# Imaging the Game Day Experience:
# A Case Study of the National Rugby League (NRL)

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**Abstract**

The study investigates the sport game day experience, including commitment to the club and sense of belonging from the perspective of fans and enthusiasts of a professional National Rugby League (NRL) team. Overall, it is noticed that the entertainment value of the game, and its importance as an escape from day to day activities are considered crucial aspects. These elements are further supported by comments underlining the importance of the game's atmosphere, the game itself and the excitement and spectacle associated with live sport experiences. In contrast, half-time entertainment and team on field performance are sources of frustration and disappointment, potentially discouraging investment in the organisation. Given the increasingly competitive nature of the professional sports environment, including emergent entertainment alternatives for consumers, the findings have important implications for the future marketing of the NRL, and potentially for other professional sport teams and leagues.

**Keywords:** professional sport; fans; game; game-day experience; perceptions; consumption

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### Introduction

In the last decade, numerous researchers have examined the psychological and behavioural attributes of professional sport 'consumers', with particular attention directed at understanding the attributes of sport fans and enthusiasts. In line with this research interest, empirical studies have focussed on understanding fans' motivation toward professional sport teams and leagues. Further research has also attempted to develop measures and scales that enable the investigation of sport fandom, commitment, and psychological attachment. A growing body of literature has also considered the factors and motivations driving game attendances, and expenditure on merchandise and sport team membership (Pelletier et al, 1995; Theodorakis, Dimmock, Wann, & Barlas, 2010). Increased knowledge in these areas is important for sport marketers, club and league managers, sponsors, as well as sport fans and enthusiasts.

Today, as professional sport organisations attempt to assure their ongoing financial sustainability, emergent changes present obstacles. For example, Buraimo, Forrest, and Simmons (2006) discuss financial distress in the context of English football. The ever-present threat and still visible effects of the global financial crisis (GFC), changing sport consumers' preferences, and new forms of entertainment are exerting additional pressures in an already highly competitive professional sport environment. Together, these issues are limiting many sport consumers' capacity to invest in attending games, purchase merchandise or season membership.

In the case of Australia, there is an argument that the country's professional sport environment is highly convoluted (Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009; McDonald, Karg, & Lock, 2010). Consequently, this argument illuminates the internal and external pressures impacting professional sport organisations' long term financial viability. Australia's professional sport landscape is shared by several 'football' forms (Lenten, 2009). Four professional competitions adopted the word 'football': the Australian Football League (AFL), Australian Rugby League (ARU), National Rugby League (NRL) and the more recently established 'A-League' (soccer). Numerous cases of failed football and other professional sport franchises, together with unsuccessful merger attempts between struggling franchises have been reported (Booth, 2005; Davies, 2006; Jancetic, 2012).

Despite concerns, there is still a drive for further expansion (Fitzgibbon, 2012; Johnston & Wright, 2010; Theodosiou, 2012), and establishment of new leagues (ABL 2012) and teams in an already crowded sport and entertainment marketplace. In the case of the four 'football' leagues, Table 1 provides a snapshot of average attendance numbers in recent seasons. Overall, the figures are in part illustrative of the highly competitive nature of these competitions. Subsequently, the descriptive figures point to challenges in drawing consumers' interest, and, ultimately, their commitment in the form of club related expenditures.

**Table 1.** Average attendances in the AFL, A-League, ARU and NRL since 2005/2006.

| Year | AFL | ARU | NRL | A-League |
|------|------|------|------|----------|
| 2006 * | 36,415 | 24,017 | 16,486 | 11,636 |
| 2007 | 38,123 | 21,233 | 16,580 | 14,052 |
| 2008 | 38,296 | 20,621 | 16,317 | 15,344 |
| 2009 | 37,835 | 19,392 | 17,086 | 13,014 |
| 2010 | 38,477 | 19,933 | 17,453 | 10,443 |
| 2011 | 36,715 | 19,336 | 16,721 | 8,746 |
| Average 2006-2011 | 36,807 | 21,850 | 16,640 | 11,647 |

* Applicable to the 2005/2006 season for the A-League (played between August-February of each year). Source consulted: Austadiums.com

While many studies have researched sport consumers' behaviour in a number of environments, the study of NRL fans, especially in recent years has been limited. Increased knowledge of this group of professional sport consumers could be useful in identifying emergent needs, demands, expectations, or changes in their relationship with professional sport organisations. Added knowledge in these areas could be very useful for sport marketers and their organisations. Given the increasingly competitive nature of the professional sport industry and other forms of entertainment, sport marketers need to develop strategies to ensure their consumers and fans are not distracted or drawn to other sport leagues or entertainment options.

This study investigates NRL fans and enthusiasts' game experience. Using preferred game day experience and game day expectations, the study addresses the relationship between these characteristics and the sport consumers' future involvement with and consumption of the professional sport product. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are respondents' images of their preferred game day experience?

RQ2: What aspects of the game experience are most important to respondents?

RQ3: What aspects of the game day experience must be addressed by the organisation to provide a more satisfying experience?

### Review of Related Literature

*Conceptual frameworks in the study of sports' consumption and game-day experience*

For many years, different events, including sport performances, have been an intrinsic part of society as vehicles of leisure, excitement, as well as an arena to display emotions (Butt, 1976; Elias and Dunning, 1970, 1986; Korstanje, 2011; Weiss, 1969; Wohl, 1970). For instance, in ancient Rome, spectacles congregating the local populace have helped thwart social fragmentation (Korstanje, 2009). Leisure, excitement, and emotions continue to be important for much of society; several studies have focussed on these aspects in the context of 'sport consumers' (Baade, 2008; Ferguson, 1981; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Madrigal, 2003). A related element in professional sport economics and marketing, the demand for sports in contemporary times, including determinants of attendance to games, has also drawn significant attention (Borland & MacDonald, 2003). Indeed, many researchers have made conceptual contributions to the study of game day experience (Clemes, Brush, & Collins, 2011; Donihue, Findlay, & Newberry, 2007; Trail & James, 2001). Figure 1 provides a framework summarising these and other conceptual contributions.

Revenues derived from game day attendances represent important financial outcomes for many professional sport teams (Forrest & Simmons, 2006). Importantly, gate receipts also represent an important proxy for sport organisations to access other and alternative forms of revenue (Groza, 2010). In the case of professional sport organisations and leagues, there has been a propensity to rely on the saleability of television rights (Evens & Lefever 2011; Scherer & Whitson, 2009), sometimes, with adverse effects on attendance to live games (Buraimo, 2008; Forrest, Simmons, & Szymanski, 2004; García & Rodríguez, 2002). Buraimo et al (2009) designed a model of determinants of game attendance specifically to yield outcomes that could be relevant for individual clubs in making strategic decisions. The utilisation of the model allowed the authors to find that, attendance to games diminished as a result of the televising of games, especially on paid-for television. Further, Buraimo et al (2009) identified that,

television broadcasting of higher levels of competition in the same sport had the potential to detract consumers from attending live games.
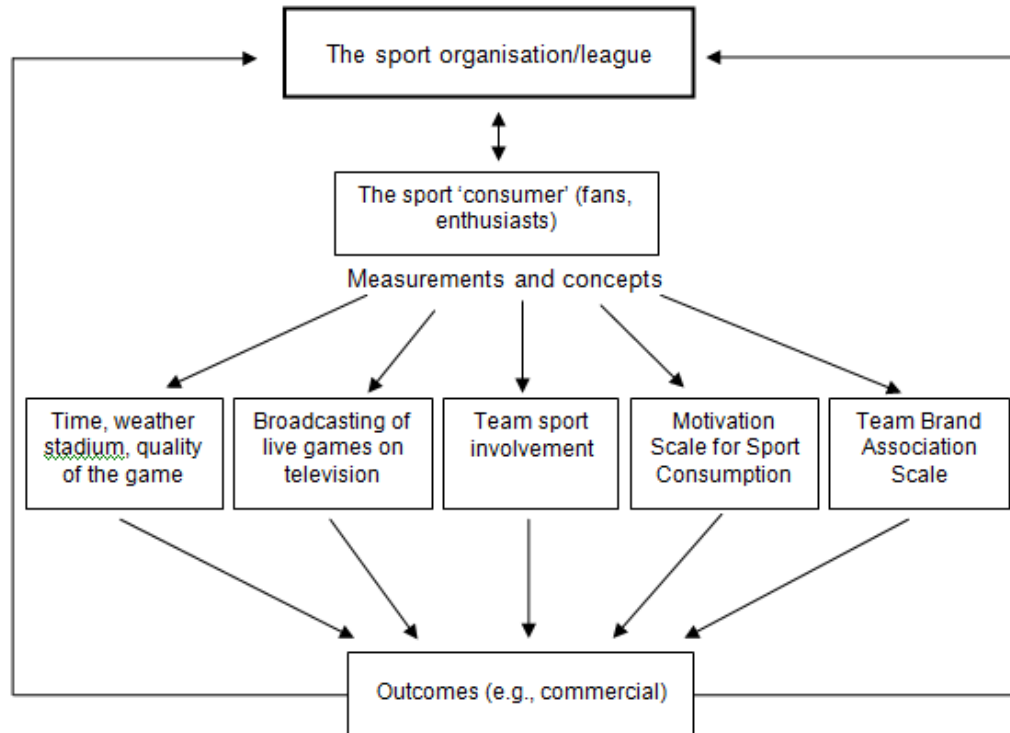


**Figure 1.** The game day experience: Contemporary conceptual contributions.

Although media, television, and sponsorship continue to be important revenue streams for professional sport leagues, there is increasing pressure to consider new and alternative revenue potential. The sale of game day attendances, game day packages, season memberships, merchandise, and the food and beverage represent important secondary revenue sources (Karg, McDonald, & Vocino, 2008; Wakefield, 2006). For instance, the uncertainty of the game's outcome is identified as a significant factor in maximisation of match attendances, especially because many spectators favour balanced rather than unbalanced competitions or leagues (Forrest & Simmons, 2002; Forrest, Simmons, & Buraimo, 2005). In utilising win ratios of teams in two different sports, AFL and NRL, and in successive seasons, Lenten (2009) proposed a measure of competitive balance. Lenten (2009) subsequently found that this measure was not only useful in analysing within season versus between-season uncertainty of outcome, but also as a potential complement "with within-season measures in time-series analysis" (p. 407).

Donihue et al (2007) proposed a model of game-day attendance in the context of baseball games during spring training. The model was divided into three categories, the first being time and weather variables, the second location and stadium factors, and the last quality of game variables (Donihue et al, 2007). The authors found that, while changes in people' incomes do not have an effect on attendance, factors such as location, average ticket prices and the quality of the game can affect people's decision to attend or to not attend a game. Moreover, as the local team's longevity in its location increases, game attendance tends to decline; in addition, attendance was found to be larger in cases where two teams co-exist in the same city (Donihue et al, 2007).

Funk et al (2004) studied team sport involvement using 18 antecedents that focussed on areas related to attendance to games. The identified areas included the sports entertainment value, excitement, vicarious achievement (i.e. feeling a sense of accomplishment when the team wins), escape, socialisation, or bonding with family and friends. Further, four facets relevant to participants' involvement profile were explored: attraction, centrality of lifestyle, self-expression, and risk. Funk et al (2004) were able to identify the exciting environment at games, vicariously experiencing game outcomes, and derived social interactions as primary properties. These and other findings of their study led Funk et al (2004) to underline the usefulness of their sport involvement construct to increase understanding of sport consumers' motives in a diverse and continuously changing industry.

The Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) is another measurement based on nine motives relevant to: social interaction, quality of the physical skill of the participants, family, physical attractiveness of participants, escape, and achievement (Trail & James, 2001). In adapting this measurement tool, as well as Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, and Jacquemotte's (2000) study on sex differences in sport fan behaviour, James and Ridinger (2002) studied spectators of college basketball games in the United States. The authors found significant gender differences, with males generally being more strongly connected to sports. Male respondents also scored higher ratings in terms of sharing the team's success, as well as feeling more disappointed than females by poor play or losses, or in their stronger desire to learn more about the sport's strategy. Females, on the other hand, felt more sense of achievement than males, and they were perceived as displaying stronger loyalty to the team they supported (James & Ridinger, 2002). Together, all these studies have made a significant theoretical contribution to the body of knowledge regarding game day experiences and sports' consumption.

Finally, Ross, Jams, and Vargas (2006) developed the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS), a measurement that, as its name suggests, intends "to measure professional sport team brand associations" (p. 260). These authors identified 11 dimensions related to consumers' brand associations of professional sport teams; of these, team success, team play characteristics, consumption experience or concessions, team success, and social interaction are closely related to the game experience. However, upon review of these dimensions, by measuring their reliability through Cronbach's alpha (i.e. scores above .70), the authors deemed the following eight dimensions as having acceptable reliability: team success, concessions, team history, rivalry, brand mark, organisational attributes, non-player personnel, stadium community, and team success.

Despite such a large body of contemporary research, the rapid events taking place in the sports' industry call for the further examination of emerging issues in the professional sport environment, including the examination of sport consumers' behaviour. Moreover, with the increasing globalisation and competitiveness of professional sport or entertainment alternatives, emerging technologies, and changing consumer behaviour (Chen & Yin, 2011), and new consumer trends, there are significant implications for the sports industry, in particular for sport's future consumption. In the context of sport events Filo, Funk, and Hornby (2009) acknowledge "that Web site marketing communication does activate attitude change within consumers" (p. 21). Similarly, in another services sector, tourism, and more specifically sport tourism, Bouchet, Lebrun, and Auvergne (2004) emphasise changes that have occurred among consumers. These changes have resulted in a more varied, demanding and qualitative consumption experience (Bouchet et al, 2004). Against this background, the following research will use the case of one NRL organisations to examine fans and enthusiasts' preferred and ideal game experience.

## Methodology

### *Sample*

While the main focus of this study was to investigate game-day experience among NRL fans, as part of a broader project, the study also examined contemporary issues affecting the organisation's current and future commercial operations. Contemporary managerial and marketing issues included fans' perceived benefits and reasons for purchasing season membership with the organisation, ways in which the organisation's

management leveraged the impacts of social media, and the organisation's relationship with the local community. These issues, however, are beyond the scope of this study, and might be presented and discussed in future research.

Table 2 illustrates that, males represent the dominant participating group; in fact, the ratio between males and females is almost seven to three. In terms of age, almost 40 percent of respondents are 34 years old or below, 32.2 percent between 35 and 44 years, and 28.8 percent over 45 years of age. Almost 30 percent of respondents have recently purchased club membership, followed by 24.3 percent who have had membership for two years, and 23.2 percent who had membership between three and nine years. From these groups, as many as 12 respondents have been members for 20 or more years; in contrast, 6.8 percent are not currently club members.

**Table 2.** Demographic and membership information.

| Gender | n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Males | 124 | 70.1 |
| Females | 50 | 28.2 |
| Missing | 3 | 1.7 |
| **Age groups** | **n** | **%** |
| 18-24 | 25 | 14.1 |
| 25-34 | 44 | 24.9 |
| 35-44 | 57 | 32.2 |
| 45-54 | 30 | 16.9 |
| 55 and above | 21 | 11.9 |
| **Respondents' membership status** | **n** | **%** |
| One year or less | 53 | 29.9 |
| Two years | 43 | 24.3 |
| Between three and nine years | 41 | 23.2 |
| Ten years and above | 27 | 15.3 |
| Currently has no club membership | 12 | 6.8 |
| Missing | 1 | 0.6 |

*Questionnaire*

Sections of the online questionnaire were designed in line with previous research (Funk et al, 2004; Irwin, Zwick, & Sutton, 1999; James & Ross, 2002; Madrigal, 2006; Pritchard et al, 2009; Stavros, 2005; Theodorakis et al, 2010). One section was designed to understand respondent perceptions of the club (images the club evoked among them), another to investigate respondents' membership status, reasons for purchasing season membership, and perceived and actual membership benefits. A further section gathered respondents' information about items concerning game-day experiences, and a final concerning respondents' demographic information (e.g., age,

gender). The online questionnaire link was active between February and April of 2011; during this time, 177 usable responses were collected.

According to the club's management, at the time of the data collection process the club had approximately six thousand members. Additionally, on average between ten and 15 thousand fans and spectators attended its home games. Thus, it is acknowledged that, the number of responses is limited, and the overall findings may not apply to the club's body of fans and spectators, or that of other NRL clubs or the league. However, the study sought to shed light on critical aspects of NRL experiences from the perspective of club's 'consumers'. In this context, the case study provides preliminary, practical, and useful information that could be further expanded in future research, and provide a foundation for research to build upon.

Once the data collection process was deemed complete, the data were exported into Microsoft Excel. Using this tool, the data, including eight Likert-scale type items (Table 3), were managed so that they could be subsequently exported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 18).

In accordance with previous research (Farrelly, Quester, & Burton, 1997; Madrigal, 2003, 2006), several statistical tests were conducted. To make comparisons between some of the participating groups, as in the case of gender and scaled questionnaire items, independent sample t-tests were used. In addition, to compare inter-group comparisons (age, membership status) versus scaled items, Scheffé post hoc were used. The software NVivo 9 was used to manage respondents' typed comments, especially those concerning fan game experience (Table 4). In this process, and in line with previous studies (Benthin et al, 1997; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Jones & Schumann, 2004; Krippendorff, 2004; Weber, 1990), content analysis was used in identifying, separating and grouping different themes emerging from those comments. In the next sections, respondents' verbatim comments will be abbreviated as 'R1' (Respondent 1), 'R2' (Respondent 2), and so forth.

*Process*

To gather the data, a decision was made to initially contact all 16 NRL clubs currently participating in the professional competition (King, Owen and Audas 2011). A letter was sent to the attention of the chief executive officers (CEOs) and management of each professional club. Correspondence outlined the purpose and objectives of the study. The letters, sent in August of 2010, also formally invited the sport organisations to participate in the study, allowing the research team to investigate clubs' 'consumers'

(fans and supporters) in various areas. For the purpose of this study, the following core themes were under investigation:

***Respondents' images of their game day experience***

Aspects of the game experience that are most important to respondents, and aspects of the game day experience must be addressed by the organisation to provide a more satisfying game day experience.

In September of 2010, one organisation's management responded, and committed to participate in the process of investigating its consumers. Because the regular NRL season was ending, the management requested that the research commence in February of 2011, when the NRL pre-season begins. This time of the year was considered appropriate, as fans and supporters may be in the process of preparing for, and therefore more involved in the upcoming season, including purchasing season tickets, club's new merchandise, or renewing club membership.

Several data collection modes were considered, including interviews with fans and spectators on game days, and paper questionnaire distribution among fans and spectators. However, it was decided that an online questionnaire was the most appropriate means of data collection. This decision was mainly based on limited financial, time, human and other resources preventing from physically attending games to distribute questionnaires. In addition, the organisation's agreement to use its web site to invite and direct potential respondents to the online questionnaire link was also believed to provide a stronger incentive among fans and enthusiasts. However, the limitations of using this low-cost, technology based tool are acknowledged. Indeed, an argument could be made that many potential respondents may not be technology savvy, be connected to the Internet, own a personal computer or lap top, or feel at ease or familiar completing an online questionnaire.

## Results

Table 3 illustrates participant responses to items measuring perceptions toward the organisation (NRL club) and the game day experience. The overall means demonstrate that, respondents were in clear agreement with the majority of the items. Primarily, respondents' appreciate the entertainment aspect of the game, associate the sport event with relaxation, enjoy the thrill of the game, and feel connected to their team/club. These areas were also supported by qualitative comments provided at the end of the itemized section:

R1: *"A team's real fans never walk out before fulltime, and don't boo their own team after a loss- teams don't deliberately lose. Sometimes they're not smart about how they play- but that's not to be booed."*

R2: *"For me it's an opportunity to put aside the stresses and strains of everyday life. To yell, chant, sing, boo as a reaction to what's happening with my team. A way of 'letting off steam'..."*

R3: *"I don't mind if they lose as long as they are competitive and play hard."*

R4: *"If the [Club name] play on a Friday night for example and lose then I feel that I have had a miserable weekend and do not look forward to Monday morning at work. If the [Club name] play on a Friday night and win then my whole outlook of the rest of the weekend is brighter, I enjoy myself more and enjoy coming in to the office on a Monday morning."*

R5: *"It does not matter if my team wins or loses, they [sic] will always be my team."*

R6: *"You win some and you lose some. Their victories are always exciting and make us want to go back again. It is always entertaining and if they lose then they always try even harder next game We, as fans get frustrated when decisions don't go their way, but we are only watching, the players must also feel this frustration. The team appears to have a good relationship on and off the field and this is very important. The Club makes the fans feel as though they are a very important part of the game and at the end of the game the players always acknowledge the fans, even if they must at times wish they could just disappear up the tunnel."*

**Table 3.** Internal reliability of section using interval scales (Using a scale, where 1: Strongly agree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neither disagree nor agree, 4: Agree, and 5: Strongly agree).

| Respondents' rating of elements (items) related to their feelings towards the sports organisation.* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cronbach's Alpha | | | .784 |
| Cronbach's Alpha based on standardised items | | | .798 |
| Number of items | | | 8 |
| Number of valid cases | | | 172 |
| **Statements (items)** | **n** | **Mean*** | **SD** |
| I enjoy sport because of its entertainment value. | 172 | 4.58 | .621 |
| For me sport is an escape from my day to day activities. | 172 | 4.28 | .902 |
| I enjoy watching sport because of the dramatic turn of events a sporting event can take. | 172 | 4.23 | .760 |
| It is important for me to feel connected to and as part of the team. | 172 | 4.16 | .903 |
| When my team loses a big game I feel like I have lost. | 172 | 4.15 | 1.024 |
| [Club's] sporting success is my success. | 172 | 3.94 | .986 |
| The opportunity to spend time with my family is one of the reasons I enjoy attending sporting events. | 172 | 3.74 | 1.177 |
| Wanting to spend time with friends is one reason why I attend sporting events. | 172 | 3.66 | 1.062 |

Research conducted by Mehus (2005) also considered the entertainment value motivations associated with sport spectatorship. In contrast, attending games to spend time with family and friends do not appear to be strong reasons to attend games among participants; indeed, these items were rated below the agreement level. This finding is in stark contrast with previous research (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Hall, O'Mahony, & Vieceli 2009; Kahle & Riley, 2004; Wann, Waddill, & Dunham, 2004) that underlines the significance of attending games with significant others (family and friends).

In spite of the strength of entertainment motivations, using independent sample t-tests to compare males versus females against these eight items, a statistically significant difference was identified concerning the item '*The opportunity to spend time with my family is one of the reasons I enjoy attending sporting events'* ($p<0.05$). Females (mean= 4.08) were clearly more in agreement with this item than males (mean= 3.60). This finding underlines the importance of game attendance in the context of leisure, to enjoy the game's thrill and excitement, and to share this experience with significant others.

This finding is potentially important in terms of the approach used to market to and connect with female sport consumers and fans. A growing body of literature has considered the differences between the expectations, motivations, satisfaction, and sport consumption of male and female fans (Davis, Mcdonald, & Karg 2010; Grove, Dorsch, & Hopkins 2012; James & Ridinger, 2002; Melnick & Wann, 2011). For instance, Wann, Schreder, and Wilson (1999) and Wann, Grieve, Zapalac, and Pease (2008) found that, female sport fans are more likely to be motivated by family needs and a desire to spend time with family and friends.

Running Scheffé post hoc to compare inter-group differences against the same eight items also identified several statistically significantly differences. For example, respondents of ages between 18 and 24 years were much more in agreement (mean= 4.52) with the item *'I enjoy watching sport because of the dramatic turn of events a sporting event can take'* than more mature respondent groups, particularly those aged 60 years and above (mean= 4.00) ($p<0.05$). The age group between 18 and 24 years felt stronger (mean= 4.40) regarding the item *'[Club's] sporting success is my success'* than other groups, particularly those aged between 45 and 55 years (mean= 3.61) ($p<0.05$). Similarly, the 'younger' respondents (mean= 4.88) were clearly more in agreement regarding *'I enjoy sport because of its entertainment value'* than did respondents aged 60 years and above (mean= 4.19) ($p<0.01$). This last finding is of importance when

considering Wann et al's (1999) research, where they concluded that, age and sport fan motivation are unrelated. This research clearly indicates that although fandom may not be impacted by age there is a strong correlation between age and the expectations concerning ideal and preferred sport game day experiences.

### *Images describing the game experience*

Over three quarters (136, 76.8%) of respondents provided comments concerning the following question: *"What words/phrases would you use to describe your game experience when [Club name] play home games?"* Table 4 illustrates the different threads that emerged from respondents' comments, with multiple allusions to the importance of leisure in the context of game attendance. While the stadium's atmosphere during games was the most chosen theme (45), one out of four comments related to both positive (e.g., the game's atmosphere) and less positive aspects.

R7: *"Atmosphere at the games… during the games and before, seeing the players and feeling as though we are part of it all."*

R8: *"My game experience was the friendly atmosphere at the stadium where other [Club's] fans are very friendly and make new friends while at the game. Enjoyed attending every home game..."*

R9: "*Atmosphere is brilliant and there is a real sense of loyalty. Have made awesome friends at footy."*

R10: *"Being at the game is much more exciting than watching it on TV. The roar when the [Club] score a try is exhilarating I get very disheartened when I hear "fan" boo their own team."*

The respondent comments are further illustrative of the relationship between fandom, belonging and game day experience. Fans and sport consumers identified positive game day experiences when there was a strong sense of place and space. The use of the phrases suggesting the friendly atmosphere and their sense of loyalty illuminate the ideal game day experience.

While neither the overall means nor the verbatim comments pertaining to the items in Table 3 identified any concerns about the club's on-the-field sporting performance, this area became obvious in many of the comments describing the game experience (Table 4):

R11: *"Amazing, there is nothing like being at the game live, the roar of the [Club] fans really makes the atmosphere at the stadium like no other. The team's recent poor performance at home is not a highlight of the home games though."*

R12: *"Atmosphere… is fantastic. Lack of perceived commitment and organisation of the team on the field at the moment is disgraceful."*

R13: *"…team performance is regularly frustrating and recently quite disappointing at home."*

R14: *"Excellent atmosphere at big games-large crowds, disappointing when the players walk out and you can tell from the onset that the team is going to lose…"*

R15: *"Sadly the players' performance so far this year has been pretty hopeless though - which makes the whole event a bit of a letdown!"*

**Table 4.** Respondents' descriptions of their game experience.

| Main emerging themes | n | %* |
|---|---|---|
| The stadium's atmosphere (e.g., fans singing) | 45 | 33.1 |
| Mixed feelings with game day experience | 36 | 26.5 |
| Importance of the game (the 'actual' game) | 12 | 8.8 |
| Excitement of attending | 11 | 8.1 |
| Disappointed about the game day experience | 11 | 8.1 |
| Fun, enjoyable, entertaining | 11 | 8.1 |
| A family 'affair' | 7 | 5.1 |

\* Percentages are calculated from a total of 136 comments provided.

Regarding the quality of other 'products' contributing to the overall game experience, respondents voiced their dissatisfaction with half-time entertainment options. The findings are especially important considering that, fans increasingly seek the entertainment and spectacle associated with live game day attendance. Further, a growing body of literature points to the competition associated with alternative entertainment offerings (Borland & MacDonald, 2003; Nadeau & O'Reilly, 2006; Robertson & Pope, 1999). If the sport game day experience fails to meet the consumers' need for entertainment and spectacle, as identified in the below comments, then there are foreseeable further pressures on the organisation's ability to convert fandom into finance, for instance, through sale of game day attendances and season memberships:

R16: *"… half time entertainment is a little useless, player performance has been up and down…"*

R17: *"…half time entertainment [is] really bad."*

R18: *"…great atmosphere, half time entertainment, and pre-match entertainment poor."*

R19: *"I love the atmosphere when the boys win or at least compete - consistently. Halftime entertainment I don't really take notice of."*

R20: *"Could mix it up a bit - seems to be the same sort of half time events all the time."*

R21: *"Half time entertainment is almost boring as we see the same things over and over again."*

R22: *"Half time entertainment is ordinary."*

R23: *"Half time entertainment is pretty boring."*

The above comments also align with O'Shea and Alonso's (2012) research concerning how sport organisations can convert fandom to commercial returns. Their research found that, a contemporary strategic objective of professional sport leagues and teams is to redevelop and repackage the sport game day experience. Such was the importance of experience, atmosphere and spectacle that sport managers were found to be running 'think tanks' aimed at finding ways to differentiate and add value to the sport game day experience (O'Shea & Alonso, 2012). Presently, the studied NRL team was not necessarily appropriately responding to fan expectations.

In view of respondent comments there was an increasing expectation that the sport game day experience was more than just the game taking place on the football field. Consequently, it could be argued that respondents were disenfranchised by what they considered boring and ordinary half time entertainment. However, where there were positive experiences, respondents made reference to half time entertainment that facilitated crowd involvement and generated a fun environment, as the following last comment demonstrates:

R24: *"The atmosphere is great and it always a very family friendly environment. We always enjoy the half-time entertainment at [Club's] home games, especially when they get the crowd involved in competitions out on the field. It doesn't have to be fancy entertainment…"*

Overall, these findings provide a context from which to re think match day entertainment as well as work to remind sport marketers that sport consumers are increasingly motivated by sports' entertainment appeal. Further, the findings also raise issues relevant to how sport organisations retain and create perceived value for their current members and fans. If current attendees are dissatisfied, then they might be

unlikely to renew their membership, convert first time attendances to long terms commitment, nor generate positive word of mouth (McDonald & Milne, 1997).

## Discussion and Conclusion

A large body of research has investigated fans, spectators and other sport enthusiasts in various areas. These areas include uncertainty of outcome, motivation to attend games, factors influencing game attendance, playoff uncertainty, and spectators' tendency to invest in the game day experience (Borland & MacDonald, 2009; Forrest & Simmons, 2002, 2006; Garland, MacPherson, & Haughey, 2004; Groza, 2010; King et al, 2011; Owen & Weatherston, 2004a, 2004b; Welki & Zlatoper, 1999). In a highly competitive and convoluted professional sport environment (Lock et al, 2009; McDonald et al, 2010), the study of fans and game attendees can assist both managers to address sport consumers' needs and demands, and for researchers to enrich the theoretical background and frameworks emerging from those investigations. In researching fans and enthusiasts of an NRL organisation, the study provides updated information on a topic that, although previously researched, has not been continuously followed in recent years. This aspect is however critical, as the number of sport leagues, sport organisations and other forms of entertainment options have continued to increase.

Figure 2 provides a conceptual framework based on respondents' comments concerning game day experience. The largest group of the participating NRL organisation's 'stakeholders' or 'consumers', including fans and club enthusiasts, strongly perceive the stadium's atmosphere as the core of the experience. Aspects such as the actual game (watching), the excitement, and the entertainment related to athletes' performance are also important factors affecting respondents' images of their game day experience. In contrast, respondents identify shortcomings in various areas, including their disappointment at home ground on field losses. This finding relates to management's investment in the purchase or retainment of talented 'marquee' and other players, and is dependent on external forces, including injuries, the calibre of the opposing team, refereeing, or the weather.
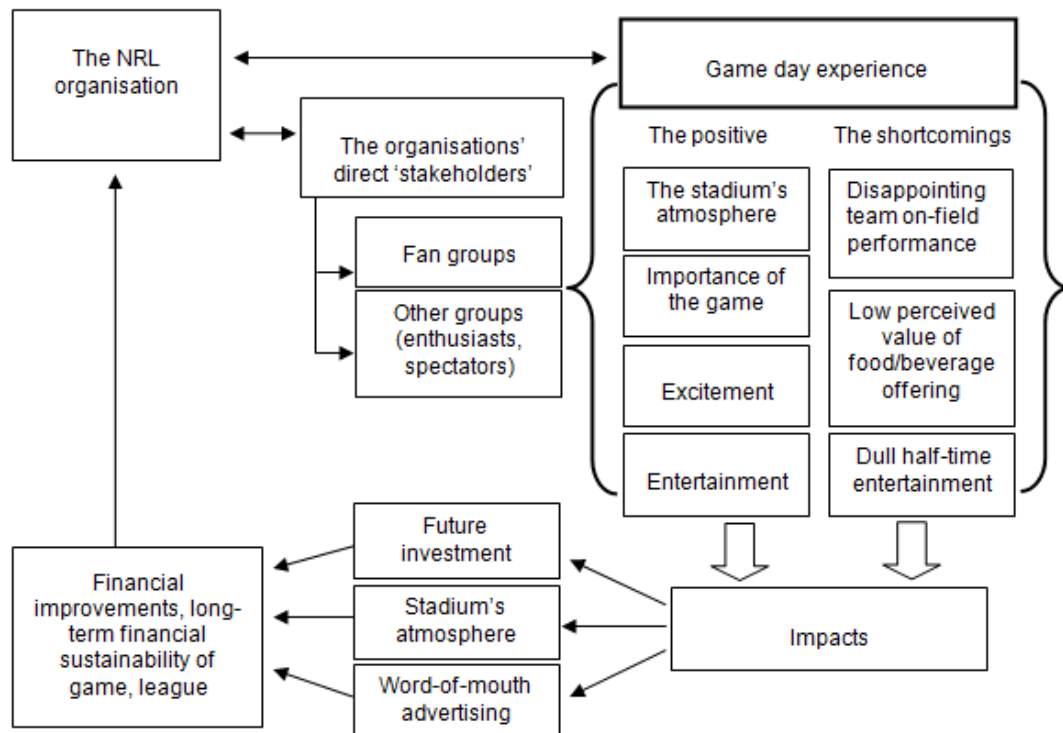
**Figure 2.** Conceptual framework of the game day experience.

However, concerns over other, more 'controllable' and tangible aspects of the game day experience were also articulated. For example, concerning price there was a perception of low value for money, this finding was especially relevant to food and beverage products at the stadium. In addition, comments underlined inadequate and poor half-time entertainment. These aspects were found to have a negative impact on the overall game day experience among some groups of respondents, and may extend further to affect their views and comments of their post-game experience. The carry over effect of this dissatisfaction may potentially contribute to negative word-of-mouth advertising. The significance of negative word of mouth is further complicated by the media habits of sport fans. With the advent of electronically-driven technologies, including social media, poor game day experience can be communicated widely and quickly.

*Limitations*

Overall, the study could be enhanced by a larger number of respondents, as well as being carried out at different times of the NRL season. Doing so could have provided a more general overview of the club's fans and game attendees, as well as allowed for the analysis of seasonal comparisons. Given these acknowledged limitations, the

findings are not generalisable to the club or the NRL league. However, the findings do illuminate some important aspects that could serve as a point of departure for the studied organisation in its marketing efforts, especially in seeking to draw more spectators, and encourage game day attendances and secondary spend, including merchandise and food and beverage purchases. At the same time, both the findings and limitations provide a starting point for future research to build upon and investigate the game experience in the NRL or other sport leagues.

### *Future Research*

Apart from filling the gaps concerning the number of respondents and seasonality of data collection, future research could also seek to expand the scope of the present study to other NRL institutions. Findings of these studies could confirm or disconfirm whether or not the shortcomings identified in this study are symptomatic of the entire NRL competition. In doing so, managers and the NRL administration would be presented with information of important practical marketing value. In addition, findings could serve as a tool to examine other leagues and organisations that are equally confronting the challenges of succeeding in a convoluted sports and entertainment environment. Together, these research efforts could also further expand and develop the theoretical underpinnings surrounding the increasingly complex game day experience.

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