. However, there is little understanding of the implications on strategic marketing planning when such league structure changes are made.

Design

Using semi-structured interviews with 11 (out of a possible 12) second-tier RFL club executives and 1 national governing body executive (n=12) were interviewed to understand the strategic marketing implications of league structure changes.

Findings

We found very few clubs had a marketing strategy, therefore, engaged in very little strategic marketing planning. Furthermore, we identified the main barriers were resource and skills, and, organisation and leadership.

Practical Implications

The RFL and other leagues going through structural changes need to concentrate on making sustainable shared resources which develop capabilities. For example, developing a standardised yet mouldable strategic marketing package would reduce the financial and knowledge resource barriers.

Research Contribution

This paper adds to a small body of literature that empirically investigates the barriers to strategic marketing practices within professional sports organisations. It also adds provides brings lower-tier professional sport clubs into focus, which are often overlooked.

Introduction

The global sports market has been valued between $600 billion and $1.5 trillion (ATKearny, 2011; Plunkett Research, 2017, SportBusiness Group, 2019), which is generally driven by professional team sports. Specifically, within the United Kingdom (UK), sport spectators spent £1.5 billion on tickets in 2019, estimated to rise to £1.8 billion by 2024 (Mintel, 2019). The problem is the UK sport spectator market is vastly dominated by Association Football (herein football) with 33 million spectators in 2019, followed by Horseracing (6.1m), Cricket (2.3m), Rugby Union (1.9m) and Rugby League (1.8m). Thus, within the UK, other than football, most professional sports operate in a crowded marketplace (Rein, Kotler & Shields, 2006). Consequently, sports are making strategic decisions to change operations, organisation, rules, territories, or even structure, to ensure it retains and attracts a fan base.

Since Rugby League in the UK professionalised in 1995 – following an £87million broadcasting deal with BskyB (O'Keeffe, 1999) – the governing body, Rugby Football League (RFL) made considerable changes to the league structure and introduced market restrictions. In 2015, the RFL implemented a promotion and relegation system, reversing a 2009 decision to impose a licensing system (RFL, 2015). This structural change operationalised their 2015-2021 strategic plan to increase the visibility and profile of the sport within the UK (*ibid.*). The result was a 12 team elite top-tier Super League, a 12 team second-tier Championship, and a new 14 team third-tier League One, connected through an innovative – yet complicated – promotion and relegation system. The new system involved the 24 clubs from the Super League and Championship compete in a playoff series, split into three leagues of 8 - branded the Super 8's - based on their league position (Wilson, Plumley & Barret, 2016). The result determines the League Champions as well as promoted and relegated teams through a branded 'Million Pound Game'.

These changes demonstrate a shift from a closed-league to an open-league system (Andreff, 2011), allowing lower-tier rugby league clubs gain promotion into the top-tier. Traditionally, sports economists examine the financial, demand, and competitive balance impacts of league structure changes (Sass, 2016; Kim, Won & Han, 2017; Macxy & Milwood, 2018; York & Miree, 2018; see also Fort & Macxy, 2003 for a good introduction). However, moving from an open- to closed-league structure (and vice versa) has broader implications on core business functions, especially marketing, at both club and league level. Logically, these marketing implications relate more to lower-tier clubs who previously had no opportunities for promotion. Therefore, this paper investigates the implications structural league changes have on rugby league's product and the associated marketing practices within second-tier rugby league clubs in the United Kingdom.

By doing so, this paper draws together both sport economic and sport marketing disciplines, making both theoretical and empirical contributions to the sport management literature. Moreover, rugby league as a sport lacks scholarly attention, therefore except for Wilson, Plumley and Barret (2016) financial analysis of top-tier rugby league, it provides one of the very few empirical studies focusing on rugby league in the UK. Also, by focusing on second-tier rugby league clubs, this paper addresses a gap in the sport management literature which generally overlooks lower-tier leagues.

Literature Review

The Sport Product

Conceptualising the product professional team sport - or spectator sport - offers is challenging mainly due to the ambivalence of business and management practice in sport (Smith and Stewart, 2010). Indeed, over recent years, sport has shifted from a cultural institution to an increasingly commercialised commodity - primarily evidenced by the excessive growth in revenue-generating capacity. As a consequence, the product of professional team sport becomes even more complicated. Both economists and marketers use the sport product as the centroid of study, yet the focus is often slightly different. Sports economists focus on the structural requirements to produce a sport product. That is, according to Neale's (1964) inverted joint product theory, within professional team sports, two firms (sports teams) – both with separate business functions - are required to produce one product. Therefore, each fixture between the two teams becomes the product (Gratton, 2000; Kesenne, 2003; Caruso, Addesa & Domizio, 2019; Sung, Mills & Mondello, 2019). Accordingly, sport economic research often centres on the factors influencing demand for fixtures (*cf.* Borland & McDonald, 2003; Villar & Guerrero, 2009).

Similarly, sport marketers agree that the product of professional team sport is the game itself. However, they extend the conceptualisation referring to three levels of the product; core – the game itself; actual – the tangible elements (stadium facilities; seating quality, food/beverage quality); and, augmented – the intangible features (atmosphere, experience, service quality; Blakey, 2011; Kotler & Armstrong, 2017; Mason, 1999; Rein, Kotler & Sheilds, 2006; Schaaff, 1995). Across these layers of product, Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (2007) suggest four influencing features of the sport product; 1) players/teams, 2) equipment and apparel, 3) venue and 4) game form (rules/techniques).

For example, higher-quality playing talent within teams increases the quality of the games being played (the core product), but also potentially increases the spectacle of the game (the augmented product). Similarly, advances in equipment and apparel change the characteristics of the core product (take football and rugby union as an example), while also changing the actual products available to buy for consumers. Venue changes drastically alter both the actual and augmented products, with new stadia having improved facilities, but also integrating technology to improve the overall experience. Finally, and more our focus, the rules and structures of the sport drastically change the game itself as well as the experiential element. For example, removing the possibility of gaining promotion, or the example of football introducing VAR, changes the augmented product just as much as the core.

However, clubs rarely have control over these distinguishing features of the sport product, with the league (or sometimes also the national governing body; NGB) enforcing changes to the game form. Therefore, while a league is the most efficient way to facilitate the individual products created by two teams (Neale, 1964) – the league also becomes a product itself (Smith & Stewart, 2010; Noll, 1974; El-Hodori & Quirk, 1971, Gratton, 2000; Kesenne, 2003). The subsequent impact is that leagues look for ways to improve their product, which often focusses on ensuring equality between teams, or what is known as uncertainty-of-outcome (Bond & Addesa, 2019; 2020; Braunstein et al., 2005; Ferreira and Armstrong, 2004; Foroughi *et al.*, 2016; Caruso, Addesa & Dimizio, 2019; Forrest & Simmons, 2002). Outcome uncertainty conceptually stems from Rottenberg's work (1956) on the uncertainty-of-outcome hypothesis – suggesting maximum demand occurs from each team having an equal chance of winning. Hence, the more unknown the outcome of the core product, this increases the excitement improving the augmented product (Coates & Humphreys, 2012; Pawlowski & Anders, 2012; Coates, Humphreys & Zhou, 2014). Sport economic literature takes the uncertainty-of-outcome concept a little further than marketing and focusses on competitive balance; which primarily refers to the uncertainty-of-outcome for the league-product. Here the more balanced the league-product is, the more equal teams will be in terms of playing talent and financial resource, increasing the uncertainty-of-outcome across three levels; match-uncertainty, seasonal-uncertainty, and, long-run-uncertainty (Curran, Jennings & Sedgwick, 2009; Borooah & Mangan, 2012; Pawlowski & Budzinski, 2013; Nalbantis, Pawlowski & Coates, 2015; Lenten, 2015, Kringstad, 2018). Fundamentally, match uncertainty refers to the core sport product, whereas seasonal and long-run uncertainty relates to the league product.

Furthermore, at a seasonal level, competitive balance refers to each team in the league having an equal chance of winning the title, raising the uncertainty of the seasonal outcomes. Consequently, this increases the demand for the league-product, theoretically providing more revenue and ultimately profit for teams and the league (Ramchandani et al., 2018). This premise of profit-maximisation focuses primarily on improving and maintaining competitive balance, unlike the traditional European sports league model focussing more on utility-maximisation - or fan satisfaction - often associated with low competitive balance (Zimbalist, 2002; Noll, 2002, 2003; Caruso, Addesa & Dimizio, 2019). While differences between profit and utility principles for a sports league are sometimes controversial (Garcia-del-Barrio & Szymanski, 2009), utility-maximising leagues are generally open, operating a promotion and relegation system, with minimal market restrictions. Unlike profit-maximising leagues that are closed, operating a franchise/licensing system with no promotion or relegation, with restricted product and labour markets (Noll, 2002, 2003).

Progressive work by Kringstad and Gerrard (2004; 2007) furthered the conceptualisation of seasonal uncertainty through competitive intensity. They extend the basic premise of competitive balance to encapsulate the structure of promotion and relegation, as well as supranational competitions. This theory suggests the more teams involved in these intra-league competitions, such as relegation battles, qualification into European wide competitions (or further competition qualification), and promotion/title races, increases demand. To this end, Scelles et al. (2013; 2016) demonstrated competitive intensity to be more relevant to consumers than competitive balance. Arguably competitive intensity increases the augmented product; in that, there is more excitement relating to the league product. The league product becomes a multi-product due to the different prizes clubs are competing for (Bond & Addesa, 2019; 2020). Specifically, concerning the RFL's league restructuring, this creates three sub-competitions post-season - the Super 8's - to determine title winners, promotions, relegations and the starting league of the following season. While economically interesting, understanding the implications such changes have on functional business areas such as marketing, is missing from the sport management literature.

Strategic (Sport) Marketing

The sport product is complex, not least because of the different levels, but also because of the level of co-production required. Interestingly, even though marketing as a discipline has evolved considerably over the last 20 years, sport marketing has generally focussed on goods-dominant logic (GDL; Fullerton & Merz, 2008). Consequently, traditional sport marketing theories are product-centred, neglecting the evolving and developing service literature (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). That said, service-dominant logic (SDL; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008a, 2008b, 2016) is increasing in popularity within sports marketing. The SDL approach provides a broader framework addressing not only consumers' (fans') needs but also a collaboration and learning from all stakeholders. Therefore, SDL better accounts for the complex and co-produced nature of the sport product. In fact, Cockayne (2019) proposes SDL as a productive mindset for marketers which enables more innovative and robustly organised marketing activities. However, caution must be given to the reduced control of marketing messages, as Stieler, Weismann & Germelmann (2014) demonstrated that co-creation could lead to co-destruction of value.

Accordingly, given the co-creation involved in producing the core sporting product, marketing it should not be an effort of individual clubs in isolation. Key actors such as sport governing bodies and league management should also be involved. Their role within marketing is captured in Tsiotsou (2016, p.491) sport service ecosystem, which among other things, “considers the pivotal role of institutions and institutional arrangements in securing both the stability and the dynamism of the sport ecosystem”. The problem, however, is functional areas that stabilise organisations, such as strategic marketing (Kotler & Armstrong, 2017; Morgan, 2019), have seldom been developed and interrogated in sport.

Interestingly, the practice of strategic marketing is well evidenced across a range of sectors and is well established within mainstream business studies (Akroush, 2012; Brown & Summers, 1982; Drucker, 1974; Jain & Punj; 1987; Karin & Preiss, 2002). Although a unified definition of strategic marketing is absent (Shnaars, 1991), there are commonalities, such as developing a marketing strategy and the associated planning processes. That said, strategic marketing research, explicitly marketing strategy research, over the last two decades, has focussed on tactical level performance outcomes instead of planning processes (Morgan, 2019; Varadarjan, 2019). Morgan (2019) further identifies marketing strategy planning, encompasses four key sub-domains; content formulation, process formulation, content implementation, process implementation. This more generalist view of marketing strategy and planning allows a greater breadth of understanding the marketing strategy landscape, especially across different contexts (Varadarajan, 2019).

One context under-researched concerning marketing strategy planning is the professional team sport industry. Much like strategic marketing, sport marketing is ill-defined but does have two universally accepted themes 'marketing through sport' and 'marketing of sport' (Gallagher, Gilmore, & Alexander, 2009; Gallagher, Gilmore, & Stolz, 2012; Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2009; Shilbury, Quick, & Westerbeek, 2003). Within both themes, strategy is at the core, whether sport is part of the strategic marketing of corporations through sponsorship and other communications, or sports organisations develop marketing strategies to grow their brand, increase revenue or fan bases. That said, strategic sport marketing research is seldom, with very little empirical literature focussing on the topic. Indeed, many sport scholars have conceptualised strategic sport marketing, which generally follows the same principles outlined in mainstream strategic marketing: marketing opportunities, strategy determination, implementation and control, and, evaluation (Brooksbank, 1996; Dibb & Simkin, 1996; Kotler & Armstrong, 2017; MacDonald, 2008; Mullin et al., 2007; Shank, 2004; Stotlar, 1993; Shilbury, Quick and Westerbeek, 1998).

Shilbury et al. (1998) do extend the traditional 4 P's context incorporating the 7P's (Product, Price, Place, Physical Evidence, People, Process and Promotion), instead of the 4Ps (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) when considering the marketing strategy determination element. However, such frameworks remain in the GDL realm and neglect the more encompassing SDL approach (Woratschek, et al., 2014), which is essential as Funk's (2017) postulation that sport organisations provide a multitude of two-way interactions encountered beyond the traditional temporal boundary of single-game consumption. Consequently, the four E's – experience, exchange, everyplace, and evangelism – are a better fit within strategic marketing planning frameworks to accommodate the service-dominant logic focus, as identified by Ross and Delia (2017). Additionally, the four E's are more relevant, given the continual and often rapid societal and technological shifts impacting sport consumption.

That said, regardless of theoretical frameworks, little research has empirically investigated the strategic marketing planning within sport organisations. To date, Harris and Jenkins (2001) and Brooksbank, Garland and Werder (2012) seem to provide the only empirical investigation. The latter concluded that 75% of golf clubs acknowledged the importance of formal strategic marketing planning, but only two-thirds undertook some form of planning, mainly situational analysis, albeit often superficially. Demonstrating sport marketing practitioners are more concerned with tactical marketing issues than strategic elements, which DeGaris (2008) suggests is probably due to a limited marketing resource.

Barriers to Strategic (Sport) Marketing Planning

The lack of marketing resources within sport organisations is not uncommon and represents only one of a wide range of barriers to strategic marketing planning identified by McDonald (1989). Dibb, Simkin and Wilson (2008) summarised these barriers into i) operations, culture and leadership; (ii) resource and skills; (iii) marketing information systems (MIS) and data; and, (iv) communication and coordination. All barriers either relate to infrastructure, processes or implementation issues and can occur before, during or after the planning process. Similarly, barriers to strategic marketing are vastly under-researched empirically, especially within sport. That said, Harris & Jenkins (2001) found evidence of all barriers within rugby union clubs, specifically; ignorance of planning, structural problems, a belief in the value of reactiveness, scarce financial resources and poor communication. Furthermore, and potentially adding to the unique features of sport strategic marketing, Harris and Jenkins (2001) identified four external barriers faced by marketing practitioners; the impact of governing bodies, the extent of uncertainty and speed of change, indirect control of local authorities and the reputation hangover created by past management.

Essentially, these external barriers derive from the very fabric of sport itself and the complex dynamic ecosystem in which sport organisation operate, with complex networks of stakeholders (e.g. NGB, sport teams, sport fans, sponsors, media and suppliers) and contexts (e.g. social, cultural, historical and economic). This ecosystem of, sometimes conflicting, stakeholders impact the delivery of the sport product (Tsiotsou, 2016), but can also provide a barrier to sports organisations functional areas, such as adopting a comprehensive approach to strategic marketing processes, including planning. Likewise, the sport industry is considered to be complacent regarding business functions, mainly engaging in strategic marketing approaches; therefore sport organisations are often themselves a barrier to effective strategic marketing planning (Harris and Jenkins, 2001; Brooksbank, et al., 2012).

The lack of empirical research focusing on strategic marketing planning in sport organisations is an issue. Ratten (2016) suggests if these problems and barriers are not addressed, then it will impact our understanding of; the marketing potential of sport; the role marketing strategy plays in sport; and the congruency between planning and practice. Consequently, this paper addresses this gap within sport management and sport marketing literature by investigating the barriers to strategic marketing planning, especially after structural changes to the league. This empirical investigation focusses on the second tier of rugby league in the UK, branded The Championship. The rationale is twofold, 1) it is the most impacted tier from the changes, and 2) lower tiers of professional sport are overlooked within sport management literature.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive criterion sampling was used (Creswell, 2014; Robinson, 2014). Each participant had to satisfy the following criterion; 1) participants had to be at an executive level within the respective organisation; 2) they must have a responsibility for marketing within the respective organisation; and, for the club representatives only, 3) they must be in the new rugby league Championship division as of 2015. The resultant sample consisted of n=12 participants (see Table 1), with 11 (out of a possible 12) rugby league Championship club executives and 1 NGB executive (N=12). Given the nature of clubs in the league, some participants were Chief Executives who also assumed responsibility for marketing and some participants were dedicated marketing managers (see Table 1 for breakdown). Each participant was interviewed to understand their perceptions of changes to the sport (league) product offered by rugby league and the marketing issues/challenges faced. Indeed, this highlights a limitation as participants will have varying degrees of knowledge concerning marketing practices and strategic marketing processes. However, the value is that all participants have responsibility for marketing at an executive level within their respective organisation, producing a credible and trustworthy data source. Following the norm within qualitative research, interviews were anonymised to protect participant confidentiality (Guenther, 2009; Bazeley, 2013; Yin, 2015), with each participant assigned a pseudonym according to their role, *id est,* NGB and Club 1, 2, 3…*n* denote participants.

[Table 1 Here]

Data Collection

Following previous qualitative work by Drayer, et al. (2010) and Patterson, Backhouse and Duffy (2016) and due to the exploratory nature of this paper, qualitative data was collected through a series of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face allowing in-depth discussions about the participants' perceptions of the changes to the sport product through the restructuring of the league, and their experiences of marketing practices (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2015). Interview guides were designed following Shilbury *et al.*'s (2009) strategic sport marketing planning framework, including key areas: identification of marketing opportunities, strategy determination, strategy implementation, evaluation, and the exploration of barriers and facilitators to planning activities. All interviews lasted between 35 – 65 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. During data collection, the lead researcher used a reflexive journal to document initial thoughts, emerging themes, and preliminary similarities and differences between participant responses (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2014). The reflexive journal provides a critical audit trail throughout the research, which ensures dependability and trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Nowell, 2017).

Data Analysis

The transcriptions were analysed using MAXQDA 11 (VERBI Software, 2016); this allows the transcriptions to be coded based on similarities of participant's responses. Data was analysed following a thematic coding process by following priori categories in-line with the nature and theoretical framework of this research, 1) relating to the sport product and 2) relating to marketing implications, with the latter being further broken down into aspects of Shilbury *et al.*'s (2009) strategic sport marketing planning framework: 2a) identification of marketing opportunities, 2b) strategy determination, 2c) strategy implementation, evaluation, 2d) barriers and facilitators to planning activities. To increase the trustworthiness of the data analysis Neumann's (2003) three-round coding process was adopted, which increases the accuracy of data interpretation into relevant themes (Richards, 2015; Elliott, 2018). To do so, the lead researcher used axial coding to examine and code the data initially, then recoding the data a second time. The lead researcher then examined the data a final time using selective coding, providing selective participant quotations that best represent the themes and focus of this research.

Results and Discussion

The Sport Product and Changes

Often when marketing scholars attempt to define and characterise the sport product, the practitioner's perspective is not considered (Mason, 1999; Blakely, 2011; Masteralexix, Barr & Hums, 2009). Interestingly, practitioners focus more on the augmented elements of rugby league's product, in particular; family, community and entertainment, as Club 7 best describes;

"...what's great about rugby league, the community aspects, the family feel, the entertainment not just on the field but around the game day... another thing about rugby league, is that the players are generally very accessible to the supporters..." (Club 7)

Furthermore, the additional emphasis on the accessibility of players as part of the product offered by rugby league supports Mullin et al.'s (2007) description of the sport product. Furthermore, our results provide practitioner support for the service-dominant logic approach (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016) and Tsiotsou's (2016) service sport ecosystem framework. Family, community and players are all important actors within the ecosystem who can influence the product. Therefore, they need to feature in any marketing framework for rugby league, and possibly sport in general.

In terms of the RFL's decision to move from a profit-maximising closed league structure to a utility-maximising open league structure (Zimblalist, 2002; Noll, 2002), it is clear that the NGB did so as they felt the licensing system did not work;

"*The reason it's been done is… to bring promotion and relegation back in, [as] the licensing, you could argue, didn't work*" (NGB)

A view that is supported by clubs;

"*We've suffered – we blame, rightly or wrongly, the licensing system*" (Club 2)

Naturally, it is expected that second-tier clubs feel disadvantaged by the licensing system as it removes the possibility of progression offered by the promotion and relegation system (Noll, 2002, 2003). However, clubs generally felt as though the licensing system negatively impacted the overall product offered by rugby league, as Club 2 continued;

"*…the fact that interest in the game at this level has been going down because people got bored with the idea that a committee room decides whether or not you move up to the next level rather than what you do on the field.*" (Club 2)

Further insinuating that the on-field product decreased in quality, thus reducing the league product quality of the second-tier. This finding also provides further empirical evidence for Mullin et al. (2007) who identified how the game form and rules (and by extension structure) contribute to the product. Thus, also showing the impact the NGB can have on the product itself, supporting Tsiotsou's (2016) framework.

The feeling of clubs, represented by Club 2 above, is also shared by the NGB;

"*...it will bring that jeopardy back, but in a sustainable way, hopefully, so rather than just two-up, two-down, or one-up, one-down… the new structure, I think, brings a lot more meaningful games in, brings that jeopardy and excitement back, whether the fans are loving it or hating it,... where you need to win to avoid relegation, or you lose and you go down, evokes emotion - and that, ultimately, is what the sport will live off in terms of driving people through the turnstiles*." (NGB)

Indeed, the structural changes have been imposed to increase the league product and maximise meaningful fixtures. Furthermore, the NGB expect an increase in fan interest through the excitement of a relegation battle returning to their league product offering as well as the newly introduced playoff Super 8's system. By doing so, it demonstrates the practitioner's acceptance that leagues need competitive intensity (Kingstad and Gerrard, 2004; 2007), somewhat qualitatively supporting Scelles (2013; 2016) findings in French football.

Although all club executives positively welcomed the structural changes, some did acknowledge that since they have been confined to a lower league, they may struggle to compete on and off the pitch. For example, Club 5 suggested they were "*content rather than happy*" referring to limited or unequal revenue distribution across the different tiers of the league, which has been identified by Wilson, Plumley and Barret's (2015) discussions. Similarly, some clubs highlighted their caution to believe this structural change is all opportunity with no risk. Their concern relates to the competitive imbalance or playing talent disparity between the league divisions - caused by the initial move to licensing, fundamentally reducing fan interest (Coates & Humphreys, 2012; Pawlowski & Anders, 2012; Coates, Humphreys & Zhou, 2014). Again, articulated well by Club 2;

"*...[under] these new structures, we might [be] waiting for 20 years, hoping for a promotion, and then… we'll play… the likes of Bradford, and Hull… [who] thrash us 60 - 70 nil - we'll think… we're miles away still. If you end up with four running away with it, and the – and, you know, and the Championship four stuck at the bottom – then I think people'll get fed up with it.*" (Club 2)

That said, generally, all clubs welcomed changes and accepted the potential to improve the league products of the second and top-tiers of rugby league. Further noting the improvement to their own club's sport product offering, and in the words of Club 8 "*only time's gonna tell*" as to whether this change improved the uncertainty-of-outcome, and thus the sport and league products accordingly. Indeed, and as expected, the NGB have confidence in their on-the-pitch offering;

"*We've got a great product on the pitch, and we think all we've gotta do is market that great product on the pitch, but the challenges to that is, if it's an amazing product on the pitch and that's all that you were going for, you would stay at home and watch it on Sky.*" (NGB)

Although, they do acknowledge more is needed from a marketing perspective to increase that experiential, augmented product, again supporting the need for more comprehensive frameworks for sport marketers (Tsiotsou, 2016)

Marketing Implications

The focus on the disparity of playing talent distribution and their inability to compete on the pitch is only one element of gaining competitive balance. The other element is financial resource equilibrium between teams (Coates & Humphreys, 2012; Pawlowski & Anders, 2012; Coates, Humphreys & Zhou, 2014), which is their ability to compete off the pitch. This financial resource disparity impacts functional areas such as marketing, as acknowledged by the NGB;

"*We're more joined up, at a Super League level, and that's just because they all have full-time marketing managers with a bit of budget to spend so we're able to communicate with them regularly. It's more of a challenge at Championship level, because there's probably 1 or 2 people doing absolutely everything at the clubs*" (NGB)

The notion of clubs in the Championship having a lack of human resource was discussed throughout the 11 clubs involved in this study, as identified by Club 8;

"*a lot of clubs are just left to their own… devices on how they run the clubs… I don't know whether it's a good or bad thing, and that's maybe why a lot of them get in [financial] trouble, as well. A lot of the owners [are] one-man-bands, and they try and do everything, and if I'm honest, a lot of them don't even know [what to do] - myself included, you just take the ownership and you don't know what you're doing*."

Therefore, disparities are also impacting functional areas off the pitch. Interestingly, as acknowledged by the NGB, while the top-tier (Super League) clubs have more developed business functional areas, clubs in the second-tier, have less support. Understandably NGB's focus on and support the tier with the most revenue-generating capacity, but it also seems perversely counterintuitive. Since the NGB re-introduced a promotion and relegation system second-tier clubs are now competing with top-tier clubs, or put another way, one-man-bands are now competing with marketing departments with additional NGB support. Therefore, while moving from a franchise system to open league structure may well improve the multi-prize elements or competitive intensity, it creates a larger disparity or imbalance within the business functions, especially marketing. This disparity is detrimental to uncertainty-of-outcome or competitive balance and thus, the integrity of the league (Nalbantis, Pawlowski & Coates, 2015; Lenten, 2015, Kringstad, 2018).

Evidently, second-tier clubs require NGB support to ensure the viability of the new restructured league. For example, 7 out of the 11 clubs involved did not have a; formal marketing strategy or plan in place, marketing budget, SMART marketing objectives defined, formalised systems of capturing consumer data, any measurement and evaluation process in place. This finding supports previous work by Harris and Jenkins (2001) and Brooksbank, Garland and Werder (2012), which also aligns to the narrative, rugby league, is guilty of complacency when it comes to marketing strategy (Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick and Funk, 2009). However, this is not deliberate complacency as clubs acknowledge it, but do feel neglected by the NGB who concentrate on top-tier clubs;

"*We're very much left to it… which is fine, [because] we knew that was the case - but it's not how I believe a governing body should operate. Well… instead of…[making] the big ones [games] bigger, and telling us how Wigan did it - what would be really good if there were a series of 20 online resources hosted by the RFL that clubs could just tap into -So that we wouldn't have to reinvent the wheel - we could get hold of the [marketing] resource pack, and we'd have blocks of... empty space for us to fill in, and it would take us through it and tell us how to go about it.*" (Club 6)

and,

" *...[we] probably could do with a lot more help - we all could... from the central body...*"(Club 8)

It is clear that clubs notice the difference in support between tiers, and all 11 clubs felt they would benefit from a more formalised approach to marketing planning and would welcome additional support from the NGB.

Support from the NGB in functional areas is essential to address the main barriers to strategic marketing planning. From the numerical count, these barriers were, in ascending order; resources and skills (39.75%), operations, structure and leadership (33.16%), communication and coordination (15.15%), MIS and data (11.94%). These barriers are akin to Harris and Jenkins' (2001) findings, particularly concerning resources and skills, and, operations and leadership within the clubs – which are often the most common barriers (McDonald, 1989; Dibb, Simkin and Wilson, 2008). This finding is not necessarily surprising amid the financial concerns across rugby league due to 'cash-flow issues' for many of the clubs (Wilson, Plumley and Barret, 2016). This lack of financial resource - which inadvertently leads to a lack of human capital (knowledge and skills) – is a considerable intra-organisational barrier that impacts practitioners' strategic marketing planning across lower levels of rugby league.

However, providing more financial resource to lower league clubs might not address this barrier. For example, Harris and Jenkins (2001) also found that extra revenue was dedicated to playing talent acquisitions rather than business operations. Considering the unique position second-tier rugby league clubs are in, this is most likely to be the case as they try and compete on the pitch. Consequently, we do not advocate different revenue distribution policies. Instead, the NGB need to consider ways in which particular business and operational functions can be supported centrally. Taking Club 6's earlier suggestion, this may be a series of online marketing resources clubs can tailor and use.

Supporting the lower tiers is important because all 11 clubs continue to take an amateur business-like approach by continually not allocating any budget to marketing efforts, operating reactively on a game-by-game basis. Continuing to neglect barriers to marketing capabilities can have a detrimental impact on business performance (Ratten, 2016). Therefore the NGB need to act, as clubs discussed their inability to alter the marketing mix and differentiate their overall product (core, actual or augmented), reducing any ability to create competitive advantage. Best evidenced by Club 4;

"*...to try and differentiate it is quite difficult, but a winning team always helps. It's just looking at generating revenue streams, and acting as a business, not just a rugby club...* "

It is apparent that clubs require support in accessing valuable resources otherwise unobtainable. Again, similar to Harris and Jenkins (2001) work, we found that all clubs in this study would welcome a centralised broad framework that clubs can tailor and individualise their plans, strategy and tactics. Given the complexities of the sport product, any such framework needs to consider not only the different levels to the sport product but also incorporates a service-dominant logic to account for the holistic sport product offering and its ecosystem (Cockayne, 2019; Funk, 2017; Tsiotsou, 2016; Woratschek, et al., 2014). Something the NGB need to address if they want to deliver on their most recent strategic plan.

While this sounds like a negative story of an NGB, it is far from it. The NGB acknowledge that communication and education are vital fundamentals they are working on getting right. Additionally, they allude to some level of standardisation, as the NGB said;

"*Communication is key, you know, we need to, educate those clubs a little bit, but also communicate what our plans are, because ultimately we don't have lots of money, they don't have lots of money – so if we all do the same thing, and the messages are the same, then it's much more powerful*." (NGB)

What communication, education and same messages look like for the NGB is unclear. That said, if the NGB is serious about improving the product, attention should be less on imposing further structural changes to the league product. Instead, efforts should focus on providing much-needed support in functional business areas such as marketing; reducing the barriers of engagement in such vital functions.

Concluding Remarks

Given the crowded-marketplace of sport, it is vitally critical sport teams, and leagues develop and implement a marketing strategy to differentiate from direct and indirect competitors. To some degree, our research provides the first empirical account of strategic marketing planning within lower league sport teams, especially within the UK. Moreover, it provides the first empirical evidence of club executive's opinions on structural changes to a league enforced by an NGB. Within rugby league in the UK, it is clear that lower league clubs welcome the reintroduction of the promotion and relegation system as this provides opportunities to prosper, on and off the pitch.

Additionally, they see the utility-maximising potential such a move has to reinvigorate fan interest. However, their caution is centred on the competitive imbalance, not only in playing performance terms but also in essential business operations and functions. Therefore, while they see the opportunities the most recent structural change offer, being able to capitalise on them is difficult, mainly due to a lack of resource - financial and human (to some degree intrinsically linked). Thus, we recommend that when NGB's and league operators enforce changes that impact the team or league product, they support clubs with practical and sustainable resources in specialist business functions such as strategic marketing. Ironically, economists point out the cooperation and collaboration required to produce the spectator sport product and league-product, yet when it comes to basic business principles, this is minimal.

Consequently, we propose that sport NGB's and league organisers also need to cooperate and collaborate with individual teams to ensure they are supported in recognising the importance of strategic marketing practice, especially within open league structures. Given the barriers identified in this study, the RFL need to concentrate on making them facilitators, by fostering the development of shared resources and developing capabilities. For example, developing a standardised yet mouldable strategic marketing package, from planning to evaluation that all clubs can utilise, reduces the financial and knowledge resource barriers.

Future Research

Firstly, rugby league is a sport which is often overlooked within the sport management and marketing literature, so future research should look to rectify this - mainly as it provides an interesting focus for structural change research within the UK. Secondly, research focussing on lower-tier leagues/clubs is welcomed, not least because they are generally unresearched, but it can support comparative research understanding differences in business functions across tiers. This will better inform NGB's of how best to support lower-tier leagues/clubs across sports. Naturally, in a rugby league context the top-tier - Super League - offers the most in terms of league revenue-generating capacity; thus efforts align to this. However, if the NGB is serious about growth and competing within a very crowded UK and global marketplace, they need to consider reducing the gap between the almost amateurish business operations within the second tier and the seemingly more professional top-tier. Doing so invariably assists delivery of the 2015-2021 strategic plan. Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, it would prove pivotal for sport marketing researchers and practitioners to answer calls from Morgan (2019) and Varadarajan (2019) to revisit the broader understanding of strategic marketing through empirical investigations, especially within a sport context. Specifically, research should focus on understanding marketing functions within the broader frameworks of SDL and Tsiotsou's (2016) sport service ecosystem, especially understanding the networks of actors and what learning can occur through the co-creation of sport products/services.

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Table 1. Description of Participants

Participant ID	Organisation	Role
NGB	National Governing Body	Marketing Manager
Club 1	Championship Club	Chairman
Club 2	Championship Club	Chief Executive
Club 3	Championship Club	Commercial Manager
Club 4	Championship Club	Chief Executive
Club 5	Championship Club	Marketing Manager
Club 6	Championship Club	Marketing & Office Manager
Club 7	Championship Club	Chief Executive
Club 8	Championship Club	Chairman
Club 9	Championship Club	Media & Marketing Manager
Club 10	Championship Club	Marketing & Media Manager
Club 11	Championship Club	Chairman