Title:

The development and change of brand associations and their influence on team loyalty over time

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Abstract

The importance of team brand associations in sport management research is well documented but the formation and stability of these associations has not been investigated. The current research tested the development, change, and predictive ability of brand associations over time. Longitudinal quantitative data were collected from consumers of a new Australian Football League (AFL) team (N = 169) at three points in time. One-sample t-tests revealed that brand associations had developed through marketing communications and the launch of the team, before the team had played its first AFL game. Repeated Measures MANOVA and Latent Growth Modelling showed brand associations changed over time, reflecting consumers’ experiences with the team. A Cross-Lagged Panel Model highlighted that brand associations influenced consumer loyalty in the future. Consequently, sport managers are provided with insights on the development and change of brand associations new consumers link with sport teams.

Keywords: Brand Associations; Fan Loyalty; New Teams; Sport Consumer; Latent Growth Model; Cross-Lagged Panel Model
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The development and change of brand associations and their influence on team loyalty over time

Sport consumers, consisting of spectators or fans, are considered the key stakeholders of professional sport organizations as they directly and indirectly contribute to the generation of operating revenue (Mason, 1999; McDonald, Karg, & Vocino, 2013). Consumers are integral stakeholders of professional sport organizations as they purchase game tickets, buy merchandise, and increase the value that can be extracted from sponsorship and television broadcasting deals. Given the substantial costs involved in running a professional sport team, sport organizations must attract new consumers whilst developing existing consumers into loyal fans. The implication being that loyal fans will continue to support the team during periods where success is limited and will interact with the team in a number of settings, increasing their team’s overall operating revenue (Gladden & Funk, 2001). For these reasons, building team loyalty represents arguably the most important objective for professional sport organizations. However, developing loyal fan bases represents an increasingly challenging scenario. Today, professional sport represents a competitive environment, in which an expanding number of teams battle with each other and alternate leisure options to attract, retain, and develop loyal fans (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). One key factor to this increased competitiveness is the introduction of new teams.

New sport teams face the greatest challenges in attracting spectators and developing loyal fans. Relative to their established competitors, new teams do not have existing consumer bases to market to, nor can they rely on past achievements to attract fans (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011; Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2011). Additionally, new teams are initially created without a prior history, which means that the experiences consumers have with the team are usually limited or non-existent. Therefore, new teams are presented with the challenge of developing new consumers, who have a
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limited understanding of the team or what the team brand represents, solely through marketing communications. This environment necessitates that new teams display consistent and effective brand images and build positive association sets in the mind of the consumer.

This is particularly relevant given the prominence of expansion observed across many of the world’s major sport leagues in recent years. In the last five years, some examples of expansion include: In Australia, the creation of eight teams facilitating the establishment of the Big Bash League (Cricket), the inclusion of two new A-League (Soccer) franchises, the addition of two new teams to the Australian Football League (AFL), and one new Super Rugby entity. In India, eight new teams have been created to establish the new Indian Super League (Soccer) and two additional teams have been included in the Indian Premier League (Cricket). In the USA, three teams have been added to the Arena Football League (American Football), and Major League Soccer has introduced five new teams while planning for an additional three more teams before 2020. This activity is also complemented by new consumers being exposed to teams they are not familiar with when they move within, and between, countries. US Census (2013) data reveals close to six million people moved across states within the USA in 2013, highlighting another opportunity for teams to build their consumer bases. Thus, for the purposes of this research we consider how fans develop perceptions of entirely new sport franchises, and franchises that are established, but have not yet been experienced by a particular consumer. We subsequently refer to these consumers as ‘new consumers’ for the remainder of this paper.

Despite the challenges faced by new or unknown teams, research has indicated that individuals can develop deep psychological connections with new teams before the team has even played a match (James et al., 2002). This indicates perceptions can form quickly in the mind of consumers and without direct experiences (e.g., watching the team compete in a match). Other research indicates that socialization agents form central information sources
that shape individuals’ perceptions, or brand associations, towards sport objects (Funk & James, 2001). Such brand associations represent the attributes and benefits linked to the team in the mind of the consumer and have been demonstrated to predict loyalty in a range of sport settings (e.g., Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013; Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008; Funk, 2002; Gladden & Funk, 2001). Whilst brand association research provides insights into how teams can form and develop relationships with new consumers, it is important to extend our understandings related to how such associations form and develop, especially in scenarios where new consumers may have little or no direct experiences with the team, such as when a new team is established, or when an individual moves to a new region. In this research, we propose to add to the literature by investigating how brand associations form in contexts where new consumers do not have past experiences with the brand and must rely on information from marketing efforts and media communication. Additionally, we propose to examine how brand association perceptions develop over time and how such association sets impact newly established fan-team relationships, answering a call from the literature (James et al., 2002).

The manuscript is presented using the following sections. The literature review provides an overview of consumer loyalty, brand associations consumers link to sport teams, and their relationship with team loyalty. The method section offers information on the research context and a rational for examining a new sport team. The analysis and results section outline three points of data collection and the treatment of longitudinal data to address three hypotheses. The discussion section explains the findings in relation to the research context and existing literature. Subsequently, the three main contributions of this research are provided and managerial implications are offered. Last, the limitations of the research are acknowledged and directions for future research are provided.

Review of Literature
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The sport product is largely unpredictable in that teams are unable to guarantee victories and, therefore, cannot consistently deliver fans the benefits associated with supporting a successful team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton, 2007). Thus, the importance of building and maintaining loyal fan bases with connections stemming beyond on-field performance has become a prominent area of research within the sport management literature (Doyle et al., 2013; McDonald, 2010; McDonald et al., 2013). Correspondingly, sport organizations have increasingly adopted brand management approaches designed to attract new fans, broaden the sport experience, and facilitate long-term relationships with fans through a multi-faceted connection (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). Such activities are important as teams must develop strong, positive, and unique brands, which differentiate them from other teams in the league that compete for consumer support (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014), to influence consumers’ loyalty with the team.

Sport Consumer Loyalty

Loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing” (Oliver, 1999, p. 34). Based on this definition, loyalty represents a multidimensional construct containing attitudinal and behavioral components. The attitudinal component of loyalty describes the extent to which an individual holds positive attitudes toward a brand; whereas the behavioral component is defined by repeat purchase and usage of a certain brand (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). The two components are closely linked in that positive attitudes toward a brand increase the likelihood that an individual will engage in behaviors benefitting the same brand. In the context of sport team support, loyalty manifests in the form of persistent, durable attitudes which are resistant to change and positively influence behavior (Funk & James, 2006; Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000). Therefore,
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Loyal sport fans may remain with their team regardless of circumstance, having a predisposition to engage in behaviors that support the team. For these reasons, sport teams must focus on branding to protect themselves against threat of competing leisure interests and changes in team performance, such as a reduction in team performances and victories. Brand associations, reviewed next, represent diverse predictors of sport team loyalty and provide a theoretically sound method to assess the evaluation of attractive characteristics linked with sport teams.

**Brand Associations**

Brand associations represent any attribute or benefit linked to a brand as perceived by a consumer (Keller, 1993). These associative links refer to tangible (e.g., Coca-Cola tastes great) and intangible (e.g., Versace is prestigious) descriptors the consumer links to the brand. Brand associations provide indicators to brand salience, the perceived favorability associated with a brand, and ultimately influence the likelihood of brand selection and consumption (Romaniuk, 2013; Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013). Researchers suggest that if an individual’s evaluation of a team is neutral or negative, he or she is likely to become apathetic toward or disidentify with the team (e.g., Lock & Filo, 2012; Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2013). However, should an individual use his or her available knowledge of a team’s brand and determine that the team is able to satisfy certain wants and needs, he or she is likely to develop favorable associations and engage in a greater breadth and depth of team supportive behaviors (Funk & James, 2001, 2006).

From a brand management perspective, brand association development represents an important area for sport management research as associations represent characteristics of the sport team that can be influenced through management and marketing (Bauer et al., 2008). Thus, brand associations are important in determining how new consumers perceive and ultimately engage with a team. Sport team brand associations that researchers have examined
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reflect the specific attributes and benefits individuals link to their favorite sport teams. Attributes represent inherent characteristics linked to a team, which help individuals form team perceptions, whereas benefits represent the meaning and value extracted from the team (Gladden & Funk, 2002). Two widely used scales measuring 13 and 11 identified sport team brand associations respectively have emerged from sport team brand association research.

The Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) (Ross et al., 2006) identified 11 associations consumers linked to teams. These associations were: Non-Player Personnel, Team Success, Team History, Stadium Community, Team Play Characteristics, Brand Mark, Commitment, Organizational Attributes, Concessions, Social Interactions, and Rivalry. Although not compartmentalized by Ross et al. (2006), conceptually these associations represent either attributes (Non-Player Personnel, Team Success, Team History, Stadium Community, Team Play Characteristics, Brand Mark, Organizational Attributes, Concessions, and Rivalry) or benefits (Commitment, Social Interactions). Similar to the TBAS, the Team Association Scale (TAS) (Gladden & Funk, 2001) contains 13 associations divided into the attributes (eight) and benefits (five) linked with sport teams. The associations that represent attributes include evaluations of the team’s: Success, Star Player, Head Coach, Management, Logo, Stadium, Product Delivery, and Tradition. The TAS associations that represent benefits include Pride in Place, Escape, Fan Identification, Nostalgia, and Peer Group Acceptance. How consumers ultimately evaluate these perceptions is dependent on the context in which they encounter the sport brand (e.g., Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001).

Previous sport brand association research has focused on contexts where the teams of interest are established entities and compete in an established league. Thus, these contexts represent scenarios where consumers are not necessarily new consumers and have had opportunities to directly experience team-related occurrences. Although research has been conducted using diverse settings such as German and Australian professional sport, as well as
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USA collegiate and professional sport, research has yet to focus on new consumers of new teams. This is somewhat surprising given both the importance of attracting new fans and subsequently turning them into loyal fans, as well as the increased prevalence of new team introductions around the world (James et al., 2002; Lock et al., 2011).

Existing sport brand association research has been conducted with consumers who had previous experiences with their favorite, established team (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008). In contrast to teams who have existed for many years, new teams operate in an environment where new consumers are still learning about the team and what the team represents. Consumers of existing teams have formed their brand associations linked with the team based on experienced attributes of the team and benefits received through their experiences with the team. However, the brand associations new consumers link with teams are not based on past experiences but created through the evaluation of marketing programs. These marketing programs are designed to influence brand awareness and establish favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in the mind of consumers (Keller, 1993). For example, Alex moves to Orlando from China and gets exposed to marketing of the Orlando Magic. Based on Alex’s evaluation of the attributes and benefits, he/she develops brand associations toward the Orlando Magic, such as the Orlando Magic have star players that he/she likes because of their skills. Therefore, new consumers’ sport brand associations are generally developed based on communication and marketing efforts.

New teams provide an optimal environment to examine how new consumers’ brand associations develop based on communication efforts of the team before consumers attend their first game (e.g., Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). As a result, Hypothesis 1 was developed: New consumers’ brand associations can be developed through communication efforts of the team.
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As brand management is an ongoing process and consumers’ evaluations of associations are continually impacted by their experiences with the brand (Bauer et al., 2008), the stability of brand associations requires further examination. Previous cross-sectional brand association research findings reflect consumers’ evaluations of the brand at a certain point in time, but do not provide insights on the stability of these associations. Given that the core product of sport organizations fluctuates in composition and quality, brand management has been identified as both an approach to provide stability and continuity to sport teams (Bauer et al., 2008) and an avenue to positively influence consumers (Gladden & Funk, 2001). However, consumers’ brand associations are time sensitive and reflect their perceptions of the team and depend on the temporal context in which the team was evaluated (cf., Aaker et al., 2001). For new consumers, it can be expected that brand associations change based on their initial experience with the team. In Alex’s case, experiences of Orlando Magic games may influence the brand associations linked with the team, such as the Orlando Magic have star players that he/she likes because they were approachable after the game. These experiences may influence the development of additional associations (e.g., players’ skills and approachable) or impact the strength and composition of existing associations (e.g., increased liking because she was able to confirm players’ skills).

Therefore, new consumers’ brand associations are likely to fluctuate over time based on consumers’ experiences with the team. New teams provide an optimal environment to examine how new consumers’ brand associations change over time as consumers experience the team after introduction of the team to the league (e.g., James et al., 2002; Lock et al., 2012). As a result, Hypothesis 2 was developed: New consumers’ brand associations change over time based on the direct experiences consumers have with the team.

Sport Team Brand Associations and Loyalty
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In sport, attitude development theorists argue that attitudes represent outcomes of associations related to attributes and benefits (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Funk and James (2004) conceptualized the Fan Attitude Network (FAN) model, which outlines that consumers will develop a positive attitude toward a sport team when they perceive that the team provides attractive attributes and meets consumers’ dispositional needs. These dispositional needs are met through benefits that the sport team provides. Hence, the current research follows the theoretical conceptualization that brand associations related to attributes and benefits influence the development of attitudes. Congruent with this conceptualization, previous research highlights that sport team brand associations are effective predictors of team loyalty.

Empirical research utilizing the TAS has supported the links between brand associations and team loyalty. For example, Gladden and Funk (2001) found seven TAS associations were significant predictors of fan loyalty, whereas Funk (2002) illustrated that six sport team brand associations enabled US sport fans to be segmented into three loyalty groups with 74% accuracy. The TAS has been utilized in research contexts outside of the US, with extensions made to German (Bauer et al., 2008), Greek (Filo et al., 2008), and Australian (Doyle et al., 2013; Filo et al., 2008; Kunkel et al., 2014) sport scenarios. Filo et al. (2008) found that the associations Management, Popularity (a combined measure of Tradition and Success), Nostalgia, and Fan Identification (termed Vicarious Achievement) possessed a positive and significant relationship with loyalty. More recently, Doyle et al. (2013) demonstrated the TAS brand associations were able to explain 57% and 59% of the variance in attitudinal loyalty scores reported by large (eight significant predictors) and small market share (five significant predictors) teams respectively.

Despite calls to investigate brand association development using longitudinal research (Bauer et al., 2008), to date, brand association researchers have exclusively employed cross-
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sectional designs (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008; Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2008). Collectively, these studies highlight that brand associations are positively correlated with consumer loyalty at a given point in time. However, brand associations reflect consumers’ evaluation of the brand stored in their memory, therefore, it can be expected that brand associations also influence consumers’ loyalty in the future. For example, the Orlando Magic’s marketing communication initiates Alex’s brand association development based on her/his evaluation of the skills of Orlando Magic’s star players, which influences her/his loyalty with the team (i.e., relationship between brand associations at Time 1 and consumer loyalty at Time 1). After experiencing the Orlando Magic, Alex’s experiences meeting the Orlando Magic’s star players influences her/his loyalty with the Orlando Magic (i.e., relationship between brand associations at Time 2 and consumer loyalty at Time 2). However, her/his evaluation of the skills of the players, which was developed based on the marketing communication of the team, may still influence her/his loyalty with the Orlando Magic (i.e., relationship between brand associations at Time 1 and consumer loyalty at Time 2). Therefore, it can be proposed that brand associations influence consumer loyalty in the future. As a result, Hypothesis 3 was developed: New consumers’ brand associations have a positive relationship with consumer loyalty in the future.

Method

A longitudinal quantitative research design consisting of three online questionnaires was utilized to test the three hypotheses. To examine the development and change of sport team brand associations, fans of a new Australian Rules football team were surveyed. This approach answers calls from existing sport team brand association literature to study diverse sport consumer markets (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Funk; 2002; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2008; Ross, Walsh, & Maxwell, 2009) by examining a new team in its early stage of development. Utilizing a new team context also enabled this research to examine the
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development and stability of new consumers’ team brand associations and their influence on team loyalty over time.

Research Context

The research focused on a new elite-level Australian Rules football team competing in the Australian Football League (AFL). The AFL is the most watched sport league on Australian television and attracts average attendances of around 40,000 per match (McDonald & Stavros, 2012). The Gold Coast Suns are a new expansion franchise in the AFL and provided the research context. As a strategic part of AFL expansion, the Gold Coast was granted a license to become the league’s 17th franchise in 2009. In 2009 and 2010 the team played games in the semi-professional TAC Cup competition and Victorian Football League (VFL), playing as the yet-to-be-branded Gold Coast Football Club. During this time, the team consulted the community on potential names, and announced in mid-2010 that they would be known as the Gold Coast Suns and would begin playing at a new stadium in 2011. The team then started their first AFL season in 2011 competing as newly-formed Gold Coast Suns.

Data was collected in three waves. At the time of the first data collection point (Time 1, October 2010), the team had played several games in the VFL, which acts as a developmental league for AFL clubs. Marketing communication were heavily focused on promoting Karmichael Hunt, who was a star player of the rival Rugby League, and Gary Ablett, who had won the AFL most valuable player award three times and was a five-time All-Australian player at the time of recruitment. At the time of the second data collection point (Time 2, April 2011), the Gold Coast Suns had entered the elite AFL competition and lost three out of three games, finishing the season last with three wins and 19 losses. Marketing communication were focused on the start of the season and the novelty factor of the new team. At the time of the third data collection point (Time 3, April 2012), the Gold Coast Suns had lost three out of three games, finishing the season second last with three wins.
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and 19 losses. Marketing communications were focused on the community engagement of the team and their youth development approach.

Procedures

Invitations to participate in the research were sent by the Gold Coast Suns’ fan and member relations department to a list of individuals stored in their database. This list contained the details of individuals who agreed to be contacted by the team either because they signed up as members (e.g., season ticket holders) or voluntarily opted to receive communications from the team. An invitation to participate in the research and a link to each respective questionnaire was included in the official Gold Coast Suns’ online newsletter during the months of October 2010 (Time 1), April 2011 (Time 2), and April 2012 (Time 3). Each survey remained active for a period of two weeks. At the completion of each survey, all data were downloaded for analysis.

Materials

Materials consisted of three online questionnaires, which gathered data relevant to the identified hypotheses. To measure brand association perceptions, 11 single-item TAS (Gladden & Funk, 2001) associations were included. The decision to utilize the TAS was made as it has been used in a wider variety of settings than the TBAS. Each item was operationalized on a Likert scale anchored with strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The 11 brand associations were represented by: Head Coach, Logo, Management, Peer Group Pressure, Pride in Place, Product Delivery, Stadium, Star Player, Success, Escape, and Fan Identification. The established TAS associations Tradition and Nostalgia were not measured due to the team being a new entity void of nostalgic moments and traditions during the data collection schedule. Although it is beneficial to examine abstract constructs, such as loyalty or commitment, via multiple items, single-item measures are useful to capture the core of each brand association (for a review see Rossiter, 2002). The use of single-items to measure
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the brand associations complied with the team’s desire to not overburden their fans with overly long surveys (cf., Kwon & Trail, 2005). Furthermore, single-item measures have been deemed appropriate for examining brand constructs (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), as respondents get frustrated if they are asked to answer similar questions repeatedly.

To measure loyalty, four seven-point Likert scale items anchored with strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) were included. These items measured respondents’ commitment, willingness to pay, intention to support the team and intention to purchase merchandise (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001) and, therefore, captured elements of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. Demographic information including respondent age, gender, and ethnicity were also gathered. Individuals were also asked to provide their permanent email address and a unique fan number (allocated to them by the team) for data management and matching. A list of the Likert scale items included in the questionnaires is provided in the Appendix.

Participants

The longitudinal sample (N = 169) was derived from three survey waves that were used to collect data from Gold Coast Suns’ fans. Collectively, the newsletters including the links to the three questionnaires were distributed to 44,119 email addresses, and collected a total of 4,393 completed usable responses (Time 1 N = 1,718; Time 2 N = 1,738; Time 3 N = 937). Based on the invitations delivered and the usable questionnaires completed, an overall effective response rate of 9.95% was observed. A total of 169 individuals completed all three surveys, forming the longitudinal sample of interest. Respondents were predominantly male (63%) and identified ethnically as Australian, New Zealander or Pacific Islander (76%). Respondents ranged in age from 18-79 years with a mean age of 47 (SD = 13.75). The characteristics of the longitudinal sample closely mirrored those of the total datasets. Although respondents were slightly older than respondents of the overall sample (M = 44
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years), Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences for gender \[ \chi^2 (3, N = 1,718) = 4.73, p = .19 \], ethnicity \[ \chi^2 (18, N = 1,718) = 18.13, p = .44 \], and education \[ \chi^2 (15, N = 1,718) = 17.72, p = .28 \], and MANOVA tests revealed no significant differences for money spent on merchandise \( F = .42, p = .52 \) and AFL games watched on television \( F = 1.99, p = .16 \). These results represent the analyses performed with respondents of Time 1, however, results were consistent for respondents of Time 2 and Time 3. Therefore, individuals who comprised the longitudinal sample did not differ from respondents who did not complete all three waves of data collection (following Jordan, Walker, Kent, and Inoue’s recommendations; 2011), and the sample was deemed to be representative of the Gold Coast Suns’ fan population. At Time 3, respondents indicated that, in the previous season, they had attended on average, 8.6 games at the stadium, watched 12.2 Suns games on TV, and spent $107 on Suns merchandise.

Analysis

Data analysis started with a screening process to create the longitudinal dataset from the three individual survey phases. Two steps guided this process. First, cases defined as unreliable due to response biases (e.g., individuals who marked the same number for each question or completed the questionnaire in an unrealistically short time) or missing data were removed in each of the three collected data sets. Second, individuals who completed all three questionnaires were identified by cross-referencing the unique fan number and email address gathered in each wave. Using the merge datasets by variable function, a master file containing the longitudinal data relevant to this study was compiled.

Following the merge, data were inspected for validity, multicollinearity, and reliability. Through investigation of construct validity, which refers to how well items measured the construct they were intended to measure (Bagozzi, 1978), two associations were eliminated from data analysis. The brand associations Success and Team Identification
SPORT TEAM BRAND ASSOCIATIONS were included in the questionnaires but later excluded from data analysis for conceptual reasons. The association Success was excluded, because of a lack of content validity as the wording of success (“It is important that the Gold Coast Suns genuinely compete for the premiership”) does not reflect a brand association, but an evaluation of importance for success. This is supported by the high mean scores of the item of Time 1 \( (M = 6.01), \) Time 2 \( (M = 5.63), \) and Time 3 \( (M = 6.05) \) despite the team’s lack of success. This aspect is addressed in the limitations section. The association Team Identification was excluded, because of theoretical reasons, as identification reflects an attitude rather than a benefit (cf., Funk & James, 2004; Lock et al, 2012). Discriminant validity was examined through investigation of inter-item correlations for multicollinearity, which needed to be lower than \( .80 \) (Kline, 1998), and examination of the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which needed to be below 10 (Kennedy, 2003; Myers, 1990). Construct reliability was examined through Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) scores, which needed to be above .70 to ensure internal consistency of the loyalty construct (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Addressing Hypothesis 1, descriptive analyses were used to determine which brand associations were saliently linked to the new sport team. One sample \( t \)-tests were performed against the test value of 4.0, which indicates the mid-point of a seven-point Likert scale. Given the large number of comparisons, a Bonferroni correction \( (p = .0055) \) was applied to minimize Type I error (Cabin & Mitchell, 2000).

Addressing Hypothesis 2, Repeated Measures MANOVA and Latent Growth Modelling were utilized to assess change of the brand associations at the measurement and construct level respectively. Repeated Measures MANOVA were applied to examine differences of unique brand associations. Mauchly’s test of Sphericity was used to determine if the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated in the merged data. Wilk’s Lambda was then utilized to justify the significance of the global model. The effect size and
the statistical power of the proposed model were captured using partial eta square and beta error probability (Pierce, Block, & Aguinis, 2004). Given a significant result reported in Mauchly’s test of Sphericity, the conservative Greenhouse-Geisser correction was used (Glantz & Slinker, 2000).

A Latent Growth Model approach was applied to examine the stability of a latent brand association construct. Partial Least Squares regression analyses were applied to develop one composite score at each time of all brand associations. Conceptually, brand associations were treated as a formative construct because the meaning of the latent variable was derived from its unique dimensions (Coltman, Devinney, Midgley, & Veniak, 2008; Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001), and each of the decompositional facets was not interchangeable (Jarvis, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Measurement invariance was tested following procedures outlined by Chan (1998). Configural invariance of the Latent Growth Model was supported as measured variables remained unchanged across measurement occasions. Metric invariance was supported as item loadings in Time 2 and Time 3 closely mirrored item loadings in Time 1. Second, a covariance-based structural equation model (CB-SEM) was applied to examine the growth curve of brand association construct over time (Bollen & Curran, 2006). To assess model fit, the chi-square goodness of fit test ($\chi^2/df$), the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) were utilized. The loadings of the intercept factors, which represents respondents’ initial evaluation of brand associations, were constrained at a value of 1 over time. The loadings of the three repeated-measured composite scores of the brand association construct for the slope were specified as $[0, \lambda, 1]$. This configuration proposes a linear growth curve across the points of data collection. This process indicates that the growth of brand associations started at zero-percent at Time 1 and reached 100-percent at Time 3 with freely-
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estimated loadings (λ) of the trajectory at Time 2 within the designated time frame. The purpose of the loading specifications was to capture the proportionality of the proposed linear change to facilitate the subsequent interpretation of findings.

Addressing Hypothesis 3, a Cross-Lagged Panel Model using CB-SEM (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Bentler & Speckart, 1981) was used to examine the influence of brand associations on team loyalty over time. A power analysis was performed using a generalized variance-covariance likelihood-ratio test with Monte Carlo simulation (Muthen & Muthen, 2002). Results indicated that, with 169 respondents, the power (d = .72) of the proposed model was slightly below the recommended threshold of .80. The statistical power indicates the probability of failing to retain a true alternative hypothesis (Type II error), meaning that an effect that is present is not detected. However, a lack of power has no impact on significant effects that are identified in the analysis. This aspect is addressed in the discussion and limitation section of this article. Subsequently, latent constructs of brand associations and loyalty were utilized to examine the path of brand associations (i.e., exogenous variable) in Time 1 on loyalty (i.e., endogenous variable) at Time 1, Time 2, and Time 3; as well as brand associations at Time 2 on loyalty at Time 2 and Time 3; as well as brand associations at Time 3 on loyalty at Time 3. Correlations were allowed among exogenous variables as well as among the residual error terms of endogenous constructs (cf., Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). The same fit criteria applied to the CB-SEM Latent Growth Model were also applied to the CB-SEM Cross-Lagged Panel Model.

Results

The results section provides an overview of the measures and then outlines results addressing the three hypotheses. Correlation matrices were inspected for multicollinearity between brand associations, and between brand associations and the loyalty construct. The correlation coefficients ranged from -.06 to .59 falling well below suggested cut-off
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recommendations (Kline, 1998). The correlation matrices also provided support that
discriminant validity existed between the nine brand associations, and between the brand
associations and the loyalty construct. Likewise, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) results
indicated the brand associations were not affected by multicollinearity as the scores did not
approach or exceed the suggested cut-off value of 10.0 (Kennedy, 2003; Myers, 1990).
Cronbach’s α scores of .78 indicated the internal consistency of the loyalty construct
(Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The correlation matrix at Time 1, which closely reflects the
correlation matrices of all data collection points, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SUC</th>
<th>HC</th>
<th>MGT</th>
<th>PIP</th>
<th>STAD</th>
<th>LOG</th>
<th>PROD</th>
<th>ESC</th>
<th>PGA</th>
<th>LOY</th>
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<td>STAD</td>
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<td>.49</td>
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</table>

Addressing Hypothesis 1, one-sample t-tests ($p < .0055$) of Time 1 brand associations
revealed that seven of the nine included brand associations (Head Coach, Logo, Management,
Pride in Place, Product Delivery, Stadium, and Star Player) reported mean scores above the
mid-point of 4.0, whereas one association (Peer Group Acceptance) possessed a mean score
significantly below 4.0. One sample t-tests revealed that Escape was the only association not
significantly different from the test value, indicating respondents neither agreed nor disagreed
that the team provided an outlet to escape the daily stresses of life. The associations Star
Player and Head Coach reported the highest mean scores indicating these were the strongest
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team brand associations at Time 1. The mean scores and standard deviations reported for the nine brand associations and loyalty across the three studies are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2
Brand Association and Loyalty Mean Scores and Standard Deviations Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 (N = 169)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Association</th>
<th>Greenhouse-Geisser F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η²</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Star Player</td>
<td>6.11 .002</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>5.91</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.01</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Head Coach</td>
<td>3.95 .018</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>5.47</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>12.8 .001</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>5.57</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride in Place</td>
<td>2.16 .117</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>5.09</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stadium</td>
<td>41.65 .001</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>8.23 .001</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>1.46</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Delivery</td>
<td>12.77 .001</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>4.84</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>2.35 .100</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Group Acceptance</td>
<td>4.81 .028</td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Addressing Hypothesis 2, the mean scores of the brand associations were compared across the three data collection points. First, comparison of mean scores of unique brand associations based on results of Repeated Measures MANOVA ($\lambda = .59$, $F (18, 656) = 11.00; p < .001; \eta^2 = .23; d = 1.00$) revealed significant within-subjects changes of several brand association mean scores over time. Significant mean score differences were revealed for seven of the nine brand associations. Greenhouse-Geisser F-values, partial eta squared values, mean scores, and standard deviations are presented in Table 2. Comparison of mean scores show a significant difference for the associations Star Player, Head Coach, Management, Stadium, Logo, Product Delivery and Peer Group Acceptance. Overall, brand association mean scores generally decreased between Time 1 and Time 2 and increased between Time 2 and Time 3; with the only exception of the association Head Coach, which also decreased between Time 2 and Time 3.
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Second, the stability of the latent brand associations construct was assessed utilizing an unconditional Latent Growth Model. The fit indices ($\chi^2 = 16.75; df = 8; \chi^2/df = 2.09; p < .032; \text{RMSEA} = .062; \text{CFI} = .91; \text{and SRMR} = .051$) indicated an acceptable model fit (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The model is presented in Figure 1. The mean of the intercept $\alpha_1$ was 4.484 and the standard error was .072. The mean of the slope $\alpha_2$ was .088 and the standard error was .067, indicating a small non-significant increase of brand associations over time. The variance of the intercept (Var $\alpha_1 = .695, SE = .100$) was significant ($p < .001$) and the variance of the slope (Var $\alpha_2 = .321, SE = .093$) was significant ($p < .001$), indicating the between-individual differences in both the intercept and the rate of change of brand association. The growth rate ($\lambda_1 = .513, SE = .107$) was significant ($p < .001$), indicating that 51.3% of the change of brand associations occurred between Time 1 and Time 2. The covariance between the intercept and the slope ($\Psi_1 = -.335, SE = .079$) was negative and significant ($p < .001$), indicating that respondents who started with higher brand association scores in Time 1 reported more drastic decrease compared to a more moderate
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increase of respondents who started with lower brand association scores.

Figure 1: Diagram of Unconditional Linear Latent Growth Curve Model of Brand Associations with Random Intercepts, Random Slopes, and Unconstrained Residual Mean and Variances.

Addressing Hypothesis 3, a Cross-Lagged Panel Model using CB-SEM was used to examine the influence of brand associations on consumer loyalty over time. The fit indices ($\chi^2 = 4.432; df = 4; \chi^2/df = 1.108; p < .358; RMSEA = .025; CFI = .97; and SRMR = .026$) indicated a good model fit (Hair et al., 2010). Descriptive statistics and the correlation matrix of the Cross-Lagged Panel Model is presented in Table 3. Results indicate that within-construct correlations over time were larger than the equivalents of between-construct correlations, providing initial evidence to support measurement stability and construct validity of the two formative latent constructs. The model is presented in Figure 2. Results
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dicate that brand associations in Time 1 had a positive relationship with consumer loyalty at
Time 1 ($\beta = .573, p < .01$), loyalty at Time 2 ($\beta = .367, p < .01$), and consumer loyalty at
Time 3 ($\beta = .242, p < .05$). Brand associations at Time 2 had a positive relationship with
loyalty at Time 2 ($\beta = .348, p < .01$), and a positive non-significant relationship with loyalty
at Time 3 ($\beta = .092, p > .05$). Brand associations at Time 3 had a positive relationship with
loyalty at Time 3 ($\beta = .358, p < .01$). Overall, brand associations explained 33% of the
variance of loyalty ($R^2 = .329$) in Time 1, 44% of the variance of loyalty ($R^2 = .436$) in Time
2, and 36% of the variance of loyalty ($R^2 = .360$) in Time 3. Brand associations were
correlated with each other and the residual error terms of loyalty were correlated with each
other.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for the Cross-Lagged Panel Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$h^2$</th>
<th>BAt1</th>
<th>BAt2</th>
<th>BAt3</th>
<th>LOYt1</th>
<th>LOYt2</th>
<th>LOYt3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BAt1</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAt2</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>BAt3</td>
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<td>.61</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>.69</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOYt1</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>.98</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>LOYt2</td>
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<td>.73</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>.61</td>
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<td>.40</td>
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<td>1</td>
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Note. BA=Brand Association; LOY=Loyalty; numbers in bold represented the within-construct correlations
over time.
Figure 2: Results of Cross-Lagged Panel Model using covariance-based SEM. BA=Brand association; LOY=Loyalty; Numbers represent beta weights and numbers in parentheses represent estimated standard errors of respective parameters; the insignificant path is represented with a dashed line. Brand association and loyalty items were displayed in Time 1 to clarify their formative nature. Empty circles represent the residuals for each of the endogenous loyalty construct at a given time. Correlations were allowed among exogenous variables as well as among the residual error terms of endogenous constructs. ** = p < .05; *** = p < .01

Discussion

The discussion is structured in four sections. First, results addressing the three hypotheses are discussed and related to existing knowledge. Second, the contributions of this
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research are provided. Third, managerial implications derived from this research are outlined. Fourth, limitations are acknowledged and future research areas are suggested.

The development of brand associations

*Hypothesis 1* stated that new consumers’ brand associations can be developed through marketing communication efforts of the team. Research contends that consumers form brand associations based on their understandings of attributes of the team and benefits that the team provides to them (Funk & James, 2004; Gladden & Funk, 2001). However, data collected six months before the team’s first game in the AFL revealed respondents had already formed positive brand associations regarding seven team characteristics. The mean scores of six attributes (*Star Player, Head Coach, Management, Logo, Stadium,* and *Product Delivery*) and one benefit (*Pride in Place*) linked to the team were above the mid-point of 4.0 indicating individuals agreed these associations were present. Although respondents were able to experience attributes and benefits related to the team that competed in the VFL, that team did not accurately reflect the AFL team’s attributes and benefits, as the team did not have a home ground, name, logo, or star players. Therefore, respondents were unable to yet personally experience these attributes and benefits personally with the actual AFL team. Therefore, findings of this research indicate consumers also form brand associations through a combination of expected attributes and benefits communicated by marketing efforts of the team and the launch of the team.

Three brand associations related to team personnel (i.e., *Star Player, Head Coach,* and *Management*) had the highest mean scores, indicating the team’s recruitment strategy was successful from a branding perspective. The team was able to convince Karmichael Hunt to switch codes from the rival National Rugby League and recruited Gary Ablett Junior. These two *Star Players* formed the core of the team and the remaining positions were filled with young, talented players, who were promoted as the future of the team. The recruitment
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of young talented players was possible because the AFL awarded the team eight of the first 13 selections at the National Draft, which shows how leagues can help new teams to develop their brand (cf., Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013). The *Head Coach* position was filled by Guy McKenna, who was a successful, well-liked former player, whereas Travis Auld, who was a highly respected administrator at Essendon Football Club, was recruited as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and face of the *Management* group. Generally, the head coach and the team management recruit players. Therefore, the success of recruiting these above mentioned star players may, in combination with the reputation of the head coach and the CEO, have influenced consumers’ evaluations related to these brand associations. Overall, the high initial mean scores show the team was successful in branding these personnel-related attributes, indicating it may be easier to use marketing communication to influence brand associations linked to attributes rather than benefits.

Marketing communications of the team were successful in generating positive associations linked to *Pride in Place, Stadium, Logo, and Product Delivery*. *Pride in Place* reflects consumers’ associations that the team would help elevate the image of the host city (Doyle et al., 2013). Considering the AFL is the most supported sport league in Australia, an AFL team may provide residents with a sense of belonging to the community (cf., Robinson & Trail, 2005). The *Stadium* of the team was under construction at the Time 1 data collection point. However, consumers already agreed the stadium possessed character. Again, this brand association has been influenced by marketing efforts of the team, which provided architectural plans of the stadium and provided updates of the construction status and the unique features included in the stadium.

The high evaluation of the *Logo* can be linked back to the approach of the team of involving the host community in the development of the team’s logo, colors, nickname, and theme song. The team won numerous awards for their community engagement initiatives and
consulting fans on these matters demonstrates an effective strategy to foster fan engagement and identification (e.g., McDonald & Stavros, 2012). Although the team had not played a competitive AFL game at Time 1, consumers held a positive association toward the Product Delivery association by agreeing that the team’s games are exciting. The high evaluation of this association indicates consumers’ held expectations that may have been influenced by a combination of the star players the team recruited and the team’s marketing messages, which highlighted a ‘culture of success both on and off the field’ (Gold Coast FC, 2008). This finding may also be explained by the excitement surrounding the team’s creation, as new sport organizations can attract curiosity and can be differentiated based on their attached novelty value (e.g., James et al., 2002; Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002; Park, Andrew, & Mahony, 2008; Park, Mahony, & Greenwell, 2010).

The mean score of the association Escape did not differ from the test value, indicating respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that the team provided an outlet to escape from life’s problems. It is likely that Escape represents a benefit that must be experienced personally before it becomes a salient association in the mind of consumers. Research on established teams has supported that team experiences provide escape from daily life (e.g., Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001). However, similar to the current findings, Kunkel et al. (2014) identified a neutral mean score for the benefit of escape (labelled “Diversion”) for consumers of the A-League, which is a relatively young soccer league in Australia. Thus, it seems it is difficult for new teams to provide their consumers with an escape from their life’s problems and perhaps only directly experiencing this benefit makes it salient.

The mean score of the association Peer Group Acceptance was below 4.0 indicating this was not a salient benefit to fans at this stage. The low score attributed to the Peer Group Acceptance benefit is in line with established sport team brand association research (e.g., Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001), which may be explained by the negative
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connotations of the association whereby respondents who agree they follow the team because of others may be labeled bandwagon or fair-weather fans (Wann & Branscombe, 1990). It is also likely the Peer Group Acceptance association was not salient as the team was not active, and, therefore, opportunities for fans to identify each other in salient group-based scenarios (e.g., watching games at the stadium or at a bar) were limited at this stage. Overall, seven of the nine mean scores of consumers’ evaluations of the team were significantly above 4.0, indicating some consumer brand associations can be developed through a combination of the launch of a new team and communication efforts of the team, therefore, partly supporting Hypothesis 1.

The stability of brand associations and loyalty

Hypothesis 2 examined the change of the team brand associations as the team matured and new consumers were able to attend games. Answering calls from sport brand management literature to use brand associations in a variety of contexts (Bauer et al., 2008; Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2002; Funk; 2002; Ross, 2007; Ross et al., 2006; Ross et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2009), this research provided insights into the change of new consumers’ brand associations over time. Repeated Measures MANOVA results revealed significant mean score changes of seven brand associations, reflecting the context of this research. The decline of brand association mean scores between Time 1 and Time 2 may be explained by the lack of success of the team. Although the Gold Coast Suns were positioned as a community-oriented team that is focused on developing players, losing the first three games by an average of 93 points (where the average AFL-wide margin over the past 10 years ranged between 35 to 40 points) may have impacted respondents’ evaluations of the team.

However, against the trend of decreasing associations, consumers’ evaluations of the Logo increased during this time period. It has been proposed that logos function as shortcuts
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to categorize other brand associations (De Chernatory & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998); however, it appears this was not the case for consumers of the team, who seemingly treated the logo as an attribute not connected to the poor performance of the team. Conversely, the evaluation of the logo increased, which may have been related to the usage of the logo on team-related marketing material or team merchandise. Positive effects of mere exposure (Zajonc, 1968) may have influenced this positive effect. Additionally, the logo may have been associated with consumer engagement activities or community engagement activities of the team, which have been utilized strategically to build the team’s brand (McDonald & Stavros, 2012).
Overall, this result highlights the power of a team’s logo to create positive brand associations in the early stage of being exposed to new consumers.

Between Time 2 and Time 3 brand association mean scores of eight associations (i.e., all but Head Coach) increased, despite the team losing all three games before Time 3 data collection. This increase may be explained by the team’s marketing efforts aimed at reducing new consumers’ expectations toward success and better highlighting the community-based focus of the team (Lock et al., 2014). The biggest change of mean scores can be observed for the association Stadium between Time 2 and Time 3, which can be explained because the Gold Coast Suns played their first home-game in their newly built stadium in round 10 of their first season, which fell between Time 2 and Time 3 data collection points. This steep increase indicates that, although teams are able to influence brand associations linked to attributes via marketing communications, consumers’ direct experiences of these attributes can have a strong influence on their evaluation of the attribute. Overall, seven of the nine mean scores of consumers’ evaluations of the team changed over the period of 18 months reflecting the changing characteristics of the team, thus partly supporting Hypothesis 2.

The Latent Growth Model for brand associations revealed a small insignificant increase of the mean of brand associations over time, indicating that brand associations
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formed based on marketing and promotions of the team before the first season did not grow over the 18 months across the sample. However, the significant variance of both the mean and the slope indicates individual respondents changed over time, and the negative covariance between the intercept and slope shows respondents with initially higher evaluations of the brand association construct had a steeper decrease compared to a more moderate increase of respondents with initially lower evaluations over the three time periods, with over 50% of the change happening in the six months between Time 1 and Time 2. Given the time between Time 2 and Time 3 (i.e., 12 months) was double than that between Time 1 and Time 2, and new consumers had been exposed to the team for a whole season instead of only three games, the findings indicate time of exposure was not the critical factor influencing consumers’ brand associations. Therefore, it seems initial exposure and the experiences of only a few initial games can influence new consumers’ evaluations and perceptions of the attributes and benefits linked with teams, still relevant 18 months later.

Brand Associations and Loyalty

Hypothesis 3 examined the influence of brand associations on team loyalty over time. Conceptually, team brand associations represent a collective network of thoughts linked to a team that have been theorized to influence loyalty (Funk & James, 2001; 2006). Therefore, a formative brand association construct was utilized for this analysis. Findings indicate the brand associations new consumers linked to the team influenced their loyalty toward the team at the same point in time, which is in line with previous research that has linked brand associations with attitudinal outcomes (Bauer et al., 2008; Doyle et al., 2013; Kunkel et al., 2014). Overall, brand associations explained 33% of the variance of loyalty in Time 1, 44% of the variance of loyalty in Time 2, and 36% of the variance of loyalty in Time 3. This finding is comparable with previous research conducted with existing consumers and
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established teams that found the TAS predicted between 47% (Gladden & Funk, 2001) and 57% (Doyle et al., 2013) of the variance in team loyalty.

Although there is a variation of between 10% and 20% in explained variance, this difference can be explained by considering the contextual bounds framing this research. For example, previous research has utilized a larger number of relevant associations as predictors and focused on teams who have had many years to market and promote their brands. Additionally, identification, which was the strongest indicator of loyalty in previous research (Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001), was excluded from data analysis as consumers’ identification with a team conceptually represents an attitude rather than an association with the brand. Overall, these findings demonstrate that brand associations influence the development of attitudes toward a team, as theorized in the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004).

Longitudinal findings show brand associations partially influenced consumer loyalty in the future. Brand associations respondents linked with the team at Time 1 also influenced their loyalty toward the team at Time 2, and to a lesser degree at Time 3; whereas the brand associations at Time 2 did not significantly influence consumer loyalty at Time 3. Two factors may have influenced these findings. First, the mean scores of brand association significantly increased between Time 2 and Time 3, and contextually influenced consumer evaluations at Time 2 may not have been relevant at Time 3 anymore (e.g., the stadium not being completely constructed in Time 2). Second, the power analysis indicated the sample size of 169 respondents lacked the required power for the Cross-Lagged Panel Model ($d = .72$) and Type II errors may occur. Therefore, it can be speculated that more respondents exceeding the power threshold of $d = .80$ may have yielded a significant path between brand associations at Time 2 and consumer loyalty at Time 3. These findings indicate that new consumers’ brand associations formed in the past can influence current and potentially future
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brand loyalty. Therefore, it can be concluded that brand associations influence consumer loyalty over time, partly supporting Hypothesis 3.

Contributions

This article makes three main contributions. The first contribution relates to extending brand association knowledge. Findings of this research indicate new consumers form brand associations through the anticipated use as well as actual use of a sport product or service. Specifically, this research illustrated that brand association perceptions formed quickly in that fans acknowledged the existence of seven sport team brand associations before the team had played an AFL game, empirically supporting claims that brand associations can be developed based on, and influenced by, marketing communication efforts of sport organizations (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001). This research extends previous team brand association literature by supporting the ability of marketing communications to influence consumers’ team brand associations. This finding also provides value to understanding how new sport teams may influence the perceptions of their customer bases, and how established teams may successfully engage with new consumers who have recently become aware about their brand.

The second contribution relates to the stability and change of new consumers’ brand associations over time. Consumers’ experiences with the team influence their evaluation of brand associations and, therefore, reflect either the changing characteristics of the team or changing perceptions of individuals’ experiences. Results indicate that the direct experiences of individuals were used to constantly evaluate the attributes and benefits they linked with the team. Therefore, certain experiences may seek to reaffirm or change an individual’s perception of specific associations based on the positive or negative value attributed to the experience (Funk & James, 2006). Holistically, the initial brand associations formed were relatively stable across the 18-month period highlighting the importance of establishing positive associations early to counteract negative information and experiences related to the
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team (Funk & James, 2001). This research supports previous team brand research claiming a brand management approach can be a successful strategy that enables teams to continue to attract and develop consumers even in instances characterized by negative on-field performances (e.g., Bauer et al., 2008). Thus, results here provide insights into how sport teams may prosper in an increasingly competitive sport environment.

The third contribution relates to the longitudinal research design confirming the influence of brand associations on loyalty over time, as outlined in the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004). Repeated Measures MANOVA results allowed for the examination of individual association mean score change, whereas the Latent Growth Model of collective brand associations allowed for the identification of the variance and the growth rate of brand associations over time. The Cross-Lagged Panel Model showed the brand associations predicted variances in loyalty similar to that observed in research on established teams, and how this prediction changed based on shifting perceptions new consumers held toward team characteristic based on their direct experiences over time. Moreover, results extend cross-sectional research (Bauer et al., 2008; Doyle et al., 2013; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2014) revealing preliminary evidence of a causal relationship between the associations and loyalty in the future, therefore, empirically supporting the conceptualizations of the FAN model (Funk & James, 2004). Overall, findings illustrate the importance of investing in marketing efforts designed to build the associations individually and collectively.

Managerial Implications

This research highlights the value sport organizations can reap by adopting a brand management perspective (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014) and offers a range of managerial actions which new teams should implement in the early stages of their lifecycle. Results are also pertinent to established teams, who can use this information to understand how to attract new consumers towards their brands (e.g., people who move to the team’s representative region or
SPORT TEAM BRAND ASSOCIATIONS who have discovered the team recently using media platforms). Collectively, sport marketers can use the current research findings to improve the favorability associated with their teams and the loyalty which their brands attract. Three main insights are now discussed.

The quick establishment of salient brand association sets indicates it is important for new teams to go to market with strategically developed marketing communications. As the research highlights perceptions of the team’s attributes and benefits can be derived without direct experience, attention should be given to crafting marketing around each association carefully and early. The small changes of the associations over time suggests it may be hard to change consumers’ initial perceptions, highlighting the importance of providing new consumers with a positive first impression of the brand.

To promote positive attributes, marketing messages developed for new consumers should include personnel with which consumers can develop a personal connection, such as Star Players and the Head Coach. Results suggest new teams should be given concessions to recruit marketable and highly skilled players from other teams, and that the coach should be carefully selected based on his or her overall fit with the brand. Findings also show that new teams need to communicate the benefits associated with following the team, such as Escape. Promoting this benefit might be particularly fruitful in new markets, where individuals have limited interest in the representative sport. To engage new consumers, new teams should present realistic expectations toward their promises for on-field performance (e.g., Lock, Funk, Doyle, & McDonald, 2014). The increase of the association Logo over time shows that, indeed, certain brand attributes are immune to poor on-field performance, providing additional support that teams need to follow strategic brand management approaches.

Perhaps most importantly, findings outline the influence which brand associations have on loyalty not only in the moment, but also in the future. The link between the associations and current loyalty provides insights into the importance of investing in the nine
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brand associations used in this study. The influence of association sets on loyalty in the future highlights the importance of making a good first impression on subsequent fan development and demonstrates that organizations should adopt an ongoing and proactive approach to brand management. Thus, if a particular brand association declines (e.g., Head Coach), then steps should be taken to rectify the situation or risk possible adverse effects on loyalty in the present time and in the future.

Although the association Success was eliminated from the analyses, our sample of consumers indicated a strong want for the team to genuinely compete for the premiership (Time 1 $M = 6.01$; Time 2 $M = 5.63$; and Time 3 $M = 6.05$). This indicates that success is an important brand association for new consumers and new sport teams, and supports published research in the established team context. Given the impact success has on the benefits consumers may gain from following a successful team, such as the ability to BIRG of the team’s achievements (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1976), it is likely that success may have spill-over effects on other associations. It is probable that perceptions of success influence associations including Nostalgia, as nostalgic memories may be created by winning important games. Similarly evaluations of the Head Coach and Star Players are likely to be favorable if the team performs well and creates a strong winning ratio.

The lack of success in our research context may have also had an impact on less involved consumers, as the average home-game attendance correlated with their league ranking across the three seasons. For example, the team attracted an average of 13,907 fans in 2013 when they placed 14th, 16,092 fans in 2014 when they placed 12th, and 12,358 fans in 2015 when they placed 16th (Footywire, 2015). Contrarily, the lack of success appears to have had a minimal impact on highly involved consumers. The team’s membership base has been growing each year, since its inception 2010, despite the team finishing at the bottom half of the table each year. Therefore, it is recommended sport managers dealing with less
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successful teams focus on other brand associations when aiming to attract less involved consumers (e.g., *Escape*) to increase their loyalty and develop their member base.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Four limitations inherent in the current research are now acknowledged and followed with suggestions for future research. The first limitation relates to the timeframe of the research. The research represents the first longitudinal examination of brand association perceptions, however further research is needed to see how the associations may develop and predict loyalty over longer periods. As our observations span an 18-month period, results may not be generalizable to periods beyond this scope. Thus, future research is needed which tracks brand association perceptions over time and better links specific marketing actions to changes in brand association perceptions, perhaps by using experimental designs. Such research is also likely to shed additional light on the ongoing impact of brand associations on loyalty. Similar to this line of thought, future investigations should also examine the longevity of the initial timeframe when new teams are still thought of as new and/or novel. Research of this kind may yield new insights into brand association knowledge and influence shifts in marketing strategies of new sport teams.

The second limitation related to the context of this research. The article has been framed around new consumers of sport teams; however, in this research only consumers of a new team were included. Although the same theoretical principles should be at work for new consumers of existing teams, findings cannot be generalized beyond the context of this study. Therefore, further testing with new consumers of existing teams is needed to confirm or challenge the current findings for new consumers of existing teams. Additionally, the focal team was largely unsuccessful during the data collection period and was created to add to an existing league rather than as part of a new league formation different to previous research (e.g., Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009; Lock et al., 2011; Lock et al., 2012). These contextual
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elements may mean results do not explicitly relate to all new sport teams who may operate in
different environments. Future research should examine new teams from a variety of
countries, sports, and varying levels of success. Replication across scenarios defined by
differing sport levels (e.g., amateur, collegiate, and professional) will also help to determine
the transferability of these results. Investigating the brand associations important to fans of
relocated franchises (e.g., Oklahoma City Thunder) may also provide an interesting
comparison point to this research.

The third limitation relates to the measures utilized in this research. Although the
decision to use the TAS was justified based on its widespread use in previous enquiries, the
present study employed single-item measures and included only nine of the 13 items within
the scale. The reasons to exclude four items and utilize single-item measures were justified;
however, it is likely that results may have been different had more associations been
included. Future research should also be conducted over longer periods of time to establish
when Nostalgia, Tradition, and other possible associations become salient brand associations.
However, particular attention should be paid to the content validity of brand association
measures. As previously identified, the inclusion of an item that would have captured
consumers’ evaluation of success, or a lack of success, in the current case, such as “The Gold
Coast Suns are a successful team”, would have been beneficial. However, although an item
that has been published in previous research was included, the item does not accurately
reflect individuals’ association whether the team is successful. Therefore, we encourage
researchers to investigate published items for content validity before they include them in
their brand association research projects. For future research related to the success
associations, it may be beneficial to utilize the following item: “The [team name] are a
successful team”. Therefore, future research should investigate when success impacts loyalty,
or whether it is merely a means to generate other associations that drive loyalty, such as
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*Nostalgia.* It is also possible the use of other sport team brand association measures would produce different results. Further to this point, it is possible that the existing sport team brand association scales do not capture all of the benefits and attributes linked to new sport teams given they were developed with a focus on established teams. Thus, future research should aim to replicate this study using more comprehensive and robust brand association measures.

The fourth limitation is related to the sample of this research. The current research started with a respectable number \((N = 1718)\) of participants in Time 1; however, only 169 participants completed all three rounds of data collection. The sample size of 169 exceeded recommended thresholds for longitudinal cross-lagged models, following Maas and Hox’s (2005) suggestion that “the standard errors of the within-individual variances over time are estimated too small when the number of sample size is substantially lower than 100, which can lead to biased estimation” (p. 90); and Bartlett, Kotrlik, and Higgin’s (2001) formular, which indicates that in total 126 \((42 \times 3\) waves\) samples are required. However, the power analysis for the Cross-Lagged Panel Model showed that the power of 169 participants was below a recommended threshold, indicating that results may have differed if more respondents would have participated in all three survey-rounds. In particular, the positive non-significant path between brand associations in Time 2 and consumer loyalty in Time 3 may have been significant. Therefore, future research should identify mechanisms to increase repeat participation, such as direct emails to participants who completed previous rounds or proper incentives to motivate respondents. Additionally, the recruitment of individuals through the ‘fan list’ may have introduced a self-selection bias excluding more casual fans. Therefore, future research should replicate the current study and provide an extension by contrasting the associations important to a variety of fans. Employing diverse sampling techniques and stage-based segmentation procedures (e.g., Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013) to place individuals into theoretically distinct segments of escalating involvement may be
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particularly effective in this regard. Similarly, qualitative research may be beneficial in further defining the meaning that each brand association holds for fans of differing psychological strength and how the meaning ascribed to each association develops over time.
References


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Funk, D., Mahony, D., & Ridinger, L. (2002). Characterizing consumer motivation as individual difference factors: Augmenting the sport interest inventory (SII) to explain level of spectator support. *Sport Marketing Quarterly, 11* (1), 33-43.
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## Appendix
### Survey Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Items Used</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Loyalty</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>I am committed to the Gold Coast Suns.</td>
<td>Chaudhuri &amp; Holbrook (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to Support</td>
<td>I intend to keep supporting the Gold Coast Suns over other teams.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to Pay</td>
<td>I would be willing to pay a higher price for tickets to Gold Coast SUNS games than for other AFL games.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intention to Purchase</td>
<td>Next time I buy sport merchandise, it will be Gold Coast Suns merchandise.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand Associations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gladden &amp; Funk (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success*</td>
<td>It is important that the Gold Coast Suns genuinely compete for the premiership.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Star Player</td>
<td>The Gold Coast Suns have star players that I like to watch.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head Coach</td>
<td>The head coach of the Gold Coast Suns (Guy McKenna) does a good job.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>The management of the Gold Coast Suns make wise player personnel decisions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logo</td>
<td>I like the Gold Coast Suns logo.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Delivery</td>
<td>Gold Coast Suns’ games are exciting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride in Place</td>
<td>The Gold Coast Suns help elevate the image of the Gold Coast community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape</td>
<td>Following the Gold Coast Suns provides a temporary escape from life’s problems.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fan Identification*</td>
<td>When someone praises the Gold Coast Suns, it feels like a personal compliment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Group Acceptance</td>
<td>I follow the Gold Coast Suns because my friends like the same team.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stadium</td>
<td>The Gold Coast Suns’ stadium (Metricon Stadium) has character.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Omitted from data analysis
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