

# **Branding Governance in International Recurring Sports Events: The World Rugby**

## **‘Sevens’ Series**

### **Abstract**

**Research Question:** In response to calls for additional research on brand governance in sports, we examine brand governance practices in the novel and under researched context of the World Rugby Sevens Series. In doing so, we expand the discourse on rugby in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and provide fresh insights regarding the brand governance practices in an international recurring sporting event.

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

**Results and findings:** The first three themes, which serve as a prelude to a deeper discussion of brand management practices depict World Rugby Sevens Series as a distinct, rebellious-responsible, co-created sportainment brand. Fostering close and beneficial exchanges with brand partners, developing strong collaborative ties with host cities and venues, commitment to athlete performance through care and support, adoption of strategic corporate social responsibility to enhance the brand, championing brand co-creation, and activating social media use are the brand governance practices on which the World Rugby Sevens Series is built.

**Implications:** We provide a fine-grained exposition of branding from the brand owner’s perspective. For the World Rugby Sevens Series, brand governance requires the ability to collaborate with and serve the needs of key stakeholders including global partners, local sponsors, rugby unions, host cities and venues, athletes, and fans.

**Keywords:** *brand governance, brand management, international recurring sports events, World Rugby Sevens Series, sports brands*

## **Introduction**

The topic of strategic brand management in sport has been widely studied (Helm & Jones, 2010; Hoye et al., 2020; Hill & Vincent, 2006; Gladden & Funk, 2002). Helm and Jones (2010) suggest shifts in the branding landscape embracing fiercely competitive industry environments, empowered consumers, line and brand extension proliferation, multiple distribution and communication touchpoints, rising popularity of strategic partnerships in delivering brands to consumers, and the risks of using social media accentuate the importance of studying strategic brand management. For instance, because sports provide drama, escapism, vicarious achievement and a source of solidarity (Chadwick, 2009; Funk & James, 2001), they compete not only with other sports codes but alternative forms of entertainment. Not surprisingly, branding is crucial for creating a distinct identity, fostering loyalty and, ultimately, increasing brand equity.

To date, most research on sports branding has focussed on brand management in the context of collegiate athletics (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998), professional sport teams (Gladden, Irwin & Sutton, 2001; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Richelieu, 2004; Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001; Watkins, 2014) and sport events (Séguin, Richelieu, & O'Reilly, 2008) including recurring sports events (Parent, Eskerud & Hanstad, 2012). This body of scholarly work has largely focused on the development of internal branding capabilities to create brand equity including brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty, brand positioning and how to understand, manage, and legally protect a brand.

Despite this preponderance of research in the domain of sports, recent studies (e.g., Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Manoli, 2020a; Ströbel & Germelmann, 2020) indicate that an understanding of brand management in sport is incomplete. Scholars such as Hatch and Schultz (2010), Helm and Jones (2010), Ind and Bjerke (2007), Merrilees (2017) and Taks et al. (2020) propose the externally focused concept of brand governance as a new approach to strategic

brand management. Brand governance refers to ‘a system of building a brand that is guided by the vision, mission and values of an organization and that systematically nurtures a brand value to become and remain a long-term strategic asset’ (Séguin & Abeza, 2019, p. 368). It deals with how organizations pull together resources, structures, functions, and processes to guide an organization’s brand management in alignment with its vision, mission, and values. Séguin & Abeza (2019) note that brand governance can be understood as a system of rules, practices, and processes, directed and controlled through clear, actionable goals to establish and sustain an entity’s long-term brand value. This conceptual definition implies that brand governance goes beyond simply developing and maintaining brand identity elements such as a brand name, logo, font type, symbols, colour, or shape, which are usually the responsibility of mid-level management (Zaichkowsky, 2010), and that a visionary approach is necessary to preserve the consistency and coherence of the brand which involves stakeholders in the co-creation (Ferrand et al., 2012) and governance of the brand (Séguin & Abeza, 2019). Renton and Richard’s (2019) pioneering work on SMEs provide early evidence of the role of brand governance in protecting brand values, brand distinctiveness, strong positioning and value co-creation. However, there remains a paucity of research on brand governance in the context of sport (Taks et al., 2020) and whether leaders of sports organizations apply brand governance (Parent et al., 2012).

Against this backdrop and responding to calls for research on brand governance in sport organizations (Séguin & Abeza, 2019; Taks et al., 2020), our study examines the brand governance practices in a major international recurring sports event. In doing so, we make several contributions to the extant literature on strategic brand management in sports. First, we add to the nascent stream of research on international sports marketing (see Ratten & Ratten, 2011; Richelieu et al., 2008; Richelieu & Desbordes, 2013) and recurring sports events in particular (Parent et al., 2012), by examining an under-researched reoccurring international

sporting event of the World Rugby Sevens Series (WRSS). Relative to soccer (e.g., Maguire & Stead, 1998; Markovits & Hellerman, 2014), baseball (e.g., Chen et al., 2012; Marcano & Fidler, 1999), basketball (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2016; Huang, 2013), and cricket (e.g., Gupta, 2004; Maguire & Stead, 1996), rugby remains underrepresented in extant research on sports marketing. The narrow sub stream of scholarship on branding in rugby (e.g., Harris & Wise, 2012; Jackson et al., 2001) addresses national team brands for rugby union: the 15-player version of the sport.

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

## **Literature Review**

### *Strategic Brand Management in Recurring Sports Events*

The early work of Gladden and colleagues (e.g., Gladden et al., 2001) highlights the significance of brand building for a recurring sports event. Gladden et al. (2001) contend that building a brand, or more specifically brand equity, demands a customer-focused relationship management drive. Four initiatives - understanding the consumer, enhancing the interface between the consumer and brand, reinforcing and rewarding brand loyalty, and developing

consistent integrated communication, typify this approach. Similar integrative models of branding have been developed by Parent et al. (2012), and Richelieu and Desbordes (2009).

Research on team-specific brands (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Hill & Vincent, 2006; Manoli, 2020b; Parganas et al., 2015; Richelieu, 2014; Schilhaneck, 2008) examines several brand-related concepts such as brand identity, brand associations, brand personality, brand consistency, brand co-creation, brand loyalty and brand equity. For example, there is a cluster of studies anthropomorphizing sports products through conferring brand personality (Schade et al., 2014). While brands like the NFL exhibit personality traits analogous to generic human mannerisms (i.e., the Big Five test) other sports brands are atypical (Kang et al., 2016). For example, Schade et al. (2014) depict brash or rebellious sports brands which are unambiguously bold and 'alternative'. Other studies have identified brand associations that fans might have for their favourite sports team (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kaynak, Salman & Tatoglu, 2008; Parganas et al., 2015). In extending Aaker's brand building model, Hill and Vincent (2006), and Schilhaneck (2008) also suggest that a sports brand takes multiple forms - a person, a product, an organization, or a symbol. Each of these varieties embodies unique sports products or consumption objects. Regardless of the form, the strongest brand associations ensue from the benefits instead of the attributes of the sports product (Gladden & Funk, 2001). For instance, sonic branding (i.e., associations between sport and music) builds a stronger emotional connection between fans and sports brands (Likes, 2013).

Over many years, there has been strong interest in examining strategic brand management in (inter)national sports brands including the Olympics, UEFA Champions League, English Premier League (EPL), Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL) and National Hockey League (NHL) (see Aguiar-Noury & Garcia-del-Barrio, 2019; Holt, 2007; Kenyon et al., 2018; Richelieu et al., 2011). Integral to this discourse is the search for a substantive explanation for the divergent

fortunes of sports brands. For instance, Aguiar-Noury and Garcia-del-Barrio (2019) illustrate that while the North American leagues (i.e., MLB, NBA, and NFL) are not decidedly more lucrative, they command the highest online traffic and visibility. Concerning the UEFA Champions league, Holt (2007) portrays centralized marketing, profitable television rights, and corporate sponsorship deals as indispensable antecedents to the creation of the UEFA Champions League brand. In both the French (Ligue1) and German (Bundesliga) premier soccer leagues, catalytic or transactional elements such as a rich history, winning tradition, passionate fans and iconic stadiums underpin successful brand building (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Wetzel et al., 2018).

### *The Changing Landscape for Strategic Brand Management in Sport*

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

Some of the above-mentioned sports brands are co-created through “the passion, excitement and involvement expressed by fans” (Kolyperas et al. 2019, p. 204). Co-creation occurs in the joint sphere (i.e., involving brand owner and fans) and in the customer sphere (i.e., fan to fan interaction) (Uhrich, 2014). It can be physical (e.g., in stadium activities) or virtual where it intersects with social media activities. Although co-creation increases fan engagement, customer-to-customer value co-creation culminates in loss of control for the brand

owner, raising the risk of not only transforming brand identity to a version for which the brand owner did not intend, but of prompting value co-destruction (Kim, Byon, & Baek, 2020).

More recent work on branding in sports acknowledges that the process of co-creation should involve all stakeholders and not just fans (Hoye et al., 2020; Parent et al., 2021; Taks et al., 2020). Stakeholders are “individuals or groups who can affect the organization or be affected by its actions” (Parent, Eskerud & Hanstad, 2012, p.146). In sports, stakeholders include community residents, athletes, fans, sponsors, media, government bodies, employees, volunteers, and other sports organizations (Hoye et al., 2020; Koutrou & Downward, 2016). As noted by Freeman (1984), the relationship between organizations and stakeholders is bilateral. Sports brands can be impacted, influenced, and shaped by the action of its stakeholders and it is these stakeholder inter-relationships that influence brand governance (Ferkins & Shilbury, 2015b; Parent et al., 2018).

Social media is another externally focused activity that has relevance to the study of brand governance in sport. Social media can serve as a vehicle to achieve strategic brand objectives in sport (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Doyle et al., 2020; Sanderson & Yandle, 2015; Taks et al., 2020), if it is well developed and properly managed (Naraine & Parent, 2017a, 2017b). Several studies have examined how social media is used to communicate a sport brand’s value proposition, specifically how social media platforms create a direct, ongoing link to end user consumers (Popp & Woratschek, 2016; Sanderson & Yandle, 2015). Given that fans today seek increasing levels of collaboration and interactivity with sports organizations, it is not surprising that existing literature largely focuses on its importance in building brand image and engagement with fans (Maderer, Parganas & Anagnostopoulos, 2018; Taks et al., 2020). However, there remains a dearth of research in how social media platforms are used in the process of brand governance. Despite its potential to increase fan engagement and loyalty (see Watkins, 2014), to date, the use of social media by sports brands

is ad hoc and intuitive and lacks integration with a broader strategic brand management thrust (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020). Recently, Ströbel and Germelmann (2020) offered a synopsis of strategic brand management that underscores the need for research to examine the role of social media in the brand governance process. In particular, there is little understanding about how social media is used in the brand governance process, particularly how mission, vision, and the values of sports brands are communicated.

In summary, our review of the extant literature on strategic brand management in sports highlights the need to explore **brand governance practices** and the **role of stakeholders** and **social media** in this process. We now report a case study on the World Rugby Sevens Series (WRSS), an international recurring sports event involving brand owners and other stakeholders. International recurring sports events encompass three related brands - association or league (i.e., *World Rugby Sevens Series*), team (e.g., All Black sevens) and athlete (e.g., Tim Mikkelsen). Brand governance is particularly challenging given the intersectionality with destination branding, brand positioning relative other entertainment options, and tensions between ‘local’ and ‘global’ (Kenyon et al., 2018; Parent et al., 2012; Richelieu & Desbordes, 2013). By examining the role of stakeholders and social media in co-creating the World Rugby Sevens Series brand, we extend traditional strategic brand management practice and its focus on consumers and their perceptions of brand awareness, image associations and loyalty, to the externally focused concept of brand governance.

### **Research Methods and Analysis**

Edmondson and McManus’s (2007) work on methodological fit guided our research design and method. Given the research focus on “how” the *World Rugby Sevens Series* manages brand governance, a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate (Creswell, 2013) due to its capacity to generate rich data and detailed descriptions (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Crick, 2020;



Doz, 2011). The highly cited work of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1981) among others, informed our qualitative research design. To enhance the clarity and trustworthiness of our approach (see Sinkovics et al., 2008; Doz, 2011) we elucidated the case study method with emphasis on the role the case study plays, sampling method, and unit of analysis.

The choice of single versus multiple case study and the precise role the case plays are two of the most fundamental considerations in qualitative case study research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Siggelkow, 2007). Since our research focused on an international recurring sporting event organized and held across multiple markets, our method constituted a hybrid single case study with embedded units. A case can serve as motivation (i.e., abductive logic), illustration (i.e., deductive logic), or inspiration (i.e., inductive logic) for qualitative research design (Siggelkow, 2007; Verleye, 2019). The first option focuses on theory refinement and verification/falsification (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Siggelkow, 2007), whereas the other two address theory development. Siggelkow (2007) indicates the difference between these latter approaches is a matter of sequencing. Rather than use a case to illustrate a theory, we employed it as inspiration (i.e., to generate theoretical insights from data). Because we summarized data, linked this data to the goal of our research, and constructed explanations from the resultant connections, our approach fits within the wider discourse on grounded theory (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gehman *et al.*, 2018; Thomas, 2006).

We used purposive sampling to reach key informants representing the WRSS. To access a representative range of perspectives, we considered both traditional rugby-playing nations (e.g., Australia, New Zealand and South Africa) and up-and-coming rugby destinations (e.g., Dubai, Japan, and USA). We approached senior rugby executives affiliated with each of these unions/events. That a co-author had a relationship with an executive at World Rugby, meant our study benefited from introductions to other rugby executives. Our aim was to interview one executive per chosen rugby union. Of the 12 rugby unions we approached, eight executives

representing seven unions agreed to participate in the interviews. Data were collected in October 2019 and are largely unaffected by the confounding questions regarding the future of sport post-COVID 19. All interviews, except one, were conducted face-to-face online with each conversation lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. The semi-structured interviews were designed to flow from general to specific. They commenced with questions on the executives' role within rugby sevens as well as the sport's historical development. A series of open-ended questions sought to probe the roles of the parent organization, national teams, athletes, host cities, social media and fans to better understand the brand governance practices of the WRSS. We recorded all interviews together with field notes before transcription for further analysis. Respondents had the opportunity to read the transcripts to validate correctness and completeness. Table 1 provides a synopsis of the interviewees. To preserve anonymity and reduce the chance of de-identification, we limit to a bare minimum the description of their roles and backgrounds.

**Table 1:** Overview of interviewees, fits here

We used triangulation to draw additional insights from sports websites (e.g., *ESPN*, *World Rugby Sevens Series*). Our focus was not so much on harvesting all data on the last 21 years of the WRSS as it was on selectively extracting bits of information to allow us to construct a timeline, verify notable developments, and identify key stakeholders for this international recurring sports event. This may be considered adequate since our focus is not on providing a comprehensive historical account of the WRSS but on dissecting how the sport is currently managing branding governance.

The WRSS is the case of interest, and individual series events (e.g., tournaments in Dubai, Hong Kong, or Las Vegas) constitute the embedded units. For example, questions to a United Arab Emirates rugby executive focused on the *Dubai Sevens* tournament. Likewise, our triangulation draws additional insights on the reporting of the tournament(s) on ESPN and/or

the WRSS website. From the plethora of qualitative analytical tools (see Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Thomas, 2006), we utilized the constant comparison approach. Frequently referred to as thematic analysis, the approach involves coding, pattern matching, and explanation building. To draw lucid themes from the data, we relied on Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis. The technique enables a researcher to condense data based on text chunks, and to categorize, label, and reorganize text segments, before aggregating them into themes. Through iterative and immersive refinement, nine themes encapsulating the brand governance activities associated with the WRSS emerged. Our findings are organised as follows: First, we provide a synopsis of notable developments associated with international rugby sevens series. We rely on secondary data from websites to map the evolution of rugby sevens. This is followed by a discussion of the first three themes which emphasize the centrality of rugby matches as the primary consumption object, the nature of sevens rugby segment, and the distinctiveness of the brand. We then delve into the six brand governance themes on which the WRSS brand is built. Our discussion includes participant voice to augment the richness of the findings. The interviewees are denoted by rugby-based pseudonyms.

## **Results**

### *The Development of the RWSS*

Figure 1 provides a timeline for the development of the RWSS. The game of rugby sevens dates to 1883 in the Scottish town of Melrose.<sup>1</sup> Ten years after its inception, the Scottish Football Union faced severe viability challenges. To overcome the difficulties, the union resolved to trim down each team to three forwards, two half-backs and two backs and to reduce the duration of each game to two 15-minute halves. From the imperative to keep traditional rugby union afloat, the sevens format arose. The North Shield Sevens at Percy Park in England,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'/history-of-'sevens'>

and Buenos Aires Sevens played in 1921 are first official accounts of international rugby sevens.

**Figure 1:** A brief history of rugby sevens, fits here

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rugby sevens was viewed as an unrefined and less glamorous version of rugby union. That perception began to shift in the late 1970s and 1980s, thanks in part to the expat community in destinations such as Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. However, it was the advent of professionalism in sevens rugby, which opened the door for an international recurring series and the participation of prominent corporate sponsors. Rugby sevens evolved from a mere workout routine for athletes targeting rugby union, to a distinct professional sports code. *Prop* details the onset of professionalism:

So, it took a few years for teams to understand about the nutrition and the weight training and everything else that that's obviously gone leaps and bounds from 10, 15, 20 years ago. And attitudes have also changed within rugby as well. So, where it was more of, you know, the third half and a few beers in the clubhouse, or after games and everything... that's completely changed. So, you know, protein shakes and ice baths now.

Sevens became a professional sport with the start of the *International Rugby Board (IRB) Sevens Series* in the 1999/00 season, which saw 16 teams participate in 10 tournaments<sup>2</sup>. There are 15 core teams plus an additional squad chosen from regional qualifiers<sup>3</sup>. Australia, England, France, New Zealand, and South Africa, and other traditional rugby playing nations constitute the core teams. The series also features smaller or budding rugby playing nations including Kenya and the USA. New Zealand and Fiji are the most successful teams in the series. Both nations featured in the finals in the early years of the series, with New Zealand winning the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens/history-of-sevens>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sevens.co.nz/about/about-the-series/>

first six straight before Fiji broke the run by winning their first of four titles in 2005/06. New Zealand have since won 13 titles, with South Africa (three) and Samoa (one) <sup>4</sup>.

In 2008, rugby sevens was trialled as a potential Olympic sport at the Dubai Sevens event. The success of this event led to rugby sevens being granted Olympic status in 2009, and the Rio 2016 games became the first Olympics to showcase rugby sevens<sup>5</sup>. The women's circuit which began in 2012 commenced just in time for the Olympics<sup>6</sup>. Twenty-four national teams qualified for the Olympics in both the men's and women's events (12 in each circuit) for the Rio 2016 games <sup>7 8 9 10</sup>. Respondents concur that participation in the Olympics, at a time the Olympics were mulling reducing the number of sports codes represented at the event, has raised the international stature of the rugby sevens series event. For instance, *Hooker* explains:

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

The growth of the series continues to attract commercial partners. HSBC are the series naming sponsors, Emirates airlines own the naming rights for the Dubai Sevens, and Capgemini and DHL are on board as global partners of the series<sup>11 12 13</sup>. Sports equipment manufacturer Gilbert is designated a technical partner. With support from key broadcast partners - ESPN, Fox Sports, NBC, Sky Sports and Supersport – the WRSS is available in 145 countries and territories. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens/history-of-sevens>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens/history-of-sevens>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens/history-of-sevens>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/173326?lang=en>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.olympic.org/rio-2016/rugby>

New Zealand, Great Britain (Silver), Fiji (Gold), Japan, Argentina, Australia, South Africa (Bronze), France, Spain, Brazil, USA, and Kenya

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/173326?lang=en>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.olympic.org/rio-2016/rugby>

Australia (Gold), USA, Fiji, Colombia, New Zealand (Silver), France, Spain, Kenya, Canada (Bronze), Great Britain, Brazil, Japan

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/78453?lang=en>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/news/306027?lang=en>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dhl.com/nz-en/home/about-us/partnerships/sports/world-rugby-sevens-series.html>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/where-to-watch>

Like most parts of society, 2020 was a difficult year for the WRSS due to the impact of COVID-19. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the 2020 series after only five of eight (women's) and six of ten (men's) events<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup>. New Zealand – the early pacesetters in both the men's and women's circuits – were awarded the titles.

### *The Rugby Sevens Brand*

As noted above, three of the nine themes emerging from the study capture perceptions of the WRSS from the perspective of the brand owner, a departure from most branding research which draws on consumers' views. Rugby matches are the primary consumption object, the WRSS brand is unique, and the personality of the WRSS brand encapsulates its distinctiveness. Profiling the brand lays the groundwork for a deeper discussion of brand governance practices that have helped foster these characteristics.

#### *a. Rugby matches as the primary consumption object*

While the WRSS brand comprises multiple consumption objects, the interviewees consider the seven-a-side rugby matches as the foremost product. Responding to the relative importance of the matches compared to the surrounding fanfare, *Fullback* explains that the end-to-end action on the pitch is fundamental to the rugby sevens brand:

Ultimately, it's the entertainment that they provide in the form of their athleticism and the beauty of the game that they play, particularly Fiji, which really is the biggest fan engagement piece.

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

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/standings/womens>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/'sevens'-series/standings/mens>

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

*b. Distinctiveness of the WRSS*

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

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

In markets such as Dubai and Hong Kong the rugby sevens series also attracts an older segment comprising not only locals but expatriates and tourists. *Centre* describes segment profiles as follows:

So, we can tell you that 62% of the people are over 40 years of age. And they are more likely from a Western culture, British, Australian, Kiwi, South Africans.

While the demographic profiles of fans may differ across markets, the psychographic and behavioral attributes are consistent. Rugby sevens fans are a vocal bunch, which is not embarrassed to express itself. *Fullback* characterises sevens fans as:

I would say a sevens spectator is more passionate and vocal and non-traditional, than what a 15s spectator would be.

*c. Brand identity/personality of WRSS*

The brand identity of rugby sevens blends the non-stop explosive action on the pitch and the entertainment or party atmosphere surrounding the events. *Fullback* states:

I think if you would describe what sevens is, it's a party atmosphere where people can dress up and have a lot of fun with their mates.

*Hooker* elaborates:

People want entertainment, don't they?... and that, historically, has been built off the party atmosphere, having fun, dynamic, fast paced, explosiveness, lots of tries, lots of great running you know, drama, you know it's that kind of action-packed side of it. It's a... it's a day out still within that context.

There is an acknowledgement that fans come for the rugby (i.e., primary consumption object) and so much more. However, if left unchecked, the party atmosphere may be problematic and may detract from the primary consumption product or propagate ignoble fandom. The need for balance is highlighted by *Flanker*:

The host unions need to make sure that they are providing an entertainment experience headlined by rugby.... you need to be careful that the entertainment experience is always headlined by the rugby (and) it doesn't get taken over by other entertainment. It's a game where a family go for a day or half a day and enjoy themselves.

*Scrum half* reiterates:

We don't shy away from the fact that we actually promote the party element of our event. But in saying that we've also got to be very measured as to how we do that, because you know, you saw some case studies particularly close to your home with Wellington...then it can actually go too far one way.

### *The Brand Governance Practices of WRSS*

Fostering close and beneficial exchanges with brand partners, developing strong collaborative ties with host cities and venues, commitment to athlete performance through care and support, adoption of strategic corporate social responsibility, championing brand co-creation, and activating social media use emerged from the data key brand governance practices on which the WRSS is built.



a. *Fostering close and beneficial exchanges with brand partners*

Interviewees underlined the importance of building enduring and beneficial exchanges with brand partners. *Prop* underscores the importance of consulting brand partners in city and venue selection:

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

*Scrum half* reiterates:

For instance - HSBC would also have a role to play in the determining factor as to where they play. So, for instance, they're not going to be interested in a market that has no HSBC, banking, investment or relationships. They can't make the overall decision, but it certainly plays a part.

Aside from showcasing their brands, formal pre-tournament functions give brand partners access to rugby executives and teams. *Flanker* elaborates:

Before the tournament, there is a teams' function on the Tuesday night, also, where all the tournament sponsors, and WR sponsors are invited. They can come along (and) meet the teams...just gives the sponsors a chance to talk to someone if they want to.

It is important to note the corporate values of these major global brand partners must align or at least complement those of the WRSS. The values rugby promotes, trust, respect, passion, solidarity and team spirit, resonate with and complements Capgemini's<sup>17</sup>. Like the top performers' award DHL sponsors, the global logistics MNE sees itself making impact through care and commitment.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.world.rugby/sevens-series/capgemini>

Local rugby unions have discretion in selecting and engaging local brand partners with whom they interact directly. *Centre* explains the intimate interaction as follows:

Some of the sponsors have direct sponsorship with teams, and they utilize players during the tournament to come and visit their hospitality space.

*Fly half* outlines the delicate challenge of managing collaborative exchanges with for example an alcohol brand.

...one of our sponsors at the time was a Brandy company, and I'm not sure if you know, Brandy and South Africa, it's quite an intertwined thing. So, what happened was the brandy garden, if I can call it that resulted in a couple of strong guys wanting to show their strength and then we realized you're going to have it at the sevens. Because the guys will just start looking for fights.

*b. Building strong and collaborative ties with host cities and venues*

The success of world rugby sevens events depends on careful selection of host cities and venues. The host rugby unions play a lead role in selecting host cities and venues. *Flanker* describes the criteria:

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

The commitment and investment host cities channel to rugby sevens events, make host cities pivotal stakeholders and focal points of brand governance practices. Fullback states:

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

This investment in an event (with tax/ratepayers money) increases a host cities commitment to the success of a WRSS event.

*c. Commitment to athlete performance through care and support*

This theme underlines the WRSS's commitment to superior athlete performance through care and support. *Scrum half* notes:

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

*Fly half* reiterates:

And that's part of the ethos of WR is trying to do (an) event that is sustainable, you are not going to lose money, you're not going to put the event in disrepute, or something happens that's not safe for the players or, you know, there's lots of things to consider.

The fitness regimen including nutrition and exercise is a fundamental component of motivating athlete performance through care and support. *Fly half* states:

The dietitian's very pedantic on the food that athletes eat, and try to spend a lot of money, making sure that there's 100% (compliance)...

*Hooker* articulates the upside of focusing on diet player safety and other markers of athlete welfare:

I think people, you know, all the stuff that we've already mentioned but actually the quality the athletes is really improving, and particularly in the female side of the game. I think that there's a real opportunity there where people become more engaged in the sevens World Series and the game of sevens through just the sheer quality and of what the athletes are about and what they do,

*d. Adoption of strategic CSR and brand enhancing activities*

The WRSS deploys scripted brand enhancing activities. The events embrace corporate social responsibility (CSR) and co-branding with a host city or country. Local rugby unions have some discretion to suggest suitable CSR-related initiatives. *Flanker* offers the following example:

We run a thing where the school can adopt a country and then two to three months before and that school learn all about the country and they'll have classes on the country and...and then they will come out and watch the training session or something; other than that a couple of buses will arrive, players will then come over and talk to them after the training session. There's a couple of handicapped children schools here, and we had NZ on the last year, go and talk to them. It's really good.

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

*Scrum half* states:

There is something that is generally done by every location. And that is a captain's call, which is involving a captain's photo, usually about three days out from the tournament. And it involves all the captains from the players in their uniform and the trophy. And we try and get it in an iconic location to take the photo. And that is generally a standard media call.

The photo shoot offers a chance to showcase what the host city offers particularly for travelling fans. Often it amounts to a sub-event or supplementary sport consumption object. *Wing* adds:

We talked about adopt-a -country. I didn't mention our second one, which is our Parade of Nations. So, rather than do that, you know, the old school way was to have the teams walk around the stadium and cheer and all this kind of stuff. But what we've done in lieu of a

captain's photo per se, is we have the teams in Las Vegas walk down Fremont Street...and the Fremont Street experience is quite unique. It's multi blocks of TV screens that are about 60 feet above your head and a whole two-lane street wide.

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

*e. Championing brand co-creation*

WRSS is a co-created brand. Co-creation is evident in the dress-ups, sing-alongs, kiss cams and ongoing interface with the host city or country. In some situations, the brand owners provoke co-creation while in others it is unprompted. *Scrum half* explains:

It is music, interaction on the big screens, dance cams, you know, all those sorts of things, you know, punters want to see themselves on the big screen. So, it's a lot as a lot of karaoke, there's a lot of big, big tunes that people can sing to.

Sport and non-sport celebrities, some of whom are avid sevens rugby fans, help co-create the brand. *Prop* describes their involvement:

So, just for example, this year 2019 we got good marketing exposure from Sébastien Chabal, ESPN France International, turning out in front of the South stand singing five hundred miles in a caveman suit.... So, it's a bit of a wow factor - I've never seen that before. We have had David Hasselhoff sing off Bay Watch song in front of the stand.

The institutional profile of host cities complements the co-creation. For example, Las Vegas and Hong Kong play contrasting roles. *Wing* describes the Las Vegas stopover:

...if you want to have a party for a weekend Vegas usually tops that list here in America. That's... that's the place you want to go. So, you go to the event, you go see a show, you come a few days earlier, you can play golf, there's a multitude of things you can do in Vegas, and it's made for that...

*Centre* depicts the contrast:

...given the Hong Kong as a vacation is very, you know, Oriental, but it's more as Western that gives you taste of like sort of an Asian culture and everything. I think, from that it attracted, a lot of teams coming across to experience Hong Kong... and Hong Kong's very good vibrant sort of nightlife gives a very international flavour across the whole city.

Thus, the co-creation culminates in a pulsating and entertaining cultural melting point. *Fly half* states:

There's so much spice in the event itself; you get the Polynesian element and what they bring to 'sevens'; you get the South Americans; you get the North Americans.....

*f. Activating social media use in brand management*

Because social media involves small chunks of attention-grabbing messaging, audio and visuals, it offers a natural fit with the WRSS. The rugby sevens game constitutes a compressed action-laden version of rugby union, which lends it to the adoption of social media. With over a million followers on Facebook and nearly 900 000 on Twitter, the significance of social media for WRSS is well-acknowledged. *Fly half* is unequivocal:

Vital, I think because it's almost a good... it's almost a natural fit in that 'sevens' is quick and social media is quick. So, we at Cape Town 'sevens' as an example, we the last two years we've done a speed tweet competition on the big screen, where you could win some very nice prizes. Because the guys are on their phones, a lot of the fans are, so it would be stupid not to engage them while they are doing what they normally do... and this scroll through (habit) on their phones and stuff. But that's the in-stadium activation, deliberate one to engage the people on their mobiles.

The popularity of social media platforms and the fact that in some markets the *World Rugby Sevens Series* targets the younger demographic, further underscores its potential as an engagement tool. *Centre* states:

On the broadcast and social media, yes that has grown. And it can be probably be attributed to organic growth, because there are more people that are engaging and activating on phones and iPads and everything else. So, I think it's also the investment that both the host unions, sponsors and WR are putting online as well.

*Scrum half* continues:

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

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

But then it's being smart, with the non-live engagement elements, and it's feeding that back in short form digestible format that people can engage with, after the live experience as well. And when I talk about the live experience, if they're not going to watch it live on TV, because it's the middle of the night, can you give them short form easily digestible options to consume what has happened when they come back.

Uptake of social media by athletes varies across markets and *Wing* suggests USA's WRSS players are exemplary:

Yeah, social media is very, very, very important from a marketing strategy. And it's a great outreach. And it's easy for players in the USA to do, you know, we'll ask them to do a little bit of a shout out, and they're more than willing to do that.

*g. Provision of a 360° Feedback Loop*

As a tournament ends, it initiates a fresh sequence of brand governance practices. This is made possible by a feedback loop focusing on the event hosts, players, and team managers. *Fullback* explains:

Post tournament there is a survey that's sent out, there is a tournament survey, so the Hamilton tournament will send to the team managers for feedback on logistics. And then the International Players Association will then send a survey out to the players for their feedback on the tournament as well.

*Prop* reiterates:

So we've got, we call it a 360 degree feedback mechanism.... when we actually get into the hosting side of things, after each leg of the series there is quite a comprehensive feedback.... it's (feedback) captured in multiple different ways.

The feedback loop post-event audits provide is not mere tokenism. It is the basis for continuous improvement on multiple fronts embracing event management, fan experience, and athlete welfare. *Wing* summarises this as follows:

And so, I look forward to that every year, because you want to keep fine tuning your events to make as many people happy as possible...

## **Discussion**

Professionalism and acquisition of legitimacy through the Olympics, served as the cornerstones to the development of the sevens brand. Rugby sevens employed professionalism to rid itself of the perception of being an inferior version of rugby union. Professionalism laid the foundation to attract superior athlete, global sponsors and broadcast partners. This is consistent with *Global Sport/Consumer Culture 3.0*: the “ongoing transnational hyper-commodification phase since the early 1990s” (Giulianotti & Numerato 2018, p. 231). Similarly, gaining



acceptance to or hosting the Olympics augments legitimacy (see Tomlinson, 2010) in much the same way as opening a foreign subsidiary or obtaining foreign exchange listing does for a traditional multinational brand. Our findings are consistent with past studies documenting the impact of professionalism (e.g., Chadwick, 2009; Giulianotti & Numerato, 2018) and the Olympics (e.g., Davis, 2012) on the growth of sports brands.

**Figure 2:** A synthesis of brand governance practices, fit here

Figure 2 provides a digest of the branding activities of the WRSS. To fully appreciate the brand governance practices, one must consider the primary consumption object, the target market segment and the distinctiveness of the sports brand. These aspects set the parameters within which brand governance practices occur. While, increasingly, the WRSS offers variety, the rugby matches played in each tournament constitute the primary consumption object. The talent on show, the up-tempo free flowing end-to-end action, and frequent scoring, all compressed in a comparatively short game, regularly culminate in nail-biting finishes. The resultant outcome uncertainty drives fan involvement and engagement with a sport consumption object. This explanation aligns with past research (Forrest et al., 2005; Hogan et al., 2017), which underscores the significance of energetic action and outcome uncertainty in increasing fan engagement with a sports brand.

The WRSS market segments diverge from other sports' segments. For instance, one segment comprises fans in their 20s with an interest in the live action and additional activities occurring at the end of each day's play. Families with young children also patronise WRSS events. In some of the stops on the circuit, rugby sevens appeals to an expatriate segment. This is especially noticeable in destinations with a prominent expatriate population such as Dubai, Hong Kong or Singapore. The existence of such segments demands meticulous brand governance activities to set a single global standard without overlooking the local. This is compatible with past research (e.g., Kenyon et al., 2018; Smith & Stewart, 2007) highlighting

the centrality of a consistent high-quality core product especially for international recurring sports event.

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

Astute brand governance practices safeguard against dilution or inadvertent hijacking of the WRSS brand. At times, it is tough to completely extricate the WRSS from disorderly conduct, drunkenness and other forms of ignoble fandom. We concur with Gee et al. (2016, p.280) on the imperative to rein in on or provide soft boundaries around “the ritualized pageantry and carnivalesque culture”, which is often culpable for value co-destruction (Kim et al., 2020). To counter this, WRSS attempts to foster the image of a rebellious brand but one that is also responsible. Scripted brand enhancing activities are instrumental in cultivating that sense of accountability. We corroborate recent research (e.g., Kim & Manoli, 2020) outlining the importance of strategic CSR and corporate philanthropy to sports branding. Notwithstanding the close match between the WRSS and social media, its adoption is viewed more as an opportunity than an accomplishment. This is consistent with extant research (e.g., Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Taks et al., 2020), which bemoans the lack of an integrated social media strategy in sports marketing.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

Responding to multiple recent calls for additional research on brand governance in and through sport (Manoli, 2020a; Manoli, 2020b; Parent et al., 2012; Taks et al., 2020), we examine the brand governance practices associated with the international recurring sporting event of the *World Rugby Sevens Series*. We demonstrate how the WRSS has strategically relied on government agencies, fans and sponsors for their resources and the process that have been followed to build and sustain the value of the brand over time. From a marginal sport perceived as the proving ground for rugby union, rugby sevens and the WRSS brand continues to grow. That tournaments are played across five of the six inhabitable continents speaks to the WRSS’s global reach. Professionalism and recognition as an Olympic sport partly explain the increasing international stature of rugby, so too does the involvement of benevolent sponsors as global

partners. Brand governance practices in the WRSS derive from the delineation of the primary consumption object, specification of market segments. Amidst the multiple consumption objects and sports products, the rugby matches are considered the primary drawcard. The short fast-paced matches with free-flowing action, provide the edge-of-the-seat entertainment, while capitalizing on attention economics. Three segments, the young (18-25), young families (generally under 40), and expatriates/sports tourists of various age groups, patronise the WRSS. Across all three segments the fandom is a loud and proud bunch, a characterisation congruent with the profile and persona of WRSS as an atypical brand. The unique international taste various national teams and their partisan fans bring to each event contributes to the co-creation of a brash, rebellious or non-conformist brand.

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

consumption constellation, that provokes and sustains interest and excitement. On the other hand, misconduct, unruly behaviour and drunkenness threaten to besmirch the brand and to discourage one of the segments (young families) from supporting the events.

Scripted brand enhancing activities help modify the perception of the WRSS from that of a reckless to a responsible brand. The corporate social responsibility and philanthropy initiatives with schools and the underprivileged help alter the narrative. We note though that branding in WRSS remains concentrated on the parent or association brand with much less focus on either team or athlete brands. In sport codes where team brands are highly visible, a storied winning history (see Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Wetzel et al., 2018) going back 100 years often precedes the teams. With only a 20-year history, the successful teams participating in the WRSS (e.g., Fiji, New Zealand, and Samoa) are still decades removed from developing such a legacy. Likewise, the athlete brand is not a focal point for the WRSS brand. In combination, these two elements probably explain the limited utilization of social media in that it is difficult to fully exploit social media without invoking the venerable history of team brands or the iconic stature of star athletes. Thus, the leverage effect (see Wetzel et al., 2018), which partly explains the prosperity of major sports brands, is yet to manifest in the WRSS. Our study comes with limitations. Our dissection of branding practices is descriptive and lacks causal relationships. It would be informative to extend this study by adding testable outcome variables to establish the impact of these practices on brand equity or preference for the WRSS brand. We approached brand governance from the brand owner's perspective and set aside the input from fans, global partners and host cities. Sampling these participants provides a diverse view and a more rigorous form of triangulation. For instance, the question of whether rugby matches are the primary consumption object or how rugby is positioned relative other entertainment and sportainment options can only be answered definitively when the fans' perspective is included. Nonetheless, we have provided initial insights to stimulate additional

research on brand governance practices in the context of the international recurring sporting event of World Rugby Sevens Series.

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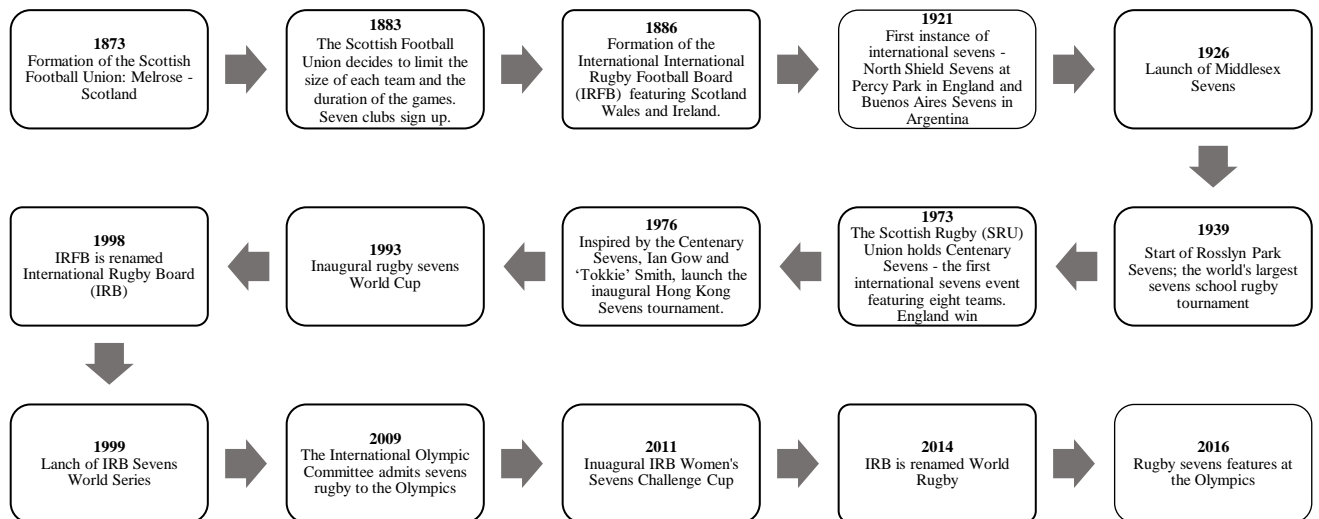
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**Table 1:** Overview of Interviewees

<b>Geographic Market</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Role/Responsibility</b>	<b>Respondent Codes</b>	<b>Respondent Pseudonym</b>
Australia	1	Rugby Australia	2	Hooker
Hong Kong	1	Hong Kong 7s	4	Prop
New Zealand	1	New Zealand Rugby New Zealand Rugby Players Association	5	Flanker
South Africa	2	Rugby South Africa	6,7	Fly half, scrum half
United Arab Emirates	1	Dubai 7s	3	Centre
United States of America	1	USA 7s	8	Wing
World Rugby	1	World Rugby	1	Fullback



**Figure 1:** A Brief History of Rugby Sevens

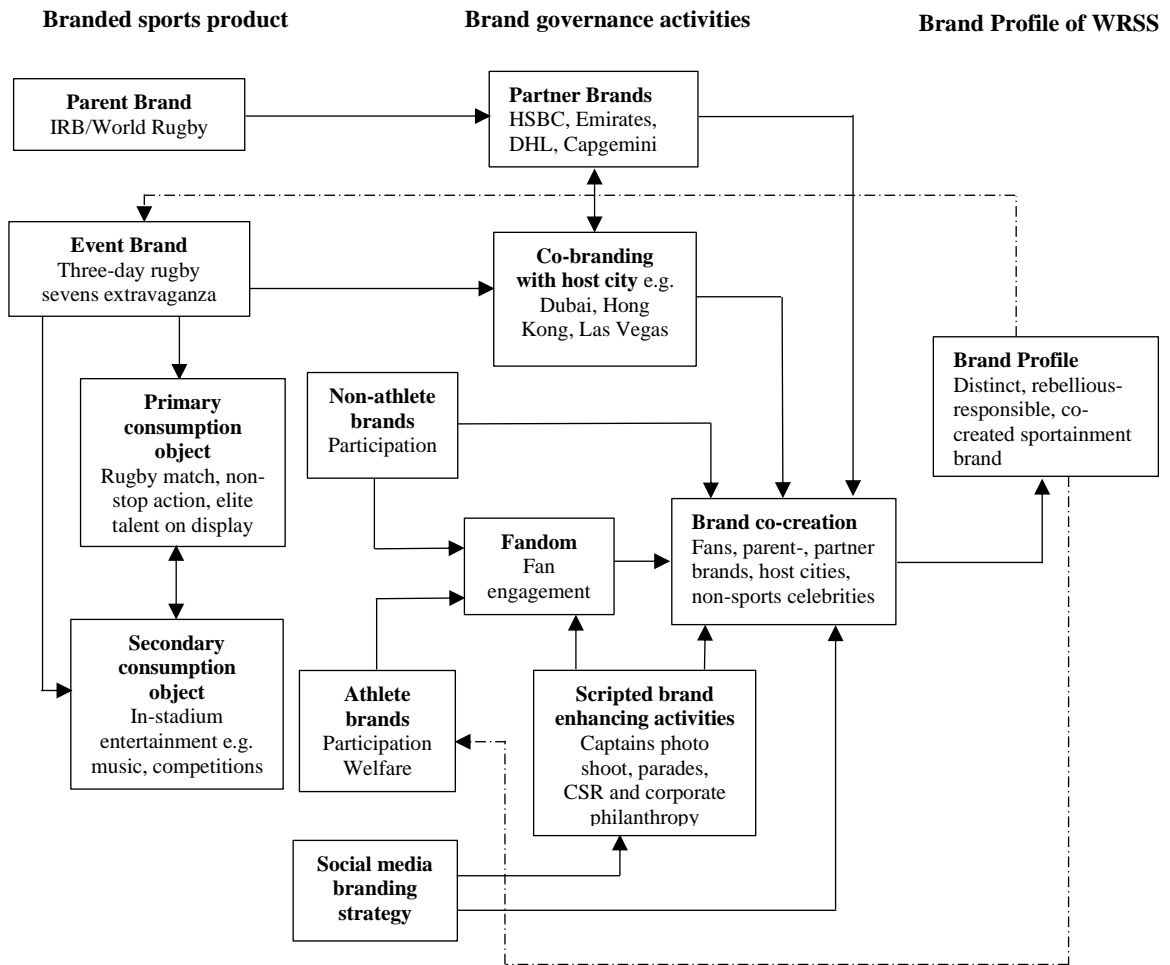


Figure 2: Synthesis of Branding Activities of Rugby Sevens Series