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# Proposing the Sports Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework

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## Abstract

The study was inspired by the fact that there has not been a systematic sport brand equity model that uses the brand perceptions held by individual and corporate consumers of sports products to rank teams from different countries in a single hierarchy according to their levels of brand development and financial structure. In line with the exploratory sequential mixed methods research design, the first phase of the study utilised such qualitative procedures as; free-thought listing, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore the antecedents, dimensions and market consequences of the brand perceptions held by Zimbabwean consumers for professional football teams. In the second phase of this study, the finding from the qualitative phase were used to generate data collection instruments for questionnaire survey. Structured observation was also used to gather data in this phase. The SPSS version 21.0 and NVivo 10 data analysis packages were used to analyze quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The findings from the study were used to develop the Sports Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework, a conceptual model which ranks sports teams from different countries in a single hierarchy, according to financial structure and level of brand development. The framework can be used to determine the level of brand development and geographical sphere of influence of sports brands. It also provides guidelines on the growth strategies that teams, at the various levels of brand development can adopt for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

**Keyword:** Perceived Brand Equity, Team Sports Brand Hierachy, Enterprise-Driven Local Brand, Community-Driven Regional Brand, Core Product-Driven National Brand, Product Extensions-Driven International Brand, Value-Driven Global Brand

## Introduction

Andreff and Staudohar (2002) trace the evolution of the financial structures of football teams over the past five decades. According to them, the financial structures of most top European football teams before the 1960s resembled that of an amateur sports club whose economic viability is largely sustained through subscriptions, donations, subsidies, and gate receipts. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the primary source of revenue to European professional football teams was gate revenue (Andreff and Staudohar, 2002). For example, French Division 1 football teams generated 81 % of their revenues from gate receipts during the 1970-1 football season (Ibid). Andreff and Staudohar (2002) note that advertising and sponsorship revenue became important during the same period as firms sought more direct identification in terms of audience, image, notoriety and sales. Public subsidies from national and local governments were another important source of revenue (Ibid). They also note that television rights were not an important source of funds to football teams at the time, as leagues and teams were fearful that live broadcasts would decrease attendance at the stadiums, thus shrinking their major source of revenue. According to Andreff and Stoudohar (2002), there were only public television stations in Europe at the time. As a result, the lack of competition among broadcasters meant that the monopsony rights fee would not compensate for lost gate receipts.

Dolles and Solderman (2005) argue that since the late 1980s, revenue streams in professional sport are changing character. The richer clubs monitor decreasing ticket revenues and increasing dependence on revenue streams from sponsors, merchandise and media. This is corroborated by Kaynak, Salman and Tatoglu (2008) who observe that although ticket revenue used to be the number one source of income, now its significance has been declining due to the emergence of other sources

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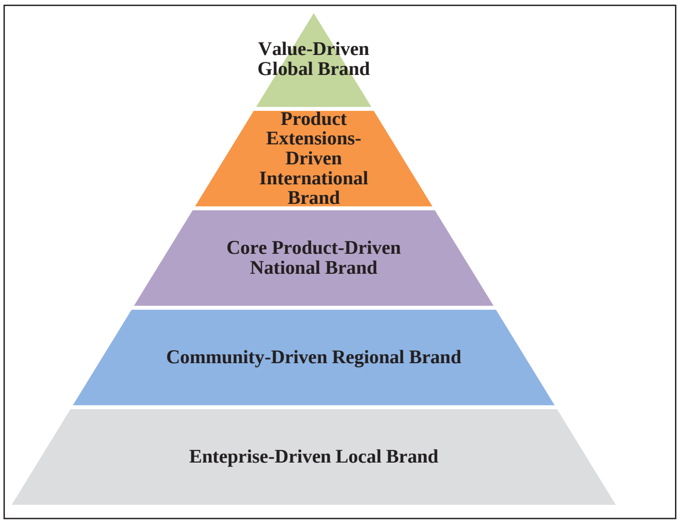
of revenues such as merchandising, broadcasting, corporations and season combined tickets. Television rights have emerged as the leading source of revenue for most European professional football teams (Andreff and Staudohar, 2002). A major reason explaining the increasing significance of television rights as a source of revenue for professional football teams is increased competition in the industry, since there are now private and public television stations to choose from(Andreff and Staudohar, 2002). As a result, the new finance model is based on four pillars; media, corporations (sponsorship and advertising), merchandising and markets (sale of players and stock)(Ibid).

These new revenue generation trends are also captured by Deloitte (2013, 2014, 2015),who note that match day revenue for the top twenty global professional football teams was declining and commercial and broadcasting streams have emerged as the leading source of revenue for these teams.

Although strategic brand management is now accepted and widely applied by professional sports teams in Europe, North America, Oceania, Asia, South America and some African countries, the notion has been slow to take hold in the Zimbabwean sports industry. Very few Zimbabwean sports entities are proactive in building and leveraging their brands and diversifying their financial structures. As a result, while European, South American, North American, Asian, and some African sports organisations were diversifying their revenue bases and developing professional structures based on sound management principles, such as strategic brand management, the application of marketing principles to the management of sport brands is still in its infant stages in the Zimbabwean sports industry. This explains why most professional sports teams in the country have remained rooted in the traditional financial model, where they are heavily reliant on gate revenue and subsidies from owner and public authorities.Most of them have been facing numerous challenges, primarily in the areas of attractiveness to sponsors, declining game attendance figures, inability to attract and retain quality employees, low licensed merchandise sale volumes and lack of television coverage. As a result, the Zimbabwean sports market today consists of an array of sports teams with different financial structures and operating at different levels of brand development. The intensity of competition in the sector has increased as these teams compete with other sports entities and other forms of entertainment, as well as other pastimes such as religion for customers, sponsorship opportunities, advertising revenue, merchandise sales opportunities, facilities and media coverage. Studies by Gladden and Milne (1999) and Bauer *et al*., (2005) show that in such competitive sports markets, products and services within the same brand category are becoming increasingly similar. Differentiation through performance on the field of play is difficult. According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2006), in a world where everything increasingly looks the same, brands are one of the few opportunities for making a difference. This is captured by Mullin, Hardy and Sutton (2007) who argue that brand superiority can distinguish the team sport product from other team-sport sports clubs, as well as from alternative recreational offers. There is increasing consensus among such scholars as Gladden, Milne and Sutton (1998), Gladden and Milne (1999), Gladden and Funk (2002), and Bauer, Sauer and Schmit (2005), Ross (2006), Kaynak, Salman and Tatoglu (2008), Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer and Exler (2008), Ross, Russell and Bang (2008), Naik and Gupta (2013, and Biscaia *et al.* (2013), Charumbira and Stotlar (2015) and Charumbira (2015) that the economic success of professional sports teams is a function of their ability to build strong brands and deliver them in a way that ensures that customers become and remain loyal. Richelieu (2004) view defining the identity of the sports team, positioning the sports team in the market, and developing a brand strategy as the three steps that lead to the creation of brand equity in professional sports teams.

Studies by Ross (2006), and Bauer *et al.* (2008), Ross, Russell and Bang (2008), Naik and Gupta (2013), and Biscaia *et al.* (2013) have shown that it is critical for sports marketers to be knowledgeable on how to build brand awareness and brand associations through an effective and efficient manipulation of the elements of the marketing communication mix. However very little research has been done on how sports team brands at different levels of brand development use brand strategy to extend the geographical spheres of influence of their brands and diversify the financial structures. It is against this background that this exploratory study sought to determine the financial structure and competitive positions occupied professional football teams in the minds of Zimbabwean consumers and increase knowledge on how managers of professional sports teams can build and strengthen perceived brand equity in order to enhance their revenue generating capacities for sustainable economic success in all performance phases on the field of play. The study was inspired by the fact that there has not been a systematic sport brand equity model that uses the brand perceptions held by individual and corporate consumers of sports products to rank teams from different countries in a single hierarchy according to their levels of brand development and financial structure. It was carried out to determine the competitive positions occupied by Zimbabwean, South African and European professional football teams in the minds of Zimbabwean individual and corporate consumers of football products. The findings from the study and financial data compiled by Deloitte (2013, 2014, 2015)on the financial structure of global football brands were used to develop the Sports Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework, a conceptual model which ranks the teams according to their financial structure and level of brand development, as summarised in Fig. 1.

**Fig. 1: The Sports Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework**




## Methodology

In line with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2011) conceptualisation of *exploratory* sequential mixed methods research design, the first phase of this study utilised such qualitative procedures as; free-thought listing, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore the antecedents, dimensions and market consequences of the brand perceptions held by Zimbabwean consumers for professional football teams. The semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 41 individual consumers of football brands, 8 football sponsoring companies, 7 sports journal drawn from newspapers which cover the activities of local and foreign football teams, 2 broadcasting houses, and six local professional football teams. The free-thought listing technique was used to collect data on the brand perceptions held by Zimbabwean consumers for professional football teams from 69 purposively sampled consumers drawn from all the ten provinces of the country. Three focus group discussions were carried out to further explore the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. The two focus group discussions were conducted at a Bulawayo-based University with Bachelor of Commerce in Marketing and Bachelor of Science in Sports Science and Coaching students, whose selection was based on their expert knowledge on branding and sports marketing issues respectively, in addition to being active consumers of products of professional sports teams. The third focus group discussion was conducted at a school, in the Somabhula commercial farming area of the Midlands Province .This group was made up of three villagers, three schoolteachers, two students and four rural-based employees of an international Non-governmental Organisation. The participants were purposively selected based on their active consumption of products of professional sports teams. The discussions were video-recorded with permission from the participants, to secure an accurate account of the conversations.

In the second phase of this study, the finding from the free-though listing survey, interviews and focus group discussions were used to generate data collection instruments for questionnaire survey. This was meant to assess the overall prevalence of the variables identified in the first phase from a large number of users of football brands. Structured observation was also used to gather data in this phase.

For the purpose of the *questionnaire survey* in the quantitative phase of the study, the stratified convenience sampling strategy, which implies stratifying the study population into ten sampling units in line with the country's ten administrative provinces, before utilizing the convenience sampling procedure to select the 600 participants that were included in the study. 600 questionnaires were distributed, of which 465 were completed and returned. The main section of the questionnaire contained questions where all items were measured on a 7-point Likert type scale; ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Neuman (2004) notes that, using such a scale for large numbers of questions, as was the case in this study can result in a "response set"- a situation where respondents display a tendency for answering questions in the same way, out of laziness or a psychological predisposition. To minimize this effect, the completed questionnaires were thoroughly scrutinised and those that were not fully completed or contained 10 or more consecutive answers on the same scale were excluded from the final analysis, leaving 402 usable questionnaires, for an effective response rate of 67%..

The NVivo 10 and SPSS version 21.0 software packages were used to analyse qualitative and quantitative data, respectively.

## Results

The findings from the free-though listing survey, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions showed that respondents had good levels of awareness of their favourite professional football teams. They were able to accurately recall their favourite team's brand attributes. In the free-thought listing survey, only 27.3 % of the teams that were listed by the 69 participants as their favourite professional football teams were local and 72.7 % were foreign. The results from semi-structured interviews with 41 individual consumers of football products showed top-level awareness for 24 professional football teams, of which 29.2 % were Zimbabwean and 70.8 % were foreign. Focus group discussions yielded similar results by showing top level awareness for 12 professional football teams, of which, 33.3 % were Zimbabwean and 66.7 % were foreign. The media-based consumers also showed top-level awareness for 3 local teams (27.3 %) and 8 foreign teams (72.7 %). This shows that the participants had better levels of brand awareness for foreign professional football teams than local professional football teams. These trends closely mirror the extensive exposure that foreign professional football teams receive on the television stations that are popular with Zimbabwean users of football brands. The findings highlight the need for Zimbabwean professional football teams to adopt media and marketing communication-based brand building strategies in order to increase the levels of brand awareness among local consumers.

The results from the qualitative strand of the study also revealed that European professional football teams have been able to generate stronger and more favourable brand associations in the mind of Zimbabwean corporate and individual users of football brands. As a result, they were perceived as market leaders in their brand category by Zimbabwean consumers. South African professional football teams occupied second position in the minds of the respondents who participated in the qualitative strand of the study. Zimbabwean professional football teams were positioned at the bottom of the standings.

According to the study participants, the increasing popularity of foreign professional football teams has affected the financial viability of local professional teams in a number of ways. The overall game attendance has displayed a strong descending trend, as fans now prefer to watch games involving foreign professional football teams on television, in the comfort of their homes or sports bars. Merchandise sales volumes for local professional football teams have also declined drastically, as Zimbabwean consumers of football products now prefer to purchase and use merchandise belonging to European and South African football teams at the expense of merchandise from local teams. Foreign teams also get better television rights packages from the most popular satellite subscriber television network in the country. The research participants attributed this to the fact that European and South African teams offer better returns on broadcasting rights investment to television companies, since most television advertisers and broadcasting sponsors prefer to be associated with them, because of their better perceived brand images.

The results show that 83.3 % Zimbabwean professional football teams have been abandoned by most of their traditional sponsors in the last ten years owing to poor corporate governance practices, poor marketing and brand management strategies, and negative returns on sponsorship investment, ambush marketing, negative publicity and the difficult economic environment. The study noted that sponsoring companies prefer to associate their products with credible sports brands. This explains why some local corporate sponsors of football are beginning to associate their brands with global football brands by running sale promotion exercises in which the winning customers are awarded tickets to travel to Europe to watch Spanish La Lia and English Premier League matches. This decline in the financial viability of local professional football teams has affected the ability of Zimbabwean premier league teams to attract and retain quality players and coaches. It has resulted in a situation where the country's best footballers and coaches are leaving local football teams for brands they perceive to be of a better quality in Europe, Asia, North America and neighbouring countries. Zimbabwean football teams used to attract talented players and coaches from Zambia and Malawi, but they no longer have the same capacity.

The study showed that Zimbabwean professional football teams derive most of their revenue from sponsorship (48.3 %) and this mainly comes from team owners. Other significant sources of revenue are;gate receipts (24.7 %), player transfer (12.2 %) and member's subscription (4 %). This financial structure closely mirrors that of European amateur football teams, where the main sources of revenue are spectators, owners and member subscription, as noted by Andreff and Staudohar (2002). The only difference is on player transfer revenue and this stems from the fact that FIFA statutes do not allow amateur teams to benefit financially from player transfers. Top European teams operated under this financial model in the 1950s and 1960s (Andreff and Staudohar, 2002). This shows that the financial structure of Zimbabwean professional football teams in nowhere near that of modern European football teams, which are recording decreasing ticket revenues and increasing dependence on merchandise sale, corporate sponsors and broadcasting right Dolles and Solderman (2005). Andreff and Straudohar (2002) also note that the financial structure of modern top-level European football teams has changed drastically in the last two decades. According to them, new sources of revenue have emerged and old ones such as gate receipts are declining. The new revenue model is based on such pillars as; the media, corporations (sponsorship), merchandising and markets (sale of stock or players).

The findings show that Zimbabwean professional football teams use a number strategy to build and maintain a positive brand image among current and prospective fans. These strategies include, interacting with fans through the mass media, social media and team websites, as well as, involving fans in the running of clubs' business, running corporate social responsibility programmes and image building through corporate sponsorship. One of the respondents indicated that, at their team, they have resorted to distributing team merchandise for free to their fans, as a brand-building strategy. The respondents believe that their brand-building strategies are effective. They, however, acknowledged that these strategies are inferior to those used by European and South African teams, hence the failure to protect the teams from the competitive threat posed by foreign teams.

The study showed that at 66.7 % of Zimbabwean professional football teams, brand management was solely the concern of the marketing officer. At 16.7 % of the teams, the brand management process was the responsibility of the Marketing Officer and Chief Executive Officer. For the remaining 16.7 %, it was the responsibility of the Chief Executive Officer. This shows that the brand management process is still largely grounded in the traditional paradigm where the brand management function is confined to the marketing department.

As a parting note, the participants were asked to suggest the measures that can be put in place to improve the perceived brand value of Zimbabwean professional football teams and enhance their revenue generating capacities for sustainable economic success. They highlighted the need to diversify and strengthen the teams' revenue bases by increasing inflows from television rights, merchandise sale, jersey rights, corporate sponsorship, advertising and stock market activities.

In the second phase of the study, the findings from the questionnaire survey were also used to validate the data generated through such qualitative methods as free-thought listing, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions by assessing its prevalence in a large number of users of football brands. The results were consistent with the findings from the qualitative strand of the study.

In the first instance, the perceived brand positions occupied by Zimbabwean, South African and European professional football teams were measured by measuring the extent to which the respondents agreed with the brand positioning statements that were posed to them, on a 7-point Likert Type Scale.A lower agreement means score of 1.35 the brand position statement:

In comparison with South African professional football brands, Zimbabwean professional football brands are superior, shows that the 402 respondents strongly disagreed with the statement.

In the same vein, a lower agreement means score of 1.0 for the brand position statement:

In comparison with European professional football brands, Zimbabwean Professional football brands are superior, signalled strong disagreement with the statement.

On the other hand, a higher agreement score of 6.96 for the brand position statement:

In comparison with South African professional football brands, European professional football brands are superior, shows that the respondents strongly perceive European football brands as superior to Zimbabwean football brands.

In the second instance, the one-way ANOVA Test was utilised to determine whether the perceived team brand attributes differed significantly between Zimbabwean, European and South Africa professional football teams as presented in section 5.5.1.3 and table 5.23. European football brands recorded an average agreement mean score of 5.898 along the 40 brand attributes that were measured, South African brands followed closely with an average agreement mean score of 5.89225 and Zimbabwean brands were third with an average agreement mean score of 5.07575.

This shows European professional football teams were perceived as brands of higher value when compared to South African and Zimbabwean professional football teams. South African professional football teams were also perceived as being superior in quality than Zimbabwean professional football teams. These findings show that professional football teams have been able to generate positive brand associations along such brand dimensions as; team play characteristics, team success, organisational attributes, management, team tradition, non-player personnel, star player and brand mark and these mainly purported to European professional football teams. Negative associations mainly applied to Zimbabwean professional football teams. They included negative associations on product-related attributes where the respondents expressed their unhappiness with the inability to retain star players and quality technical personnel, poor current form, declining quality of football, poor team tactics. Along the management dimension, unfavourable associations included shambolic management practices and boardroom squabbles. Similarly, along the security and ethical dimensions, negative associations were recorded on such attributes as crowd violence, vulgarism, and bad behaviour by players. Finally, some of the respondents expressed their unhappiness with such ethnic discriminatory practices of some local professional football team as tribalism.

## The Sports Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework

There has not been a systematic sport brand equity model that uses the brand perceptions held by individual and corporate consumers of sports products to rank teams from different countries in a single hierarchy according to their levels of brand development and financial structure. Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) developed a model which ranks French football teams into four categories according to the level of brand development. In a bid to bridge this knowledge gap, the findings on the brand positioning perceptions held Zimbabwean consumers for local and foreign professional football teams, the data on the financial structure of Zimbabwean teams and financial data compiled by Deloitte (2013, 2014, 2015)for global football brand were used to develop a conceptual model which ranks the teams according to their financial structure and level of brand development, as summarised in Figure 1.

The Sport Team Brand Hierarchy Conceptual Framework shows that professional football teams that are popular on the Zimbabwean can be classified into five categories according to their financial structure, level of brand development and geographical spheres of influence.

### Enterprise-Driven Local Brand

At the base of the hierarchy are professional football teams which rely heavily on funding from their owners, for operation. These brands mainly resonate with the fans who are also connected to the team owners in some way. On a national scale, the levels of customer awareness of these brands are very limited and they are perceived as weak and undifferentiated.

Brand strategy at this stage focuses on growth by increasing the levels of brand awareness and building positive brand associations in the surrounding communities through community social responsibility programmes and media publicity campaigns. Regional growth can also be achieved by adopting team names that are linked to the geographical area in which they are based. Such name-based brand strategies can influence fans to perceive the team as a common unifying point for community, town or a source of regional pride. At this stage, brand strategy can also focus on improving the quality of the core-product. These strategies can enable the brand to move to the next level of brand development.

### Community-Driven Regional Brand.

Community-driven regional brands are highly visible in the geographical regions of the country from which they operate. They resonate with those fans who are based in those regions, since they are perceived as a common unifying point and a source of pride in the region. Their financial structure is dominated by gate revenue and sponsorship from the team owners.

At this stage of brand development, brand strategy focuses on expanding the brand's geographical sphere of influence. This can be achieved through the successful implementation of such strategies as, recruiting talented players from other regions of the country, running nationwide corporate social responsibility and other marketing communication campaigns. Other useful branding strategies, include improving the quality of the core product and generating beneficial media coverage.

### Core Product-Driven National Brand

The core product-driven national brand's high perceived brand equity is grounded in its ability to generate positive brand associations along such core-product related attributes as success on the field of play and the presence of quality players and charismatic coaches. The levels of fan awareness of these brands are high country wide.

The financial structure of this brand is dominated by gate receipts. Corporate sponsorship is also significant. This stems from its good fit with the marketing objectives of companies that may want to use the popularity of the sports brand to reach their own target audiences.

Brand strategy at this stage focuses on reducing dependence on gate revenue and increasing dependence on merchandise sale, corporate sponsorship and broadcasting revenue. The brand can also extend its influence geographically into neighbouring countries by recruiting players from those countries and playing pre-season friendly matches against teams from those countries. Brand strategy at this stage can also focus on generating positive brand associations along such non-product related associations like management, service delivery, venue factors and improving the functional, symbolic and experiential benefits that fans derive from associating with the team. The study also noted that the core product-driven national brand can also enter into co-branding partnerships with product extensions-driven international brand and value-driven global brand and leverage on the relationship to strengthen its brand equity, extent its geographical sphere of influence and diversify its financial structure.

### Product Extensions-Driven International Brand

The difference between the product extensions-driven international brand and core product-driven national brand is that the former has been able to extend its influence into neighbouring countries through such actions as recruiting players from those countries and playing friendly matches there. It has also managed to diversify its revenue base through such product extensions as merchandise sales, corporate sponsorship and selling players to global brands. The quality of the core-product is, however, still at the same level as that of a core product-driven national brand.

To grow this brand into a value-driven global brand, brand strategy can focus on improving the quality of the core product to world-class levels by engaging the services of world-class players and technical personnel from across the globe. The brand can also enter into beneficial co-branding partnerships with value-driven global brands. This can improve its global brand visibility and perceived quality. Consequently, this may enable the brand to increase its merchandise sales volumes, attract more lucrative broadcasting and sponsorship contracts, and generate more revenue from player sales and stock exchange activities.

### Value-Driven Global Brand

This brand is perceived as a global market leader in its category. Its financial structure exhibits a significant decline in dependence on gate revenue and increased dependence on broadcasting rights sales, sponsorship, advertising, merchandising and sale of stock or players

.The brand is highly visible across the globe and is perceived as stronger, more favourable and highly differentiated from other brands in its category. The quality of the core-product is better than that for brands in the first four levels of the hierarchy.

Brand strategy at this stage focuses on maintaining the global brand leadership position of the brand and improving brand presence in emerging markets.

## Significance of the Framework

The framework can be used to determine the level of brand development and geographical sphere of influence of sports brands. It also provides guidelines on the growth strategies that teams, at the various levels of brand development can adopt for sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

However, the framework is based on research finding from a study carried out in a single country, on a single sport, football. As results, it may not accurately mirror the situation in other sports settings.

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