The "authenticitude" battle in action sports: A case-based industry perspective

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ABSTRACT

The expanding and often unregulated status of the action sports setting has resulted in mainstream athletic companies diversifying their products in order to portray an authentic image and establish their market presence. The influx of mainstream brands has created a new paradigm in the industry and further pressure on core action sports brands regarding their competitiveness in a highly antagonistic environment. Through a descriptive case study, 13 in-person interviews were performed with a private action sports company's employees in order to examine their perceptions relative to the organization being authentic while expanding to mainstream markets. This occurred through identification of the enterprise's true identity and deconstruction of its authenticity based on participants' responses, which were categorized in five properties (i.e., essence of enterprise, nature of offerings, effects of heritage, sense of purpose, and body of values). Varying perspectives on each of the five elements were uncovered and discussed. Outcomes illustrated the need for a new management imperative, where action sports organizations should not only comprehend the essence of originality within their identity, but also how to render consumer's perception of authenticity.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, there has been a rapid growth of the action sports industry, although quite chaotic compared to the mainstream sport setting. Action sports have expanded significantly, but not too long ago marketers realized the powerful connotation the terms *alternative* or *action* hold, especially for youth markets. As far as their relative definition is concerned, action sports are "an eclectic collection of risky, individualistic, and alternative sports such as skateboarding, BMX biking, surfing, street luge, wakeboarding, and motocross" (Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004, p. 239). They have also been termed *extreme*, *alternative*, *lifestyle*, *whiz*, *panic sport*, *post-modern*, *post-industrial*, and *new sports* (Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2007). Among different expressions commonly used to describe activities that either ideologically or practically provide alternatives to traditional sports and mainstream values (Rinehart, 2008), the representative and all-encompassing term action sports is utilized throughout this paper.

During the past decade, television and corporate sponsors recognized the vast potential of action sports in attracting a young male audience (see Bennett, Henson, & Zhang, 2003). As such, mainstream companies instantly sought to associate

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with the alternative and extreme "do-it-yourself" image of the rider/boarder to cross-promote a variety of products, such as apparel lines and cultural events (Gonzalez, 2011). Media corporations, including ESPN and NBC, have capitalized on the growing popularity of action sports via events such as the X Games and the Mountain Dew Action Sports Tour. For instance, ESPN's X Games are televised in approximately 200 countries. In 2013, the event was hosted in Brazil, Germany, and Spain as part of the network's global expansion ("ESPN International Fact," 2013). In relation to the indisputable growth of action sports globally, Kellett and Russell (2009) noted that the action sports industry has seen an organic and almost chaotic growth in comparison to mainstream sports, as they often function outside a formal business environment. Interestingly, there are few barriers for entry into the action sports industry due to the absence of leagues or governing bodies regulating action sports, a fact that constitutes both an opportunity and a challenge for the action sports world (McKelvey, 2012).

The evolution of action sports has triggered a growing interest of younger consumers and their parents in sports that have an alternative and unconventional character and ethos. This increasing popularity has resulted in mainstream athletic companies diversifying their products in order to portray an authentic image and capture a share of this lucrative business. Nike, for example, has repeatedly attempted to break into the action sports setting. Before releasing its skateboarding line in 2002, Nike marketed skateboarding shoes twice and failed. Donnelly (2008) discussed how the company faced formidable challenges entering the skateboarding shoe market due to affiliation with mainstream sports such as basketball and baseball, and their lack of association with skateboarding. To this end, Grayson and Martinec (2004) noted consumers may become suspicious or reserved if they perceive elements of authenticity have been purposefully manipulated for making profit. The difference now is that Nike has a limited distribution to skate shops, it sponsors grassroots skateboarding contests, and several of Nike's staff members in skateboarding are recruited from the core action sports industry (Gomez, 2012).

Action sports have undergone an evolution subjected inevitably to the major forces of commercialization (Thorpe, 2006). The gradual influx of mainstream athletic entities, such as Nike and Adidas, has created further tension in the overall action sports setting. As a result of this somewhat sudden upsurge and following demand from mainstream markets, alternative sport subcultures have expressed concerns about the "selling out" of companies in the field (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010). Evidently, there are conflicting dynamics between alternative sport participants who want to preserve and control authenticity of their sports as they become commoditized, and the corporate world that gradually takes ownership and wants to present these sports as mainstream (Honea, 2004). Thus, core entities have been striving to comprehend the nature and process of change in action sports consumption communities, and, simultaneously, maintain a delicate balance between addressing needs of core consumers and expanding to mainstream markets. The goal of the market expansion strategy is to attract new customers to existing products (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 1994). A major challenge in market expansion strategies is converting non-customers of a certain industry into customers. Consequently, the increased commercial appeal of action sports and the resulting entry of mainstream participants/consumers into the subsequent alternative communities have impacted definitions of authenticity in core subcultures.

Marketers are increasingly recognizing the sociocultural aspects of branding and the pivotal role of authenticity within an enterprise's image and marketing mix (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Although researchers have investigated the consumption context of action sports from a consumer (e.g., Bennett et al., 2003; Bennett & Lachowetz, 2004; Cianfrone & Zhang, 2006) and subcultural participation perspective (e.g., Beal & Wilson, 2004; Rinehart, 2008; Thorpe, 2006; Wheaton, 2004), there is a need for pragmatic insight into the corporate management aspect of the industry. The imperative of authenticity will dominate managerial attention in action sports, and the vitality of brands will result from "the individual and collective ability of businesses to master the discipline of authenticity" (Gilmore & Pine, 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, the dynamic status of the action sports setting, which is constantly transformed due to the gradual entry of mainstream entities, has resulted in the formation of new standards of authenticity and a continuous expansion to mainstream by core action sports brands. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine perspectives of a private action sports entity's employees with regard to the organization being authentic while opening up to mainstream markets. This was accomplished via a case study of the Board Sports Company (BSC) based on information-rich insight provided by a diverse sample of its employees. Participants' responses relative to the organization's perceived authenticity formulated the foundation of deconstructing BSC's identity.

2. Theoretical perspectives on authenticity

Often regarded as the cornerstone of modern marketing (Kozinets, 2001), authenticity is a multilayered, polysemous, and complex concept that is subjective and socially constructed (Beverland, 2005; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Quester, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2006). From a branding perspective, authenticity is an individual assessment by consumers of whether a brand is legitimate or genuine and has a sense of quality that emerges from their own experiences (Cohen, 1988). From a sociological perspective, an authentic subculture has been defined in opposition to the inauthentic, mass-produced, commercial mainstream, or dominant culture (Wheaton, 2007). Foundationally, consumers construct authenticity because they are motivated to realize associated benefits such as sense of escape, feelings of assuredness, and connection with the past (Rose & Wood, 2005). According to Beverland and Farrelly (2010), "consumers actively seek authenticity to find meaning in their lives, and in line with associated personal goals prefer brands that reinforce their desired identity" (p. 839). Since notions of authenticity are socially constructed, consumer expressions of authenticity often reflect wider social norms (Beverland, 2005).