This paper demonstrates a multi-methodological approach to understanding brand creation in an international sports event. It describes use of Parent et al.’s model and outlines how Beer’s Viable Systems Model provides complementary insights about branding and organizational processes suggesting revision of Parent's model for the Sevens Wellington event.

KEYWORDS: sports events, brand creation/identity, organizational design, systems thinking

INTRODUCTION

The paper reports on one strand of a multi-methodological research project examining the branding process – brand creation and brand identity – within a large international recurring sports event. The paper focuses on the specific case context of the annual two-day Sevens Wellington rugby tournament in New Zealand. The Wellington tournament, which has been held in February each year since 2000, is part of what is now known as the World Rugby Sevens Series, consisting of ten tournaments in ten countries, played on annual basis. The Sevens Wellington tournament marks round five of the World Rugby Sevens Series and over fifteen years has become one of NZ's most popular sporting events. Popular with players and known for its unique ‘carnival’ atmosphere, the event has traditionally attracted high spectator numbers. Yet in 2014, 2015 and 2016, the event struggled to achieve a ‘ticket sellout’ as before, and also struggled to meet its sponsorship goals, perhaps amongst other factors, due to a decline in brand strength.

This paper first outlines the development and use of Parent et al’s (2012) conceptual framework as a lens to examine branding issues: brand and identity creation for the Sevens Wellington event (aka the Sevens). The framework also encompasses organizational variables, and addresses notions and issues related to organizational structure, governance and management. These inter-related organizational and branding issues provide a rationale for adopting a multi-methodological approach to understanding such issues and how they may addressed. Beer’s Viable Systems Model (VSM) (1974, 1979, 1981) was considered to provide an alternative and complementary set of perspectives on such matters, and was used alongside Parent et al’s 2012 framework to constitute an appropriate multi-methodological approach to both branding and organizational design.

A companion paper (Harrison & Davies, 2016) has demonstrated the wider benefits of the multi-methodological approach (Davies et al, 2004) to understand the inter-relatedness of effective brand creation and underpinning organization-related factors. In this paper, we show how insights from the use of Beer’s VSM lead to proposed revision in the Parent et al (2012) model of brand creation.
The paper proceeds with some background on the sport of rugby and Rugby Sevens. Then following a brief overview of relevant literature, it sketches Parent et al.’s brand creation conceptual model (2012). The paper then provides a parsimonious description of Beer’s VSM (1974, 1979, 1981), as a prelude to offering a selective VSM diagnosis and analysis of findings from the brand creation study relevant to the Sevens organization. A subsequent section which draws on those findings identifies variables and constructs that beneficially complement Parent et al.’s 2012 model, before proposing revisions to the model that impact its diagnostic potential.

BACKGROUND

The sport of Rugby Union is a sport played globally by men and women, with more than one hundred countries playing in the quadrennial 15-aside Rugby World Cup (RWC) and its qualifying matches. Although the game of Sevens was first played more than one hundred years ago amongst amateur clubs in the United Kingdom, the modern sport played by elite athletes at international level, is relatively new. However, the recent growth is such that in 2016, Rugby Sevens, for men and women, will be part of the Olympic Games in Rio. 15-aside rugby last featured in the Olympic Games in 1924, when the USA XV won Gold. The Sevens tournament in NZ forms part of the World Series Olympic Qualifying process. The responsibility for delivering the Sevens tournament had been devolved to the Wellington Rugby Football Union (WRFU, 2014a) by the New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU), the governing body for rugby union in NZ. The Sevens organization is headed by a General Manager, but is, in all respects, a virtual organization. It must deliver the Sevens as a tournament event, as an entertainment event, and as a stadium experience. It has an Advisory Board that comprises representatives of the NZRU (2014a, b), WRFU, the Wellington Regional Stadium Trust – as the stadium venue host, and Wellington City Council – as a major sponsor etc. Sevens is expected to make a significant return on investment to its owners – the NZRU, and its partners – but the seemingly insatiable demand for event tickets that initially sold out in minutes, then hours, then days, no longer exists. The Sevens brand had seemingly changed and diminished in strength, and the virtual organization had limited resources, no capital funding base, and no formal governing board to fill a stewardship role to give direction to the organization.

PRIOR and RELATED WORK

Brands and Branding

For detailed coverage of prior work examining the concept of ‘brand’ and its importance in differentiating a product or service, creating value, and marketing a specific set of features, benefits or experiences, readers are referred to Kotler & Keller (2012), Parent & Séguin (2008), Shank (2009). With respect to the sports event domain addressed in this paper, we note that recent sports event and management literature has generally focused on the external antecedents that contribute to building sports events brands, such as benefits, ‘consumer motives and increasing spectator attendance (Funk et al., 2009). An exception has been the research by Parent and Séguin (2008), who developed a model of brand creation for international large scale one-off sporting events, based on the process of sports events’ identity construction previously proposed by Parent and Foreman (2007). Parent et al. (2012) then extended these models for the evaluation of international recurring sports events, and for application in the Northern hemisphere. Unfortunately, there is little research that examines brand creation for sports events in the New Zealand (NZ) context, let alone events so closely associated with the brand
of NZ’s national game, rugby.
The wider research, of which this paper represents one strand, sought to address a gap in the literature by examining the inter-relationships between the four referents of Parent et al.’s (2012) model of brand creation for a recurring international sports event in a NZ context – the Sevens rugby tournament. The referents include, but are not limited to: (a) the importance of the LG, (b) the context, (c) the nature of the event, and (d) the induced event experience.

In the following sections we further sketch Parent et al.’s theoretical framework, focusing on a selective review of the literature relating to concepts of brand knowledge and the referents of Parent et al.’s (2012 model. The findings are then presented, analysed and discussed in the context of Stafford Beer’s Viable Systems Model – the VSM (Beer, 1979, 1981; Brocklesby et al., 1995; Davies, 2002). Finally, a revised conceptual model of brand creation for the Sevens event is provided along with concluding comments. First, we outline the nature of Parent et al.’s 2012 Model of Brand Creation.

Parent et al.’s (2012) Model of Brand Creation

The evolution of Parent et al.’s (2012) model of brand creation is briefly addressed in a companion paper (Harrison & Davies, 2016). Here, we merely sketch the scene for its development. Suffice to say that the branding of recurring international sports events has interest on several counts, for example: temporal - that aspects of branding must be sustained over time for the recurring event, and societal/cultural - that branding can, and perhaps should accommodate the changing international markets and venues. In a sense, there is an international and a local or domestic dimension to branding (Parent et al., 2012).

The 2012 model of event brand creation is depicted in Figure 1. We continue with a sketch of complementary literature relating to the model’s referents and their antecedents conceptualized in the model. These referents include the leadership group (LG), the context, the nature of the event, and the induced event experience.

Figure 1. Parent et al.’s 2012 Brand Creation Model for International Recurring Sports Events

The Leadership Group (LG) - Parent et al. (2012) assert that building a strong brand, and a quality event which satisfies stakeholder needs, requires strong leadership. They have found that effective leadership encompasses a spectrum of skills and attributes: political skills and connections to manage stakeholder relationships; ability to manage a volunteer force; the drive, aptitude and ability to set and maintain high technical standards and a hunger to improve; and
also, a leader’s or Leadership Group (LG) “commitment and passion for the event, sport and associated and inherent values.”

As such the skills and attributes were considered to span political and networking skills, management skills, sports / event skills and values-based actions. Other concepts of particular importance surfaced in the literature have also been embraced, and include stakeholder management (Parent, Olver, & Séguin, 2009; Yukl, 2002), and strategic direction and planning (Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996).

The Context - The second referent of Parent et al.’s (2012) model encapsulates the context of the event. Whilst a sound strategic direction and planning process represents, in essence, the internal environment that underpins the LG’s efforts, and shapes and drives the creation of the brand, Parent et al. (2012) conceptualize the event context as moderating the initial creation of the event by the LG. Having a good understanding of the context of the event is also vitally important, and would include factors such as the sporting and economic environment, the full spectrum of media, technology and culture (Emery, 2010), as well as the local or domestic market environment (Gladden et al., 1998).

The Nature of the Event - The third referent of Parent et al.’s (2012) model is the nature of the event. Factors, here, that act as a catalyst for brand creation include: the standing and recognition of sport in the host region; the presence or absence of a worldwide brand for the sport; and previous event success, media coverage, geographical location, event history and impact. Institutional arrangements and the recurring nature of the event have also been identified to be key factors (Parent & Séguin, 2008; Ross, 2006).

Induced Event Experience - Based on the notion that the strategic construction of the sport brand can only happen after its identity is shaped (Richelieu, 2004), Parent et al. included in their 2012 model an additional referent, ‘induced event experience’. This construct is allied to the evolution of the brand, in as much as evolution represents fine-tuning activities following event execution and debriefing.

Whilst the primary product of the sports industry is the competition that occurs at a sporting event, increasingly, activities - before, during and after the actual competition - are becoming more ‘entertainment’ oriented, providing sports consumers with a “diverting or engaging” spectacle or a different kind of ephemeral experience (Shank, 2009, p. 4). In addition, the sporting nature of an event, in itself, is largely associated with, and adds to the spectrum of intangible and subjective features that influence customer patronage decisions.

This precis of the literature for the wider study has addressed concepts related to brand knowledge; suggested an evolution toward Parent et al.’s (2012) model of brand creation for recurring international sporting events; and summarized the conceptual rationale for the four referents that undergird the model. We also note that the concepts of consumer motives, orientation towards a sports event, and service quality, and then their subsequent effect on behavioural consequences could be appropriately integrated within the context of the ‘induced event experience’ referent. It has also been noted that establishing dynamic feedback between the LG referent and ‘context’, rather than just a moderating effect, would also have potential to enhance the model.

In summary, restating the importance of understanding, reacting and adapting dynamically to the environment, to context, to stakeholders – spectators, consumers etc; and making appropriate use of communication channels and information for feedback, all pointed towards endorsement of Beer’s VSM as a complementary framework for interpretation of the Sevens case data (Angen, 2000). As such, Beer’s VSM was seen as not only likely to provide a complementary perspective on the Sevens organization and Sevens event, but also to offer interpretation and insight about whether important matters surfaced by VSM diagnosis could be accommodated within an enhanced Parent et’s 2012 model.
**The Viable Systems Model**

A detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of the VSM is not within the scope of this paper, but can be found in Beer (1979, 1981), Brocklesby et al (1995), Brocklesby and Cummings (1996). However, a brief outline of key notions is provided. Beer has conceptualized a viable system as sharing a network of communication channels bonding five complementary sub-systems (Davies, 2013). Beer (1959) suggests that the five sub-systems - identified as also existing in other viable organisms, for example, the brain and body - and the appropriate feedback and information flows that connect those sub-systems, are necessary to facilitate self-adaptive viability. The five sub-systems whose effective systemic functioning and communication links are necessary for organizational viability, are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: The VSM – Sub-systems and Systemic Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-systems</th>
<th>Functions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1 Operations</td>
<td>autonomous operational units that act out the very identity and purpose of the overall system, doing what the system is designed to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-System</td>
<td>comprising four other sub-systemic functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5 Identity</td>
<td>the creation and promulgation of identity, values, purpose or raison d’être, vision, direction and mission, throughout the organization and its wider environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4 Intelligence</td>
<td>strategy development serving the organization's future; focusing on the future and external environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3 Resourcing</td>
<td>operational planning, resourcing, formal reporting, regulation, control and audit functions relating to the autonomous units; focusing on the inside and now of the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3* Monitoring</td>
<td>informal monitoring of culture, performance, risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2 Coordination</td>
<td>effecting overall coordination of autonomous units, ensuring autonomous operational units work in harmony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Environment: VSM recognition and capture of the environment within the model is necessary to reflect the domain of action for the organization, and to contextualise or ground the internal interactions of the organization.

Adapted from Davies (2013) and Brocklesby and Cummings (1996)

Figure 3: Stafford Beer’s Viable Systems Model
These sub-systems may also be capable of viability. As such, viable systems are recursive; that is, viable systems contain embedded viable systems that can be modeled using an identical cybernetic description as the higher (and lower) level systems in the wider systems hierarchy. The Sevens organization is presented in Figure 3 as a schematic representation of the VSM. Its cybernetic or systemic strengths are then examined via VSM diagnosis. The VSM framework was used as a lens to provide a systems perspective on key issues that had surfaced in the findings of the wider brand creation study, and that have been identified in the literature.

**FINDINGS - THE SEVENS WELLINGTON ORGANIZATION AND THE VSM FRAMEWORK**

In conceptualizing and representing the Sevens organization as the system of interest – aka the System in Focus (SIF), we note that it is also regarded as a nested S1 unit of the WRFU system, which in turn is embedded as a S1 unit within the NZRU system. Within the Sevens system, and certainly within its own embedded S1 units covering tournament operations, entertainment and stadium operations/experience, it may not be surprising to find silo effects in evidence. However, the VSM presentation makes it more readily obvious that considerations of coordination are now seen to encompass elements across different logical levels, recursion or nestedness, of the overall system; and also between elements at the same level of recursion – highlighting, in a different way, not only the complexity of coordination functions, but the difficulty in attending to silo effects.

**Figure 4: The Sevens Wellington System – a Viable System Model and Diagnosis**

Key issues that had surfaced in the findings of the wider brand creation study, related not only to matters underpinning successful brand development facing the Sevens organization, but also to the organization itself, and to environmental forces and factors. As such, elements of Parent et al.’s (2008) model of brand creation were reconceptualized and reinterpreted using the VSM model (see Figure 4), especially to highlight matters that may reflect organizational
effectiveness. These matters include systemic role conflict, systemic overlap in functional duties, and/or systemic gaps or weaknesses matters within the organization or wider system. As an overview of findings, we note that at the time of the study, there was an absence of S2 and S5 functionality within the wider system relating to the Sevens system-in-focus, and its S1 operations. In particular, there was a seeming lack of S2 coordination within the WRFU system, with limitations in the policy framework provided to Sevens and less than adequate direction about means of resolving minor incongruencies arising from the sub-optimal local objectives of tournament, stadium and entertainment S1 operations. The S2 systemic weakness associated with the wider WRFU system, has impacted on the Sevens event as a S1 sub-system of the WRFU, and on the Sevens event as a possible viable system in its own right.

Such matters and other key activities manifesting as the meta-systemic functions are shown as annotations in Figure 4 as illustration of VSM thinking. They are referred to in more detail in the companion paper (Harrison & Davies, 2016).

REVISED CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR BRAND CREATION AT SEVENS WELLINGTON

In light of the research findings and interpretation of the Sevens brand creation ‘system’ using the VSM framework, a revised conceptual model of brand creation is proposed and presented below (see Figure 5). The key insights portrayed within the revised model reflect a need to distinguish or differentiate the S5 values-creation, vision-making and strategy determination functions, from Parent et al’s (2012) all embracing categorization of leadership antecedents; and to identify them explicitly as governance functions. These revisions help make an articulation and dissemination of organizational values, governance and strategic direction, more explicit.

Figure 5. Revised Conceptual Model of Brand Creation for Sevens

The development of an overarching S5 identity and long-term vision as a governance function, has been separated out, in the revised model. In addition, insights from VSM diagnosis that highlight the importance of the dynamic systemic interplay between strategic and operational planning, scanning and interpreting the external environment, are also incorporated. As such, the S5 function, and especially the notions of creating and disseminating organizational values, effectively provide an organizational context for activities of the LG. Allied with S5 strategic choice and strategy determination, the S4 strategising and intelligence function - which has a role in identifying long-term strategic trends and factors in the macro environment - is also depicted in the revised model by a new feedback loop with the ‘context’
antecedents.

Other erstwhile leadership activities are also reflected in the revised model by their interplay with the LG. In addition, a feedback loop between ‘internal stakeholders’ and S5 functions has been created to capture not only the essence of S3* informal monitoring and episodic intelligence gathering, but also S2 coordination functions.

The S4 intelligence function is reflected in the revised model mainly within the LG element, but also by the feedback loop with the ‘context’ and ‘nature’ antecedents. Being able to proactively identify trends and amend strategic positioning appropriately is a key skill. More localised trends within the environment that capture changes in ‘institutional affiliation’ and reflect an event’s ‘history, success and impact’, are captured in the model by the ‘nature of event’ construct. An additional factor, ‘ritual behavior’, is proposed as a further refinement to the revised model, given the impact that behavior can have on an event of this nature, in general, and the Sevens event, in particular.

Within the local Wellington environment, understanding the target audience is also vitally important. This facet is captured within the revised model by the proposed addition of several antecedents linked to what we may regard as the ‘induced event experience’ referent, such as: ‘behavioural intent’ and ‘perceived service quality’. A systemic feedback loop between ‘spectators’ within the external stakeholder grouping is also suggested to emphasize the importance of information sharing and flow. These communication flows can be conceptualized as part of the S3* monitoring function.

The S4 strategising function reflects activities conducted by the LG and is depicted by the two-directional arrows linking to the S5 governance element. The ability, or requisite variety, of the S4 function to manage all such inputs and requirements, to innovate, and also lead structured change, will impact the ultimate creation and success of the event brand.

Within the proposed revised model, the LG also have responsibilities for S3 resourcing, planning and control functions. These include marketing and planning functions in as much as they relate to resourcing the creation of the Sevens brand. They also include helping shape the environment for the event; and enabling the effective functioning of S1 units – entertainment, tournament and stadium operations. As depicted within the LG antecedents, there is a grouping of S3-related skillsets which are required in order to create a successful brand, in particular S3 marketing support and S3 commercial/sponsorship management skill-sets.

The interplay between S4 intelligence function, S1 operations, and the environment are reflected in the revised model by the interplay of the ‘event brand’ and ‘internal/external stakeholders’ (including media) – which elements have been separated out to provide greater clarity.

External stakeholder attitudes towards the brand may not only include perceptions of service quality held by spectators and sponsors (as stakeholders), but may also be expressed in terms of their behavioural intent. If so, the LG then needs to have access to an effective S3* monitoring system of appropriate requisite variety, in order to be able to conduct ad hoc market research and surveys, as and when required, to understand how perceptions of the brand may have changed as a result of induced event experience or as a result of media coverage.

The perceptions of internal stakeholders will also have an impact on the strengthening/weakening and pervasiveness of organizational values, and this is depicted by a new feedback loop in the revised model. The media, as a distinctive stakeholder group, has been separated out, and re-orientated to highlight the impact that media can have on a number of referents.

In summary, the foregoing has attempted to convey how and why the proposed model accommodates and revises Parent et al’s (2012) model, especially with respect to its underpinning contextual, LG (governance) and organising committee antecedents.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined and demonstrated use of Parent et al’s (2012) conceptual framework as a lens to examine branding issues: brand and identity creation for the *Sevens Wellington* event. It was noted that the framework also encompasses organizational variables, and addresses matters related to organizational structure, governance and management. These inter-related organizational and branding issues provided a rationale for adopting a multi-methodological approach to understanding such matters and how they may be addressed. Beer’s Viable Systems Model – VSM - (1974, 1979, 1981) was considered to provide an alternative and complementary set of perspectives on such matters, and was used alongside Parent et al’s 2012 framework to constitute an appropriate multi-methodological approach to examining both branding and organizational design.

The paper reports on a study which was part of a wider project which examined brand issues in large international recurring sports event, and which drew primarily on the brand creation and brand identity model developed by Parent et al (2007, 2008). A companion paper (Harrison & Davies, 2016) has demonstrated the wider benefits of the multi-methodological approach to understand the inter-relatedness of effective brand creation and underpinning organization-related factors. Here, we also demonstrate that the benefits can extend to the use of one methodological framework informing conceptual developments in the other. In this case, we have shown how insights from the use of Beer’s VSM lead to proposed revision in the Parent et al (2012) model of brand creation.

In respect of understanding broader branding issues for the *Sevens* event, the findings reported in the companion paper (Harrison & Davies, 2016) indicated the relative importance of several factors – both organizational and brand related - in the management of the *Sevens* brand. In the revised model, for example, the importance of the dynamic interplay between planning/scanning and interpreting the external environment has been made more explicit, and elements from the literature review and key themes from the research findings have also been incorporated.

In summary, the work reported in this paper is part of a wider study that has not only contributed to sport specific event management knowledge that relates to brand creation and brand identity, not only contributed to understanding systemic functions that underpin successful branding processes, and underpin organizational effectiveness, but also to methodological and conceptual developments.

In this respect, we state that the benefits of a multi-methodological approach have been extended beyond use of one model to inform use of another; beyond use of insights from one model to inform insights derived from the other; and to include the conceptual development of one model using insights developed from the other.

REFERENCES


