## Consumer Based Brand Associations for Professional Football Leagues

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### Abstract

Sport brand research primarily focuses on sport teams as brands. Although the literature focuses on teams, league branding is becoming increasingly important, due to the fact that professional sport leagues face an increasing competition for spectators, and against other entertainment opportunities. In a desire to be the preferred code of choice, managers of the respective league brands look to leverage their brand associations to establish brand equity in order to buffer the plethora of entertainment choices available to spectators. This study examines whether existing team brand association literature can be applied to leagues, and finds that 12 of the 14 tested associations are applicable for leagues. Furthermore, existing differences between the four football leagues in Australia in terms of the league brand associations are revealed.

Keywords: sports fan, consumer behaviour, brand, brand equity, brand architecture

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**Introduction**

In today's professional sport, managers treat their entities as brands to be managed. Since sport performances are uncontrollable, unpredictable and spontaneous (Gladden, Milne and Sutton, 1998), management takes a long-term approach with a focus on the sport experience and a sustainable relationship with customers to build the brand rather than winning. This change has led to many examples of rebranding teams, such as the Chicago Bears (Gladden and Funk, 2002) or Manchester United (Keller, 2008), as well as leagues, such as the UEFA Europa League or Basketball Australia. Historically, leagues and teams have held a monopoly position in their area (Rosenbaum, 1987). However, with an increase in sport franchises and new media, the competition for sport consumers has increased (James, Kolbe and Trail, 2002). As professional sport takes on a more business approach to its management, it becomes crucial to build a strong brand and distinguish it from competitors (Kaynak, Salman and Tatoglu, 2008).

There are two prominent frameworks used in the literature to understand sport brand building: consumer-based brand equity and brand association (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Ross, Russell and Bang, 2008). These frameworks focus on sport teams rather than sport leagues. However, a sport league functions as a brand umbrella over sport teams that compete in the league. The league can also represent a sport code and league managers must learn how to develop and maintain the league brand. In a highly competitive sport entertainment market such as football in Australia, there are four different codes which consist of rugby league, rugby union, Australian Rules football and soccer and each is represented by a professional league which competes for market share. The same holds true for other competitive markets such as the European Soccer League which competes for consumers within the code as well as against other sports (Chadwick and Holt, 2008). The aim of this study is to examine the applicability of existing team-based brand association frameworks to the umbrella sport league level in the Australian football context. In addition, this study will examine whether differences exist between the four football leagues in Australia.

**League brand architecture**

In the sport context, the league provides the framework to produce the sport entertainment product. The product is a competitive game between two franchises which simultaneously produces the league product which is a series of competitive contest played seasonally which leads to an annual championship (Gladden and Funk, 2002; Sutton and Parrett, 1992; Whannel, 1992). The existing differences between leagues and traditional franchises, and the "unique arrangement required to produce the league product" (Mason, 1999, p. 405) suggest that leagues may function as hybrid sport franchises with a unique system and brand architecture.

The brand architecture of leagues and teams can be described as a continuum between a "branded house" and "house of brands". In a branded house, the master or umbrella brand is closely linked to and dominates the major brands, e.g. Virgin. In a "house of brands" there is little to no linkage between the master and major brands, e.g. Procter & Gamble (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). Between these two extremes a continuum of hybrid approaches can be found. Most applicable to the context of leagues and teams is the master-brand – sub-brand

approach. These sub-brands can augment the master-brand in a number of ways (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). The league, as it provides the framework for the teams to compete, would be considered the master-brand, whereas the teams would represent sub-brands. If both are strong brands, the sub-brand functions as a co-driver of the master brand (Devlin, 2003) and they reciprocally boost each other. An example of this relationship is fans of Manchester United who also watch the English Premier League. Manchester United's rise as a top sport brand came along with the rise of the English Premier League, after the leagues' rebranding and restructuring in 1993 (Aaker, 2008). Drawing on the notion that sub-brands need strong master-brands, a successful and strong league brand is indispensable for a successful sport team brand. This is supported by the case of the Women's United Soccer Association in the USA, or the merger of the NBL with Basketball Australia, where the sub-team brand suffered from the failure of the master league brand.

### Consumer based brand associations

Keller (1993) defines consumer-based brand equity as: "the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of the brand" (Kotler and Keller, 2006, p. 277). Furthermore, he distinguishes two dimensions that influence brand equity – brand awareness and brand image. The component brand awareness is related to the ability of consumers to identify the brand from memory under different conditions (Rossiter and Percy, 1987). Brand image, as the second component framework refers to the "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p. 3). These brand associations are distinguished in attributes, benefits and attitudes (Kaynak et al., 2008). According to Aaker (1996), these associations are used to make a consumption decision, which makes them a crucial part of the brand equity concept and management.

Keller's framework has been adapted by several researchers to examine sport consumers (Bauer, Sauer and Schmitt, 2005; Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer and Exler, 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2002). According to Taylor (1992) sport fans are the "supreme authority" (p. 118) of a league. In fact, other stakeholders, for example television and corporate sponsorships, only exist because of the big fan bases (Mason, 1999). Thus, this article integrates and adapts existing team brand association frameworks to examine league-based brand associations of professional football in Australia.

### Consumer based brand associations for leagues

The brand association for a professional sport league represent attributes, benefits and attitudes linked in the consumer's mind with a specific league. Hence, league-based brand associations reflect the image a consumer holds towards the professional sport league. Gladden and Funks' (2002) team association model (TAM) framework identified and measured 16 associations that were classified into attributes, benefits and attitudes (e.g., Keller, 2008). Ross, et al. (2006) introduced a team brand association framework with 11 associations and later developed a scale (TBAS) to assess these associations (Ross, 2008). Bauer, et al. (2008) modified the TAM model and demonstrated its applicability to the German team sport setting.

The current research on league brand associations integrates the two predominate team based brand association frameworks. Gladden and Funks' (2002) conceptualisation has been theoretically merged with Ross, et al. (2008) to explore 14 attributes, benefits and attitudes linked to professional sport leagues. Out of the 14 associations, four were present in both

studies, six were adopted from Gladden and Funk (2002) and four from Ross (2008). The identified associations were modified to fit the Australian context and league system. Brand attributes consisted of seven associations related to league management, star player, excitement, logo design, organisational attributes, rivalry and history. Brand benefits consisted of six associations related to league identification, nostalgia, diversion, community pride, peer group acceptance and socialisation benefits. Brand attitude was measured using commitment towards a league as commitment represents the strength and favourability of attitudinal evaluation towards a league (Gladden and Funk, 2001). Associations deemed not applicable to Australian sport leagues and omitted were concessions, stadium, success, team characteristics, and head coach. The dimensions of importance, knowledge and affect were also omitted as they are represented by commitment. Overall, the 14 associations serve to provide a conceptual structure to examine league brand associations from a consumers' perspective. The following two research questions are provided to guide an empirical test of the league-based associations.

Research Question 1: Can team-based brand association frameworks be used to explore league-based brand associations linked to professional sport leagues?

Research Question 2: Are there differences in league-based brand associations among the four Australian football leagues?

## Research Method

The data for this quantitative research design has been collected through online surveys. A national database of individuals who opted-in receiving market research surveys was used to send invitations for participation. The information that the individual is interested in football was a prerequisite to choose prospective participants. 4000 (500 for each league in each area) surveys were sent out to Brisbane and Sydney, representing two major metropolitan areas with all four researched codes. 421 surveys, representing a response rate of 10.5 %, were collected. The sample was 56.5% female (n = 238) and 43.5 % male (n = 183), with an average age of 39.45 years. Respondents answered the questionnaire in the context of their favourite league. 33.7 % (n = 142) of respondents were NRL fans, 10.0% (n = 42) were Rugby Union fans, 45.8 % (n = 193) were AFL fans and 10.5 % (n = 44) preferred the A-League.

## Analysis

The data was analysed using SPSS 17.0. Mean scores for all brand associations were calculated for the overall sample, as well as for each league. A one-sample t-tests ($\alpha = 0.05$) compared league brand associations with a Test Value of 4.0, which indicates the middle of a 7 point Likert scale. Furthermore, a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to explore research question 2. Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc test was used to identify significant ($\alpha = 0.05$) differences between the four football leagues. Table I indicates the team brand associations Test Value with the observed league brand associations and lists the means for the four different leagues.

The one-sample t-test analysis indicates that the mean score for 12 out of 14 league brand associations was significantly above the 4.0 test value. The associations peer group acceptance and league identification were below 4.0, indicating that these two should not be

adopted from the team brand association literature. These results suggest that 12 team-based brand associations can serve as league-based brand associations.

The ANOVA results reveal significant differences for nine of the 14 brand association between the four football leagues. No significant differences were found for five associations: logo design, organisational attributes, community pride, league identification and peer group acceptance. Overall, the differences among the leagues on various associations were mixed but generally show differences between the four leagues. Subsequent post-hoc tests revealed an interesting trend as the A-League received the lowest ratings for eight of the nine associations.

Table I: Results

| | Mean | Std. Deviation | NRL Mean | Union Mean | AFL Mean | A-League Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Commitment | 5.81 | 1.23 | 5.78 | 5.72 | 6.02 | 5.07[1, 3] |
| Tradition | 5.41 | 1.45 | 5.61 | 4.93[1] | 5.76[2] | 3.68[1, 2, 3] |
| Excitement | 5.40 | 1.37 | 5.54 | 5.53 | 5.49 | 4.43[1, 2, 3] |
| Star Player | 5.30 | 1.44 | 5.39 | 5.53 | 5.41 | 4.32[1, 2, 3] |
| Rivalry | 5.28 | 1.52 | 5.13 | 5.47 | 5.55 | 4.36[2, 3] |
| Nostalgia | 5.02 | 1.53 | 5.14 | 4.95 | 5.23 | 3.80[1, 2, 3] |
| Community Pride | 4.59 | 1.49 | 4.63 | 4.58 | 4.63 | 4.23 |
| Socialisation | 4.52 | 1.68 | 4.69 | 4.63 | 4.49 | 4.00[1, 2, 3] |
| Diversion | 4.42 | 1.71 | 4.51 | 4.47 | 4.59 | 3.34[1, 2, 3] |
| Logo Design | 4.40 | 1.42 | 4.45 | 4.47 | 4.47 | 3.89 |
| League Management | 4.24 | 1.59 | 3.94 | 4.67[1] | 4.39[1] | 4.16 |
| Organisational Attributes | 4.23 | 1.54 | 4.38 | 4.63 | 4.06 | 4.05 |
| League Identification | 3.36 | 1.82 | 3.46 | 3.72 | 3.27 | 3.07 |
| Peer Group Acceptance | 2.89 | 1.76 | 3.02 | 3.26 | 2.72 | 2.80 |

[1] = differences with the NRL; [2] = differences with Rugby Union; [3] = differences with the AFL

**Discussion and Future Research**

**Discussion**

The findings from Research Question 1 reveal the brand association literature for sport teams can be adopted to understand sport league associations. The mean score for 12 of the 14 associations were above the mid-point of 4.0 ($p < .01$) indicating that respondents agreed that these attributes, benefits and attitudes are linked to a professional football league. The associations of league identification and peer group acceptance were not rated above the 4.0 mid-point. Hence, their applicability to a sport league setting is questionable. Commitment which measures the strength of brand attitude toward the league scored highest with a mean of 5.81. The other associations load in a mixed order, not representing a specific order of attributes and benefits as one might have expected (Gladden and Funk, 2002). Overall, this evidence suggests integrating the two sport team-based brand association frameworks is beneficial to understand professional football league-based brand associations.

The findings from Research Question 2 highlight potential differences that consumers have toward professional sport leagues. The differences in the mean scores for tradition and

nostalgia for the AFL are not surprising given the AFL was established in 1897 whereas the A-League was founded in 2004. Another example is star player which was rated lower for the A-League than for the other three leagues despite the NRL and AFL utilizing a salary cap to ensure competitive balance. However, the other leagues do not face as much competition for marquee players from other leagues as the A-League does, where the best players leave for Europe to earn more money. To combat this effect and attract consumers through star players, one marquee player for each team, who is exempt from the salary cap, is allowed. Given differences in how leagues are managed, no differences for organisational attributes were identified for the four leagues. However, the NRL scores significantly lower in the association management than Rugby Union and AFL. This result is closely connected to questionable behaviour of players, which impacts the league's image up to a point where it is "almost beyond repair" (Chesterton, 2008).

## Managerial Implications

The current research will assist league brand managers in creating favourable brand associations and, hence, attract and retain consumers. Low evaluations for some brand associations are part of the leagues' unique characteristics, as shown in the lower evaluations of the A-League. Managers can develop specific strategies to counteract these evaluations. For example, the A-League is a very young league that is still in the growth stage of the product life-cycle. The other three leagues can be classified in the mature stage of the product life cycle (Lehmann and Winer, 2005). Hence, leagues should use different marketing approaches that fit their stage of the product life-cycle. Alternatively, the use of marquee players represents a good example for how a league can counteract low associations regardless of life-cycle stage. For example, the A-League in Australia and the MLS in the US have successfully used experienced European and South American star players to attract new fans and alter perceptions of league quality. Overall, the league-based brand association structure provided in this research will help leagues indentify unique characteristics of the brand in order to create or reinforce positive consumer associations (Suckow, 2009).

## Future Research

Future research should use the integrated league-based brand association framework to examine sport leagues outside Australia. Other brand associations for example the image of a league, or competitive balance can be added to the framework to improve its holistic character. In addition, since brand associations are only one part of the existing brand equity literature, a holistic league brand equity research should be undertaken. Future research should also consider the level of prior involvement among consumers and seek to examine how league associations differ based on the level of involvement with the league.

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