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**BRANDING A NICHE SPORTS CLUB. A CASE
STUDY OF SIVAS KANGALS RUGBY FC**

**BRENDIRANJE NIŠNEGA ŠPORTNEGA KLUBA:
ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA SIVAS KANGALS RUGBY
FC**

ABSTRACT

Due to technology, countries have been introduced to new sports. With more demand, interest, and coverage, new sports have become so established in a society that it is as if they had always existed. Thus, mainstream and niche sports concepts emerged. Mainstream sports are those that can gather mass media and public coverage, while niche sports are those that are less popular or nonexistent. This study focuses on a niche sport in Turkey, that is, rugby; this is a sport that is not even in the top 15 popular sports in Turkey. As the aim of this study is to explore difficulties faced in the branding and marketing of a niche sport in a new area, this study uses the case study of Sivas Kangals Rugby FC. The current study adopted an inductive qualitative design. The study is based on semi structured interview of four stakeholders: the coach, athletes, sports journalists and fans. The results of the study highlighted the difficulties a niche sport could face, why niche sports faced difficulties, reasons for playing rugby, and marketing techniques for a niche sports club. Furthermore, the study also highlighted the positive effects of niche sports and the benefits of a fan base.

Keywords: Niche Sport; Rugby; Branding; Sport Marketing; Sport Branding

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IZVLEČEK

Z razvojem tehnologije je začelo prihajati do uvajanja novih športov. Z večjim povpraševanjem, zanimanjem in pokritostjo določenega športa so se le-ti uveljavili v družbi, kot da bi obstajali od nekdaj. Tako so se pojavili t.i. »splošni« in »nišni« športni koncepti. Splošni športi so tisti, ki lahko zbirajo množične medije in javnost, medtem ko so nišni športi tisti, ki so manj priljubljeni ali jih sploh ni. Ta študija se osredotoča na enega izmed nišnih športov v Turčiji – rugby. Rugby je šport, ki ni sodi v 15 najbolj priljubljenih športov v Turčiji. Namen pričujoče študije je raziskati blagovno znamko in trženje nišnih športov na študiji primera Sivas Kangals Rugby FC. Študija temelji na polstrukturiranem intervjuju štirih zainteresiranih strani: trenerja, športnikov, športnih novinarjev in navijačev. S študijo smo odkrili najpogostejše težave, s katerimi se lahko soočajo nišni športi, njihovi vzroki, razlogi za igranje rugbyja in tržne tehnike za nišni športni klub. Poleg tega je študija izpostavila tudi pozitivne učinke nišnih športov.

Ključne besede: Nišni športi; Rugby; Blagovna znamka; Športno trženje; Športna blagovna znamka

INTRODUCTION

Sports have cultural importance in societies (Bergin, 2002). A sport is not only a physical activity, but also an element of national pride, cultural identity, an art form, and a part of daily life. Furthermore, globalization has increased the possibilities for all sports stakeholders (Kerr & Gladden, 2008). Due to technology, countries have been introduced to new sports. With more demand, interest, and coverage, new sports have become so established in a society that it is as if they had always existed. However, not every sport can be equally popular and attract the public's attention (Dwyer, Greenhalgh, & LeCrom, 2016). Thus, mainstream and niche sports concepts emerged. Mainstream sports are those that can gather mass media and public coverage, while niche sports are those that are less popular or nonexistent.

The concept of a niche sport is different for different countries (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). For instance, football is the most popular sport in most European countries, while in South Asia cricket is considered a mainstream sport. Contrarily, apart from a few countries in Africa, cricket is mostly unknown to the continent. In this context, Rosner and Shropshire (2011) discussed four categories of niche sports: minor league; emerging sports; indoor sports that are alternatives to traditional outdoor sports; and gender-specific leagues. This description clarifies the distinction between a mainstream and niche sport. As a niche sport is unable to attract mainstream media and attention of fans, supporters and participants of a niche sport are considered a sub-segment of sports fans (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006). Usually, football, basketball, baseball, hockey, and golf are considered mainstream sports while sports including tennis, lacrosse, bowling, fishing, curling, horse racing, and action or extreme sports are considered niche sports (Kang, Rice, Hambrick, & Choi, 2019). However, niche sports vary based on the region and culture (Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2013). In this sense, every country has its mainstream and niche sports. In Turkey, football, basketball, and volleyball are the top three most popular sports (AP, 2014). This study focuses on a niche sport in Turkey, that is, rugby; this is a sport that is not even in the top 15 popular sports in Turkey. As the aim of this study is to explore difficulties faced in the branding and marketing of a niche sport in a new area, this study uses the case study of Sivas Kangals Rugby FC. Therefore, it examines a niche sport in a smaller city, Sivas, where, unlike large cities, there are fewer facilities and less opportunities. This study has adopted a quadruple approach. It investigates the opinions of a coach, athletes, fans, and sports journalists. Its purpose is to provide a set of recommendations for managers that will help them to establish a niche sports club. Thus, the study's objectives are to explore the difficulties that a niche sport club could face; the factors that attract coaches,

fans and athletes to a niche sport; the role of media coverage and its importance; and marketing techniques that bring success.

Branding and sport

Branding is essential in attracting consumers to a product and influencing future consumption behaviours related to the brand (Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2014). Branding is a strategy for establishing a trademark and recognition of an entity among the public (Storie, 2008). A brand is a unique name, term, sign, symbol or design, or combination of these, which is used to help differentiate the product from the competition (Kotler, 1997). Therefore, a sports brand is a unique name, recognition, and loyalty among its fans (Hardy, Norman, & Sceery, 2012). professional and customer-oriented brand management is essential for a sports brand's long-term success (Gladden & Funk, 2001). According to the literature, sports branding has often adopted the model of customer-based brand equity (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Maroco, 2013). Brand equity adds value to the brand and attempts to define the relationship between customers and brands. Moreover, as Sasmita and Suki (2015) noted, brand equity related to consumers places greater confidence in a particular brand than in competitors' brands, thereby enhancing consumers' loyalty.

As brand equity is a customer-based set of activities, it is considered a value that customers associate with a brand (Aaker, 1991). Keller explained that this value is generated by developing positive and unique associations towards that brand (Keller, 1993). Furthermore, as Biscaia et al. (2013) observed, the concept of brand equity is often used to analyse how a brand can add value to a product or service and represents the outcome of several marketing strategies. In this context, Keller (1993) suggested that adding value to a brand through brand equity is possible via brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. These four qualities will be discussed in greater detail below.

Brand awareness: Put simply, brand awareness is whether or not consumers know about a brand (Keller, 1993). Huang and Sarigöllü (2014) considered brand awareness as comprising the recognition and recall of a brand in customers' minds. Here, brand recall refers to consumers' ability to retrieve the brand from memory, while brand recognition involves knowledge of and familiarity with the brand (Su & Tong, 2015).

Brand awareness is a critical step towards brand marketing and is an indispensable part of the communications process in branding (Macdonald & Sharp, 2003) as brand awareness encompasses familiarity with the brand: that is, a consumer's ability to identify the brand under

different conditions (Hasaan, Kerem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2018). Hasaan et al. (2018) argued that brand awareness casts a positive effect on the process of creating a sports brand. Brand awareness must precede brand associations; indeed, a consumer must first be aware of the brand in order to develop a set of associations (Washburn & Plank, 2002). As Biscaia et al. (2013) noted, to create value for a brand, consumers must first become familiar with the brand and subsequently develop positive and unique brand associations towards that brand.

Brand association: Brand association refers to any brand knowledge (either positive or negative) relating to the brand in the customer's mind (Huang & Sarigöllü, 2014). Brand association leads customers towards purchase decisions and promotes brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991) because if a brand association is favourable, a consumer thinks positively about the brand under consideration (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Brand associations consist of all brand-related attributes, such as thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Kotler & Keller, 2006). The higher the brand association for the product, the more it will be remembered by the consumer who will, in turn, express loyalty towards the brand (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Finally, Mullin, Hardy, and Sutton (2014) indicated that the appropriate management of brand association dimensions could help managers to strengthen the sports brand, increase consumer behaviour, and reduce vulnerability to competitors in the leisure marketplace.

Perceived quality: Perceived quality refers to the consumer's judgement about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988). It is not the objective quality of the product but consumers' subjective evaluations which depend on their perceptions (Su & Tong, 2015). Thus, perceived quality is not about the attributes a product holds but, rather, its image in the mind of the customers. Chui, Chow, and Choi (2014) suggested that the concepts of perceived quality and consumer satisfaction are interrelated as a direct antecedent of the willingness to purchase from the brand (Clemenz, Brettel, & Moeller, 2012). In the sporting context, Hardy, Norman, and Sceery (2012) noted that sports branding must leverage name recognition, perceived quality and loyalty among its fans.

Brand loyalty: Aaker (1991) stated that loyalty is the attachment that a customer has to a brand. According to Sasmita and Suki (2015), meanwhile, brand loyalty is related to users' repetitive buying behaviour over time with a positively biased emotion. Sports brand loyalty is considered a form of psychological connection to a team resulting in consistent and enduring positive behaviours and attitudes towards that team (Funk & James, 2006). In this sense, loyalty towards

a sports brand can be conceptualised in two forms: behavioural loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Biscaia et al., 2013; Funk & James, 2006; Hasaan et al., 2018). Attitudinal loyalty in sport is a psychological process involving the commitment and attitudinal preference of a person towards the sports brand. Behavioural loyalty refers to the actual purchase behaviour towards the brand (Biscaia et al., 2013; Hasaan et al., 2018).

Brand sustainability: Kuikka and Laukkanen (2012) noted that brand value enables firms to develop and sustain positive relations with consumers and gain an edge over rivals. Brand sustainability can be defined as the actions that can be taken to help an organisation increase a brand's value to both the marketer and the consumer over time. In this context, brand loyalty creates the value of a brand, while sustainability helps to increase that value. Grubor and Milovanov (2017) claimed that managing sustainability requires a new sort of knowledge promoting the provision of transparent business activities and processes with clear communication. Furthermore, global production and consumption with cultural capital, as well as targeting and positioning based on a deeper understanding of local culture, is critical for sustainability (Steenkamp, Batra, & Alden, 2003). In this regard, globally expanding a sports brand is key to sustainability with other factors.

Branding and niche sport

A niche sport is a type of sport that is less popular or emerging in society (Martin, Williams, Whisenant, & Dees, 2015). Niche sports are defined as any sports that do not attract mainstream support or media attention in the region in which they operate (Dwyer et al., 2016). Niche sports do not attract a mass audience (Miloch & Lambrecht, 2006), instead only attracting a low percentage of a country's population (Zhang, Bennett, & Henson, 2003). They do not receive regular coverage in the local and national media (Simmons, Greenwell, Thorn, Hambrick, & Greenhalgh, 2013) because they do not appeal to the public in the same way as mainstream sports (Kang et al., 2019). These sports offerings are quite different from mainstream sports (Dwyer et al., 2016).

Niche sports face a complex market situation as they have to rely on direct revenue generated from their customer base to survive because they seldom command the sponsorship or media funding (Simmons et al., 2013). Furthermore, these sports have to adopt unique ways to ensure brand awareness and consumer interest as they have limited opportunities to promote their sports offerings via traditional communication channels (Kang et al., 2019). However, niche sports can provide fans with an experience that is lacking in many mainstream sports. For

instance, there is more connection between fans and athletes (Greenhalgh, Simmons, Hambrick, & Greenwell, 2011).

Mahoney, Hambrick, Svensson, and Zimmerman (2013) suggested that niche sports organizations can use the psychological continuum model (PCM) framework to better understand sports consumers and help them advance through the stages towards allegiance. Thus, this study has adopted the PCM framework to understand and promote a niche sports club (i.e., Sivas Kangals Rugby FC). The PCM framework theorizes that sports consumers become loyal (i.e., form a psychological connection) through four stages: (1) awareness – an introduction; (2) attraction – exhibition of interest; (3) attachment – formation of a stable psychological connection; (4) allegiance – an expression of loyalty toward the sport product (Funk & James, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2013). Furthermore, niche sports marketers should understand the attributes influencing consumer support (Simmons et al., 2013). The PCM framework clarifies an individual's psychological connection to a sports brand (Kunkel, Hill, & Funk, 2013). The framework also helps to understand the relationship between brand associations and loyalty (Funk & James, 2006). In this context, the awareness stage involves knowledge about the existence of a sports brand. Indeed, as Alexandris, Du, Funk, and Theodorakis (2017) argued, for an individual to express an interest in a particular sporting activity, he or she should hold prior knowledge about it. Awareness is also known as the first exposure (De Groot & Robinson, 2008). Individuals who belong to this stage know about a certain sports brand (e.g., team, athlete, league); at this stage, however, they have not yet developed a particular favourite (Funk & James, 2001). The second stage is attraction, which involves an understanding of the basic rules of the sport and the ability to distinguish between different teams (Funk & James, 2001). In this stage, an individual has developed a positive attraction towards the team (Alexandris et al., 2017); nevertheless, the psychological connection is still relatively unstable and weak (Beaton & Funk, 2008). The 'attraction' is the result of situational factors, including external or environmental and internal, such as constraints and motivation (Beaton, Funk, & Alexandris, 2009). The next stage is attachment, where an individual has developed a stronger psychological connection with their favourite team. Attachment refers to the internal psychological meaning taken, as shown by the attributes and benefits associated with a team (Gladden & Funk, 2001). According to Funk and James (2001), the level of psychological importance and value connected to a team accounts for how attraction develops into attachment. Although a following has developed at this stage, external forces and perceived constraints are still capable of influencing liking/disliking decisions

(Alexandris et al., 2017). The final stage of the PMC framework is allegiance: that is, the construction of loyalty (De Groot & Robinson, 2008). Allegiant fans possess highly favourable attitudes towards a specific team, as allegiance is characterised by persistence, resistance to change, and an impact on cognitive processes and behaviour (Funk & James, 2001). It is expected that individuals in the allegiance stage are able to resist internal and external factors and constraints against their favourite sporting entity (Alexandris et al., 2017), and remain loyal to that team or individual.

With the above theoretical background in mind, the study has selected the following research questions the study has selected the following research questions.

R1. How does the PCM framework work among fans in niche sports branding?

R2. What difficulties do niche sports brands face?

R3. What are the reasons for these difficulties?

R4. Which marketing techniques can be effective for niche sports brands?

METHODS

Research setting

Given the nature of the study, an inductive qualitative design was employed. The authors surmised that this method was the most appropriate in eliciting meaning and gaining in-depth knowledge about the topic because flexibility of a qualitative design allows the researcher to understand phenomena as they actually occur in the real world (Charmaz, 2006). The current study adopted a quadruple approach that involved four stakeholders: the coach, athletes, sports journalists, and fans. This approach is appropriate for the current research as it is suggested that to understand a unique and complex phenomenon, sampling based on multiple stakeholders is the most appropriate method (Creswell, 2003). The current study focused on the Sivas Kangals Rugby FC club to explore a niche sports club brand establishment. The club was founded in 2014 in the city of Sivas, Turkey. It started with two balls and four players. The situation on-field and off-field improved with time, bolstered by an agreement with Cumhuriyet University Sports Club (CÜSK). Currently, four of the players from this club have played in the Turkish national rugby team. In 2019, the club also established a women's team. Thus, the club is a case study of a niche sports club establishing itself in a smaller city.

Sampling

The preliminary stage of sampling involved negotiating access (Okumus, Altinay, & Roper, 2007), and this process was eased due to one of the researcher's established relationships with various sports stakeholder groups (clubs, athletes, fans, and journalists). A series of semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the coach, athletes, fans of the club, and sports journalists were conducted. The final sample comprised 24 participants: a coach, five athletes, fourteen fans, and four journalists (see Table 1 for details).

Data Collection

The data was collected via an interview guide that was developed by the author using Patton's (2002) guidelines. Four semi-structured guides were developed based on Funk and James' (2001) PCM framework (i.e., one each for the coach, athletes, fans, and journalists) with the same main structure but different questions. Thus, the interviews had four main sections aimed at understanding and promoting a niche sports club (in this case, Sivas Kangals Rugby FC). These sections were developed based on PCM framework which theorizes that sports consumers become loyal (i.e., form a psychological connection) through four stages: awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance. Examples of the questions asked are

Coach: What factors drove you to establish or coach a rugby club?

Athlete: What factors drove you to become a rugby player?

Fans: What factors drove you to become a fan of this club and rugby?

Journalist: What factors can attract the media to rugby in Turkey?

Since the researcher must prompt the data when using qualitative data (Kvale, 1996), the interviewer in this study asked probing questions to extract more details. In this vein, follow-up questions were often asked to clarify the participants' statements.

The interviews were conducted over three months and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to sign a voluntary participation form that explained the purpose of the study and confirmed that they accepted being part of the study. All interviews lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, depending upon the participant's interest and their willingness to share their thoughts. To protect the participants' identities, we assigned an identification number for publication purpose in separate categories (i.e., coach: C1; athletes: A1 – A5; fans: F1 – F14; journalist: J1 – J4; See Table 1 for details).

Table 1. Participants' description.

No of Participants	Code	Gender	Age range	Years of club experience
Coach				
1	C1	M	51	6
Athletes				
5	A1-A5	M: 3; F: 2	16-24	1-6
Fans				
14	F1-F14	M: 9; F: 5	16-36	1-6
Journalists				
4	J1-J4	M: 3; F: 1	30-57	1-3

Data analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2014) mentioned that starting the data analysis after the first interview permits researchers to become more familiar with the participants' responses. Thus, an analysis was begun after the first interview. After converting the interview into written form, the authors noted their first impressions of the interview. Then, they discussed these initial impressions with each other. This process enabled researchers to discuss how to improve subsequent interviews as it gave them a better understanding of the data and participants' responses (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013).

The study opted for two coding systems for data analysis: the open-coding level and the axial level. The data coding was done manually. In open coding, data is broken down and concepts are defined to categorise the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding was employed for the initial analysis to develop the initial themes. For that purpose, interview responses were read to obtain a good grasp of the data. The researchers then employed axial coding. Axial coding is the process of crosscutting or connecting the initial themes to classify them into more specific themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Axial coding helped to elaborate the results of this study from the initial themes into a compact form: The authors classified the initial themes into more defined, concrete themes; in some cases, combining similar themes to those that could not stand alone. After the lead author summarized the data, the results were discussed with the other researchers to confirm the findings (McTavish & Loether, 2015).

The study opted for an inter-coder reliability and agreement process to establish agreement among the researchers. Inter-coder reliability could be achieved by having the research team members operate independently from each other, while inter-coding could be achieved through discussion and reconciling coding discrepancies between the research team members (Kuckartz, 2014). To achieve inter-coder reliability, researchers defined units of an idea (i.e., beginning and ending of a single idea). This process converted the data into more manageable units (Carey, Morgan, & Oxtoby, 1996). Once the units of analysis were identified, the research team assigned codes and developed themes. Then, the authors compared their coded transcripts to see whether there were discrepancies in the coding. The final inter-coder reliability, measured via Cohen's Kappa, was .92. Then, the remaining discrepancies and disagreements were discussed until an agreement was reached.

RESULTS

The results of the interviews conducted with the participants are presented below. The results of the study identified various themes and sub-themes, presented using the participant's quotes. The participants discussed the difficulties that the niche sport faced, the reasons for these difficulties, the reasons that they were interested in the niche sport, and marketing techniques to promote a niche sport. The findings of the study contribute to a deeper knowledge of the development of a niche sport in an area.

PMC framework stages

Participants of the study discussed the different stages of the PMC framework according to their experiences.

Awareness: The participants of the study identified various factors that contribute to the awareness stage.

Family: My father took me to the Dinamo Baku club and I attended a rugby training session. This was my first introduction to rugby. [C1]

Friends: I heard that the men's rugby team had been established from my friends and I had the chance to watch them a few times. Thanks to my friends. [A2]

Sports: I don't know when it was, but since the day I saw the first game I have been in love with rugby. [F6]

Accessories: I heard about the team in 2018. The players' jerseys caught my attention in the stadium. They were training. [F5]

Mass media: It was the first time I had seen rugby on television years ago. [A4]

Social media: A message came via a WhatsApp group from a friend saying that the 'Women's Rugby Team' was being established. This was the first time I heard about rugby. [A1]

Promotional activities and advertisement: I came to know about rugby during a promotional seminar held at the university. [F1]

The posters of the Sivas Kangals Rugby team were hung on the board in our faculty. I searched for rugby on the internet. I liked the sport more after the videos I watched. [F7]

I came across a friendly game of the team and watched it. [F8]

Attraction: Participants of the study discussed the factors that initiated attraction regarding sports. These factors included, for instance:

Close group effect: My friends used to play rugby. Watching them playing and talking about sports experiences made me attracted to the sports, too. My other friend joined because his older brother plays rugby. When people notice a thing repeatedly among their close friends, family and neighbours, they are automatically attracted towards that [A1].

Sport: I have been in love with rugby since the first time I watched it. I was attracted to it because of masculinity, game style, rules and technicalities involved in the sport [F3].

Identity: I felt that playing rugby in Turkey created a different identity as the sport of rugby is unique, physical and special [C1].

Self-esteem: I did not want to be like everyone else who was playing the popular sport of football here. I wanted to be different. I am interested in less popular sports from my childhood. Then I found out about Kangal FC, and I joined them to play rugby, which is still a very new and unique sport in this area [A4].

Attachment: Participants of the study discussed the attachment level in accordance with their experiences. The stage of liking was also possible, with many factors involved converting attraction into attachments. For example, one participant observed:

There are many things that attract fans and athletes and make them like certain (niche or popular) sports: for example, fans like excitement, aesthetics, stadium facilities, attachment

with team and players, good pastimes, etc. Contrarily, athletes like to join a sport which will assure them a good career, like-mindedness, popularity, and close circle influence. That is why a niche sport could attract more fans than players because a niche sport (such as rugby in Turkey) does not offer a good, long professional career [C1].

Allegiance: The last stage of PMC framework is ultimate loyalty. Our participants indicated that allegiance produced an unyielding commitment which is long-lasting and always resistant to the idea of changing their favourites. As one participant noted:

The most difficult thing is winning the loyalties of fans. Although winning loyalty is a long process, it also pays back for a longer period. I know many fans of rugby who developed a very strong allegiance with the sport, and now they are die-hard fans of rugby. They were watching matches last night on television (due to time-zone difference), ignoring other people's comments because of their interest in such a niche sport, and posting things on their social media, which no one likes. But still, they are very much committed to their favourite sport [J2].

Difficulties that niche sports face

The participants of the study mentioned various types of difficulties they faced when representing a niche sport. In this context, all types of interviewees (i.e., coach, athletes, fans, and journalists) mentioned difficulties they faced or witnessed according to their experience. Moreover, different types of problems, such as technical, financial, and social, were highlighted.

When discussing difficulties, participants of the study mentioned the financial issues they faced due to being part of the niche sport (i.e., rugby) in Turkey. For instance,

We cannot find a rugby ball and t-shirts easily in Turkey. They are expensive and not made in Turkey. We have to buy them from abroad. I am not getting any money from this job. Maybe I am spending it out of my pocket. But I still do my job with great love [C1].

We had difficulties in finding a field for training and playing matches [A9].

The biggest challenge is not being able to train on the grass field and the lack of equipment [A1].

Rugby needs economic support in Turkey. For example, rugby athletes go to the matches with their own money, there is insufficient support of the national team, there is no rugby field, and

it is extremely difficult to find a rugby ball. There are no sponsorships or promotions of rugby [J2].

The difficulties in establishing a niche sports club are not only financial. One difficulty is the lack of interest from youth and, as a result, few people are motivated to participate in this sport. Unfamiliarity is always associated with niche sports. For example,

There were no participants in the beginning and after the university agreement, the first training session consisted of only seven boys [C1].

There wasn't one person in Sivas who knew rugby. But now (sometimes I am surprised) the number of people who know what rugby is has increased [J2].

Niche sports do not only face the issue of a lack of athletes but also face structural issues. For example, one journalist stated that

The number of referees and coaches are insufficient. Governing bodies and leagues are weaker [J4].

Participants of the study mentioned that difficulties are also related to the nature of the sport. Rugby is a rough game and usually recommended to those who have a strong physique. For instance,

People are less interested in rugby because of the injuries and difficulty of the sport [A5].

Because rugby is a hard sport, though I think it is misrepresented, people who are new to the sport are afraid, so its popularity is limited [F9].

Due to the nature of the sport and the smaller financial benefit, society and youth are not very fond of rugby in Turkey. For instance,

My family was supportive at first, but they do not want me to play anymore because my injuries have increased [A3].

Parents do not like sports that may endanger their children. Their priorities are that there are fewer injuries, there is a chance of a better future, and there are good financial opportunities, and unfortunately, rugby does not provide any of these factors right now [C1].

Some of my friends are not interested because they find the sport very hard [F6].

Many of my friends were afraid, and one had to leave because of their injuries [A1].

These problems affect the commitment of athletes as well, and, as a result, professionalism is lacking among club athletes and most of them are part-timers. For instance,

Unfortunately, children are not able to be professionals in this situation. It is difficult to comply with the conditions for proper training - food, fitness, and other things - to be a professional [C1].

Maybe in the future, when rugby is more accepted in Turkey, there will be professional players. Right now, some are part-timers, and others are just committed. You cannot say that they are professionals [A2].

Participants of the study highlighted the issue of location as well when establishing a niche sports club. Participants indicated that big cities could adopt niche sports better than smaller cities because big cities have more opportunities and a larger population. For instance,

It could be more successful in big cities. There would be a greater chance to recruit more players [C1].

Big cities have big opportunities while smaller cities have limited facilities. A city like Sivas, with approximately four hundred thousand people, cannot offer what Istanbul or Ankara could. So, this is a drawback for the Sivas Kangals Rugby club [J1].

However, there are some positives to niche sports. For instance,

You get a lot of attention when you represent a unique sport [A3; F6].

You have the chance to shine easier. It is easier to be a national athlete [A1].

It gives you some sort of novelty that you represent an uncommon sport. Thus, you belong to a separate group, an elite club [F10].

Participants of the study also shed light on the benefits of the fan base of the niche sports club as they are assets for any sports entity. For instance,

Fans develop their rituals that are attractive to new fans. Fans also work as a marketing and economic resource for a club. They spread a positive message through word of mouth, recommend the sport to friends and family members, follow the team, athletes, and leagues, and purchase tickets and club accessories [C1; J2].

Why niche sports face difficulties

Participants of the study mentioned different factors that caused difficulties for Sivas Kangals Rugby FC in the city of Sivas. For instance,

Nobody knew what rugby was. American football was almost recognizable, but rugby was a sport they had never heard of. That is why the youth are less interested in rugby: Because it is an unknown sport. Very few rugby teams exist in the region [C1].

The rugby federation in Turkey does not work seriously in this job. The federation needs to pay serious attention to this issue [J1].

Football is the first thing that comes to mind when it comes to sports in our country. Football attracts a massive audience [J2].

I think this is due to the indifference of the media channels. If the media and TV channels show interest, people would know and like this sport [F8].

We had the biggest difficulties for sponsorship and financial support because rugby is unpopular in Turkey [A1].

Marketing techniques

The participants of the study revealed different types of marketing techniques that would help boost the rugby and Sivas Kangals Rugby club. For instance,

Media related: Rugby can be marketized via news on TV and newspapers and all kinds of advertisements in the press [J1].

The club's website is a useful tool for advertisement [C1].

Brochures and video presentations for young coaches and players can spread the message to more people [A4].

The adoption rate for new sports is very high in Turkey. The promotion of the sport needs to be done right. There is also an advantage in using TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines for promotion [J2].

As a first step, matches must be broadcasted live. Afterward, I think that the quality of the players would be increased by giving funds to the clubs [F9].

Area related: If well-known sports clubs show interest in this sport and competitions are held not only between university teams but also in high schools and secondary schools, as in the US, its popularity would increase [F3].

Children should be encouraged to play this sport at the high school and secondary school levels. Their families should support them. Thus, its popularity would increase [F2].

Club-related: National players must meet with other small-team players while famous teams should compete with lesser-known teams [F6].

We can boost rugby and Sivas Kangals Rugby FC by arranging rugby festivals and rugby shows and participating in international tournaments and friendly matches with famous teams [J3].

Asking players and fans to invite their friends and family members could attract more people [F4].

DISCUSSION

The current study focused on a niche sport in Turkey – rugby – and specifically on a rugby club as a case study, Sivas Kangals Rugby FC. For that purpose, interviews with a coach, athletes, fans, and journalists were conducted to gain an in-depth picture that would help with the future establishment of niche sports clubs. The results of the study highlighted the difficulties a niche sport could face (financial, lack of interest from youth and society, structural, nature of the sport, location of the club, and lack of professionalism), why niche sports faced difficulties, reasons for playing rugby (family, friends, sports, accessories, mass media, social media, promotional activities, and advertisement), and marketing techniques for a niche sports club (media-related, area-related, and club-related). Furthermore, the study also highlighted the positive effects of niche sports and the benefits of a fan base.

In the context of PMC framework, awareness is the first stage. This study identified various factors that contributed towards awareness, the first two of which are family and friends. Parents are considered a direct and influential source of inspiration for their children (Melnick & Wann, 2010). Hasaan et al. (2018) argued that parents, family members, and friends are antecedents of athlete branding as they are the source of spreading awareness to their family members and friends. Since parents, family members and friends are direct sources of information for children, children receive early information about and particular awareness of the world through them. The third factor is the sport itself. In this context, Hasaan et al. (2018) noted that sports

and sports teams are capable of spreading awareness of themselves: for example, football is known in those countries where it is not a popular sport. However, knowledge of niche sports and sports teams is less productive than that of popular and globally known sports teams (Traugutt, Augustin, & Hazzaa, 2018). Club accessories can also contribute to the marketization of the sport and sports clubs. Colourful dresses, scarfs, and kits are some of the ways to attract potential fans to the club. For example, cricket adopted coloured kits for two of its formats instead of its traditional white dress to make the sport more attractive (Hasaan, 2019; Mortimer, 2013). Therefore, a good strategy could be to introduce shiny and colourful club accessories. The other factors are mass media and social media. Media attention is one of the main differentiators between a mainstream sport and a niche sport (Dwyer et al., 2016). However, social media could attract many new fans to a niche sport. Facebook and Instagram promotions are examples of this. Social media is considered an extension of traditional sports broadcasting and communication (Watanabe, Yan, & Soebbing, 2015). That is why it can provide sponsors and endorsers with a new way of engaging fans (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Therefore, a better social media strategy and a good relationship with mass media can be beneficial for a niche sports club. Lastly, participants of the study identified advertisement and marketing activities as effective ways of promoting a niche sports club. In this vein, effective sport marketing campaigns adopt different methods to reach the target audience (Brown, 2003). Thus, while every sport requires marketing and promotional activities, these activities are essential to spread awareness of niche sports, which lack sufficient media attention. In the second stage of the PMC framework, attraction and the close group effect are important aspects. Finally, family and friends not only provide a source of awareness but also initiate attraction among potential customers of sport (including both fans and athletes).

Family members are a source of inspiration and influence people to play or support certain sports and athletes (Dixon, 2012; Hasaan et al., 2018; Hsieh, Wang, & Yoder, 2011). Furthermore, Dixon (2012) stated that friends tend to motivate their friends to become fans of certain types of sports. Thus, a close circle affects the likes and dislikes of a person. Sport itself is not only a source of awareness but a cause of attraction as well. Chadwick and Burton (2008) found that football itself played a major role in establishing the features of football-related brands. In this way, the nature of the sport can contribute to its popularity. A unique identity is considerably attractive to an individual. This study has indicated that a niche sport provides a source of unique identity to its participants. Past studies have identified that social identity is a source that attracts youths towards sports, as sports can offer a distinct opportunity to promote

personal growth and development (Bruner et al., 2017). In this context, niche sport presents a more unique identity to its participants, as suggested by the study results. Self-esteem is another designated factor that contributes to the attraction of a niche sport. De Groot and Robinson (2008) observed that when individuals think of a particular group (in the context of sport) as superior to any other group, they prefer to join that group to satisfy their own self-esteem. Existing studies have also determined that feeling connected to certain groups is associated with higher self-esteem (Bentley et al., 2020). The impression of uniqueness plays its role within the PMC framework's stage of attraction. Attraction leads towards attachment: positive attraction constructs a positive experience that ultimately converts into attachment (Biscaia et al., 2013). The results of the study echo those of past studies which have proposed that various attributes contribute in the context of sports branding, including, for example, on-field and off-field attributes (Hasaan et al., 2018); achievements, aesthetics, drama, and escape (Robinson & Trail, 2005); social interaction, sporting success, and stadiums (Biscaia et al., 2013). All these factors paid their due share to convert attachment further into allegiance. Allegiance is a long-lasting loyalty that is repaid in the shape of team loyalty, media exposure, merchandise sales, ticket sales and revenue generation (Ross, 2006). In light of the above finding, achieving the allegiance stage is essential for the success of any sports brand entity, including niche sports.

This study also examined the difficulties niche clubs face, identifying financial barriers, lack of interest from youth and society, structural issues, the nature of the sport, the location of the club, and the lack of professionalism as barriers. These findings are consistent with past studies. The first barrier is that niche sports face financial problems, in line with Hambrick, Simmons, and Mahoney (2013), who found that niche sport participants often faced financial obstacles. Furthermore, Cohen, Brown, and Welty (2012) found that niche sports are financially fragile: Because they are unable to attract mainstream media and attention (Greenhalgh et al., 2011), there are fewer opportunities for sponsorship available. Therefore, niche sports are more dependent on federations. However, a small budget with little financial help can help minimize the financial obstacles. The second barrier niche sports face is the lack of interest from youth and society, which also affects the commitment of athletes and results in a lack of professionalism. This finding is in line with past studies, as Zhang et al. (2003) found that niche sports attract a low percentage of a country's population and therefore exist relatively isolated from mainstream society. The third barrier niche sports face is structural. It is indicated that less financial support, low interest from the society, and less popularity can lead to structural issues for any sport. For instance, Kunz and Schnellinger (2014) found that many niche sports

still lack the attention of sport consumers and thus lack basic structure. The fourth barrier niche sport face is nature of sport. The nature of the sport is also an important factor for its popularization. When rugby is newly introduced, it is considered unsafe and dangerous. Similarly, cricket, which is most popular in old British Colonies, is considered a very complex sport (Hasaan, 2019). Due to the nature of the sport, people are not fans of bullfighting, action sport, ultimate fighting, and other sports considered brutal and dangerous in certain parts of society. Thus, the nature of the sport is its best positive or negative advertiser. The fifth barrier niche sports face is the location of the club. Past studies have identified that the location of the club is important for its success. For instance, Hasaan et al. (2018) noted that people often feel attached to certain regions and the teams located in those regions. In this context, the club discussed in the current study faced a drawback because Sivas is a smaller city and, therefore, there is less potential loyalty. In this vein, Richelieu, Lopez, and Desbordes, (2008) found that the reputation of the French club Paris Saint-Germain is benefited by Paris' international status. Furthermore, big cities offer more facilities, infrastructure, and sponsorships than smaller cities. The last barrier niche sport face is lack of professionalism from its participants. Furthermore, Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson (1999) found that the lack of financial support could negatively affect an athlete's commitment, professionalism, and performance during training and matches. Stable financial circumstances are essential for athletes to increase their commitment to the sport (Andreff, 2006). It has been observed that, usually, the career of athletes of less popular sports are shorter due to the decreased financial stability. In third world countries, governments support certain sports but policymakers decide which sport to support, while in developed countries businesses decide where to provide sponsorship as per public interest.

In the context of reasons for these difficulties, it was suggested that unfamiliarity with the sport, lack of interest and clear action from federations, lack of media interest, and the popularity of other sports are major factors that contribute to the difficulties faced by niche sports. These all are problems inherent in niche sports, except for the role of federations (Dwyer et al., 2016). However, a stronger role of a niche sports federation could be a solution to the problem of niche sports.

Lastly, this study discussed the possible marketing techniques. The first is media-related techniques. Media is the most powerful source of communication. Thus it is natural that, currently, the technology-dominated media is the best way to promote various products (Keeffe & Zawadzka, 2011). In this situation, media activities on different media channels could attract

more fans to niche sports clubs. The second marketing technique is area-related resources. Participants of the study suggested that niche sports should focus on schools and colleges to invest in a long-term future. For instance, to promote cricket in Estonia, where cricket was relatively unknown a few years ago, cricket promoters mainly focused on getting more children and schools involved (ICC-Europe, 2012). Therefore, involving children in the sport is a good strategy as it makes them familiar with the sport at a very early age. The second important area-related resource is an attachment to an already-famous club. Many major clubs have introduced their fans to another sport. This happened with Real Madrid Baloncesto (Real Madrid basketball team) or Beşiktaş J.K. (a basketball team). It is a common branding strategy that one popular entity could influence its followers to like another entity. For instance, the popularity of a sport in a society may influence its population to like (or dislike) a particular athlete Stewart, Smith and Nicholson (2003) or an athlete could positively influence fans to be loyal to the athlete's sponsors (Hasaan et al., 2018). In this study's case, the agreement with the Sivas Cumhuriyet University Sport Club already proved useful for Sivas Kangals Rugby FC; one further step in this direction, which is making an agreement with Sivasspor (the most popular sports team in the region) would boost Sivas Kangals Rugby FC popularity further.

Limitations and strengths

As with any study, some limitations should be acknowledged and considered for future research. This study is based on exploratory qualitative research design, which is best suited when little is known about a topic and when the researcher needs to understand more from the participants' perspectives (Merriam, 2009). However, future studies could employ quantitative methods in order to provide further support for these findings with a larger sample of sports fans.

Furthermore, the current study opted to evaluate one sports club for a case study. While the study results were interpreted from rich data, making the results significant, one can nonetheless argue that extending the results achieved on the basis of the study of a single case does not appear to be consistent with scientific rigour. Therefore, future studies could use multiple niche sports clubs in a single study to ensure a better understanding and generalisation of the results. In future work, expanding the data through the evaluation of more clubs would be helpful for both the literature and managers.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study focused on a niche sport in Turkey. A rugby club in a small city in Turkey (Sivas) was used as a case study. As rugby is not a popular sport in Turkey, the aim of this study is to explore the difficulties faced in the branding and marketing of a niche sport in a new locality. The current study not only targeted a niche sport but also a smaller city, Sivas, which had fewer facilities and opportunities than large cities. To do this, it adopted a quadruple approach, interviewing a coach, athletes, fans, and sports journalists. The study's purpose is to provide an example of niche sport club for marketing and managers on the obstacles they could face while establishing a successful niche sports club. Therefore, the study objective is to explore the difficulties that a niche sports club could face, the reasons that coaches, fans, and athletes are attracted to a niche sport, media coverage and its importance, and successful marketing techniques. The result of the study highlighted the difficulties a niche sport could face (financial, structural, lack of interest from youth and society, nature of the sport, location of the club, and lack of professionalism), why a niche sport faces difficulties, reasons for playing rugby (family, friends, sports, accessories, mass media, social media, promotional activities, and advertisement), and marketing techniques for a niche sports club (media-related, area-related, and club-related). Furthermore, the study also highlighted the positive aspects of a niche sport and the benefits of its fan base. The study also suggested techniques and methods to adopt for better marketing of a niche sport. Lastly, this study contributed to the literature on niche sports as it focused on all possible obstacles a niche sports club manager could face.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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