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Branded for Success: A Longitudinal Examination of Brand Associations as Drivers of Team Identification for a New Sport Brand

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BRANDED FOR SUCCESS: A LONGITUDINAL EXAMINATION OF BRAND
ASSOCIATIONS AS DRIVERS OF TEAM IDENTIFICATION FOR A NEW SPORT
BRAND

by

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DEDICATION

For my family, friends, mentors, and all those who have helped along the way:

To my family – thank you for the love, confidence, and humility.

To my friends – thank you for reminding to enjoy the small things.

To my mentors – thank you for your guidance and compassion.

To Heidi – thank you for being my best friend, support system, and biggest fan.

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ABSTRACT

The competition for the sport consumer has intensified over the last decade, and many teams are now seeking to establish a foothold in the marketplace (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016). To form a competitive advantage in the sport industry, many sport organizations are beginning to think of their organizations as brands to be managed (Ross, 2006). From a sport marketer's perspective, it is difficult to rely on brand characteristics based on success or team composition to promote a sport brand and develop fans due to the unpredictable nature of the sport product. Conversely, brand characteristics regarding the logo, color scheme, or communal nature of the sport organization and its consumption can be guided and manipulated by sport marketers.

However, there remains a gap in the literature that examines how brand associations, as individual components, contribute to a larger sense of brand community, and how these components can then shape broader consumer behavior processes such as team identity. From this, the purpose of this study was to: 1) analyze how individual brand associations and team identification manifest themselves throughout a new sport team's inaugural season, and 2) to investigate how the changes in individual brand associations drive the change in team identification throughout the new sport team's inaugural season. A three-stage longitudinal data collection was employed to gather data from consumers of a new minor league baseball team. Multi-level growth

curve model analysis was conducted to identify individual growth, and provide evidence for the influence of each brand associations development on the development of team identification. The results provide contextual evidence of how, and what brand associations develop during the inaugural season, and to what extent the development of each brand association explains the development of team identification. Notably, brand associations that are communal in nature showed continued growth throughout the inaugural season, and the increase in each of these associations was the most impactful in the development of team identity. Implications for sport managers and directions for future research are discussed.

PREFACE

This dissertation would not have been made possible without the assistance of the Columbia Fireflies organization. Their willingness to let me be around the organization during the inaugural season, and also facilitate the completion of this project was unbelievably gracious. I hope the findings presented here in this study are able to contribute to their long term success.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AR(1) ....First Order Autoregressive Structure

AVE .... Average Variance Extracted

CR .... Composite Reliability

GCM .... Growth Curve Model

ID .... Identity

MiLB... Minor League Baseball

MLB.. Major League Baseball

OID .... Organizational Identity

PCA... Principal Component Analysis

SGE.. Shared Group Experience

T1,T2, T3 .... Time 1, Time 2, Time 3

TAM..Team Associations Model

TBAS ....Team Brand Associations Scale

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As the sport industry has matured and grown over the last decade, the competition

for the sport consumer has intensified (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016). While

presenting a winning on-field product can be a guarantee for financial success, sport

organizations cannot always count on their teams to continue their winning ways. In

order to combat this issue, and form a competitive advantage, many sport organizations

are beginning to think of their organizations as not simply a collection of players, coaches

and managers, but as brands to be managed (Ross, 2006). A brand has come to be known

as a logo, name, color scheme, or combination thereof that represents an organization,

and allows consumers to accurately and quickly identify the organization in the

marketplace (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). The application of this definition to sport is

quite practical, with the majority of major league professional sport organizations across

the globe placing great emphasis on the development and management of their brands

(Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 2001). Certain sport organizations have crafted brands that

have allowed them to become some of the most valuable organizations in the world, a

value that they would not hold if they held a different brand identity (Badenhausen,

2016). With this known, it becomes quite apparent that not all brands are created equal in

the marketplace, with some appearing to be more attractive or desirable to consumers.

However, little is known about what characteristics attract consumers to a particular sport

brand. Numerous teams and organizations hold a brand that represents a winning tradition, star player, or legendary coach. Others have brands that epitomize the stadium in which they play their games, or the region or city they are located in. Additionally, sport teams can hold brands that represent a unique logo or uniform, or a collection of fans that are loyal and partake in rituals or traditions that are integral parts of their attendance. From a sport marketer's perspective, it is difficult to rely on on-field success or team roster based characteristics to promote a sport brand due to the unpredictable nature of the sport industry. Conversely, brand characteristics based upon the team's logo, color scheme, or communal nature of consumption can be guided and manipulated by sport marketers. Yet, little is known regarding the value of particular brand qualities and characteristics that hold the greatest impact in driving sport consumer behavior. The ramifications for such understanding are quite important, and could provide sport organizations with pertinent information that could inform brand management strategies that drive financial success. While these strategies could be valuable for numerous sport organizations, they could be particularly valuable for new sport organizations, or those that are smaller or less well known.

As mentioned above, an examination of the sport industry reveals that sport teams hold a range of brand images built upon various associations and characteristics. Several examples may help to illustrate this. The Carolina Panthers of the National Football League (NFL) promote themselves as a team representative of a specific geographic region, characterized by their slogan of "Two States, One Team" (Breiner, 2016) and a team logo that was designed to mimic the geographic shape of the states of North and South Carolina. This has given the organization an opportunity to build a brand that

allows consumers throughout the region to feel a strong connection to the organization

and to one another (Breiner, 2016). Similar geographic brand image focuses are seen

throughout professional sport (New England Patriots, New Zealand Warriors, Western

Force, Texas Rangers, etc.), however, little is known regarding if creating this

opportunity for fan-to-fan, and fan-to-organization connection has any organizational

benefit.

As a comparative example, the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs

represent two of the most valuable brands in professional baseball, and American

professional sports (Badenhausen, 2016). However, the organizations' brands hold

distinctly different characteristics, with the Yankees relying on their team's history,

success, and star players (Davidoff, 2016), while the Cubs' brand relies on the communal

associations of its ballpark, fans, and stadium community (Lazare, 2012). In contrast to

the Yankees, the Cubs' brand has also been characterized by a history of poor on-field

success, yet despite the poor quality of the Cubs on-field product, the organization was

able to maintain some of the highest attendance and merchandise sales in Major League

Baseball (MLB) (Klayman, 2015). Through crafting and growing a brand, the Cubs were

able to present an identity to the consumer that was easy to identify, relatable, and

espoused some form of value through its consumption (Conick, 2016).

Ultimately, the goal of sport marketers is to create a strong cohesive groups of

fans that are characterized by positive consumer behavior. The collection of fans that

come together to consume and watch their favorite sport team either in the stadium, their

favorite bar, or in front their TVs can be called a brand community. These brand

communities are characterized by consumers who are brought together through their

shared attachment and appreciation for a particular brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

With this known, the congruence and application of the concept of brand community to the sport industry comes into focus. Many sport teams are characterized by their vast, loyal fan bases, comprised of consumers who hold a shared attachment and affinity for the team they support. Through their involvement in these communities, consumers begin to develop a sense of empowerment that has been found to have positive consumer behavior outcomes (Katz & Heere, 2013). In the sport industry, it has been found that fellow fans are in fact more important than attachment, satisfaction, and identification in bringing fans to the stadium (Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon, 2015). These sport fan communities often can drive consumers to become more involved with the sport organization, and invested in the organization's goals (Katz & Heere, 2015). The value then in creating a brand that stimulates the development of these communities can be easily ascertained, and the implications for sport organizations are quite significant. In the sport management literature, much of the research involving sport fans has focused on the concept of team identity. Recently, the sport fan literature has also adapted a brand community lens, with team identity being used as a marker for the existence of fan (brand) communities (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 2011). However, there exists a gap in the sport management literature that explicitly examines how brand associations can drive team identity, and what specific brand associations have the greatest impact on team identity.

1.2 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to develop a greater understanding of the brand characteristics and associations that hold the greatest impact in creating identified fans,

and how the impact of these associations on the development of team identity may change throughout a team's season. Specifically, in this research I will examine the associations most valuable to a new professional sport team as it enters its inaugural season of play. Developing a greater understanding of the value a new sport team's brand holds in creating identified fans could create new insights into the way sport teams best manage their brand in a way that contributes to long-term success. Additionally, this investigation will further examine the ways in which scholars have measured sport brand associations. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to analyze the change in brand association and team identity perceptions held by consumers of a new sport team, and (2) to examine how the development of individual brand associations drives the development of team identification over the course of the new team's inaugural season.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

As will be discussed later throughout this manuscript, brand associations have been examined numerous times in the sport management literature, yet there remains a need to synthesize the concepts of branding and brand associations with the understanding of brand communities. Notably, increased research should be conducted that specifically examines which characteristics of a sport brand, impact the development of team identity, and subsequently a brand community of identified consumers. This focus could be particularly pertinent for new sport organizations as they enter into a competitive industry. While older, more established sport organizations are able to utilize characteristics such as team history or past success, new teams have no such luxury, and thus must rely on other characteristics to build their brand image in a manner that will be the most effective in developing a community of identified fans (Grant,

Heere, & Dickson, 2011). To compound the intricacies of brand creation and management for new sport teams is the likelihood that many of these teams are often minor league teams that are unable to utilize well-known players or coaches, or on-field talent and skill as characteristics in which to build a brand around. Similar complications exist for lesser known sport organizations as well. This can be seen in such examples of teams that operate in the traditional European model of relegation and promotion. While the majority of the members of these professional leagues remain constant throughout the years, a small portion of these teams change quite frequently. Similar to new sport teams, this creates barriers for these teams to build brands around such organizational characteristics as well-known players, coaches, or rivals due to the turnover that comes from changing leagues every few seasons. For smaller, less well-known sport teams finding ways in which to create a predictable committed group of fans becomes important for organizational success. The findings from this study will aim to inform both current and future research regarding the impact of branding and brand associations to grow fan communities of sport organisations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 BRAND EQUITY DIMENSIONALITY

Ultimately, the goal of the branding process is to create a brand that holds some

form of value that creates competitive advantage in the marketplace. This brand-based

value is known as brand equity, and has been conceptualized as the added value an

organization holds from their brand and its components (logo, name, color scheme, etc.)

that it would not have if it held a different brand identity (Keller, 1993). Brand equity

has become a critical indicator of market success, and has been a consistent focus of

marketing managers for well over a decade (Aaker, 1996). Organizations that hold

strong levels of brand equity are not only more recognizable to consumers, but are

provided with a greater level of financial strength. While early brand equity research

relied upon market valuation, sales figures, and other monetary measures of the added

value of brand equity to a firm, marketing scholars quickly adapted a more consumer-

centric view of brand equity valuation (Aaker, 1996; Keller & Lehman, 2003).

Aaker (1991) posited that looking exclusively at monetary and financial figures in

the search for the value of brand equity led researchers to ignore the perceptions of

consumers, which may be more valuable to the organization than the sales figure they

generate. Aaker (1991) also conceptualized that brand equity was comprised of four

factors: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Through focus on each of these brand equity components organizations are able to craft

strong positive levels of brand equity. Keller (1993) offered a similar, but different

conceptual framework that aimed to represent a customer-based perception of brand

equity. Keller (1993) argued that brand equity is a manifestation of brand knowledge,

which represents all that is known about a brand and is comprised of brand awareness

and brand image. Brand awareness, according to Keller (1993) can be understood as

consumers' ability to both recall a particular brand in a product category, or recognize a

particular brand in a product category. The speed of which represent the consumers'

overall level of brand awareness. Brand image was conceptualized as being more

complex, and is the culmination of the consumers' brand associations in regards to their

attributes, benefits, and attitudes. The work of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) would

characterize and lay the groundwork for much of the branding scholarship moving

forward. In examining their two theories of brand equity, it can be seen that both

included the concepts of brand awareness, which Aaker (1996) characterized as anything

that is known about a brand, and brand associations, which Keller (1993) stated are the

traits or characteristics about a brand that are linked to a consumer's memory. Through

both views of brand equity, an understanding of the value of consumers' perceptions of a

brand was realized. By focusing on the perceptions of consumers as the valuation

mechanism for understanding the value created and added from an organization's brand,

a more precise understanding of how brands can aid organizations in growth, decline, and

expansion was ascertained (Keller & Lehman, 2006). Scholars have since examined both

frameworks from an empirical perspective, attempting to decipher the role that brand

equity plays in shaping consumer behavior. Cobb-Walgren, Ruble, and Donthu (1995)

were among the first to take Aaker's (1991) framework and apply it to an empirical study

in an effort to understand the affective and behavioral outcomes of brand equity. The authors found that brands do hold different levels of brand equity, and that those with higher equity elicit higher levels of consumer brand preference (affective) and purchase intent (behavioral). Scholars also investigated the role of brand equity in larger organizational consumer perceptions. Brady, Cronin, Fox, and Roehm (2008) analyzed consumer brand equity perceptions of organizations in the context of performance failures, and found that those organizations that held higher levels of initial brand equity were able to rebound from the negative brand equity perceptions created from performance failures quicker than those with lower levels of initial brand equity. With the value of positive brand equity known, marketing managers across industries soon began to realize that branding and brand management were not simply processes to separate themselves from their competitors, but rather should be treated as processes that should culminate in the creation of strong positive levels of brand equity that create organizational value and consumer retention (Keller & Lehman, 2003).

Within the branding literature, much of the early work focused on the understanding and testing of brand equity with regard to tangible product-based industries such as that of footwear, cameras, and soda. Sensing a potential problem of viewing all industries as having the same characteristics, Berry (2000) conceptualized a new brand equity framework within the context of the service industry. Utilizing the theories of both Aaker (1996) and Keller (1991), Berry (2000) conceptualized service-based consumer brand equity as the outcome of a service organization's brand image. This brand image is shaped by external communications regarding the brand in the form of media content, internal communications originating from the organization in the form

of advertising, and through consumer experiences that are then committed to memory or shared with other consumers. The culmination of these three channels of information is the total brand image of the service organization, and this image contributes to the organization's brand equity. Berry (2000) posited that while Aaker's (1996) inclusion of perceived quality and brand loyalty in the brand equity framework were valid, he argued that both brand associations and brand awareness should be regarded as key contributors to consumer based brand equity of service brands. The intangible nature of services heightens the importance of branding when compared to physical goods (So & King, 2010). The ability to create a brand that provides consumers readily available information regarding qualities and characteristics of the service brand simplifies the decision making process, and can drive consumer behavior (Davis, 2007; Kim, Kim, & An, 2003).

2.2 IMPORTANCE OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

While scholars have conceptualized and tested brand equity as a multi-dimensional four or five component construct (Villarejo-Ramos & Sanchez-Franco, 2005; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), many scholars, like Berry (2000), have focused on brand image, brand associations, and brand awareness as key drivers of brand equity. As mentioned previously brand associations, as conceptualized by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) are any perceptions, characteristics or thoughts about a brand linked in a consumer's memory. The strength of these associations is often a culmination of the perceived fit of the association regarding the brand and its product category, as well as the uniqueness of the association regarding the brand and its product category (Keller, 1993). The totality of these brand associations creates a brand's overall image, which is

how consumers in the marketplace perceive it. For example, a brand such as Major League Baseball's (MLB) New York Yankees may elicit brand associations like success, wealthy, high-class, and star players. Thus, their brand image would represent their organization as a successful, wealthy, and high-class professional baseball team in New York comprised of star players. These associations, and subsequent image, have been found then to contribute directly to the organization's overall brand equity with consumer agreement of positive brand associations contributing to positive brand equity (Belén del Río, Vazquez, & Iglesias, 2001; Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001; Grace & O'Cass, 2002). However, it is important to note that not all brand associations are created equal, and contribute positively to the brand's equity. Romaniuk and Gaillard (2007) found that while Keller (1993) posited the need for associations to be both unique and have some fit with brand and its product category, brand associations could in fact be too unique. Through examining organizations across eight product categories, representing both goods and services, Romaniuk and Gaillard (2007) found that those brands that were perceived to have more unique associations suffered from lower consumer perceptions of brand equity, as well lower intents to use the brand in the future. Thus, as posited by Keller and Lehman (2003), the goal for marketing managers is to craft a brand identity, that is both different and similar to its peers in the product category. A strategy that is particularly pertinent for new organizations crafting their initial brand identity. Crafting a strong brand that holds positive levels of brand equity has been found to be driven by the perception of the brand's associations (Gordon, James, & Yoshida, 2016). Thus, further focus on brand associations as key drivers of brand equity has become critically important for both scholars and marketing managers.

2.3 BRANDING IN SPORT

In the context of sport, the focus on branding and brand equity has increased steadily over the past 20 years. As mentioned previously, organizations no longer see themselves as a representation of their on-field product, but as brands in the marketplace that should be managed effectively. Gladden, Milne, and Sutton (1998) were among the first to acknowledge the role that a sport organization's brand equity may hold in contributing to the organization's success. Utilizing a college sport organization as their guide, the authors posited that the organization's brand equity is a product of the marketplace characteristics of which it exists, resembling that of brand associations introduced by Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993). The authors stated that the outcomes of brand equity for sport organizations are realized through the ability to influence ticket sales, merchandise sales, media consumption, sponsorship agreements, donor retention and exclusive media agreements. Gladden et al. (1998) then utilize the example of the University of Notre Dame football program as a brand with a strong positive level of brand equity, and emphasize the value to college sport organizations of focusing on building and crafting brand equity of their athletic department and individual sport programs. This framework was further studied by Gladden and Milne (1999) in a professional sports setting with similar characteristics contributing to professional sport brand equity that then lead to positive financial outcomes for the sport organization. The focus on these characteristics that resemble brand associations further emphasizes the role that they play in crafting brand equity of an organization, and ultimately influencing both affective and behavioral consumer responses. Guided by the work of Keller (1993) and his conceptualization of customer-based brand equity, as well as Berry's (2000)

conceptualization of service-based brand equity, Ross (2006) proposed a framework for understanding spectator-based brand equity in the context of sport. Ross (2006) posits that spectator-based brand equity is based upon consumers' perceptions of a sport organization through comprehension of their marketing communication efforts as well as their direct experiences with the sport organization. This ultimately culminates in spectator-based brand equity being driven largely by the associations that consumers hold toward the sport brand. Ross' (2006) focus is grounded in the understanding of the consumption of the sports spectating product as a service, in which the value the consumer gains from the experience is intangible. This ultimately is what sets the study of branding and brand equity in sport apart from traditional product-based industries. While tangible goods exist in the context of sports spectating, the consumption of those goods are only part of the consumer experience. It is the overall experience that individuals are consuming, and thus the aspects of the experience that individuals are associating with the brand of the organization are what drive its brand equity (Ross, 2006).

2.4 IMPORTANCE OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS IN SPORT

The understanding of the role of brand associations in sport as drivers of brand equity, and subsequently consumer response has received considerable scholarly focus. Gladden and Funk (2002) used Keller's (1993) conceptualization of brand image and brand associations to develop a scale that engendered a measurement of team sport brand associations, called the Team Associations Model (TAM). The TAM, stemming from the work of Keller (1993), divided associations into three categories: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. The attributes in this case represent those characteristics that are associated

with the product, which Gladden and Funk (2002) define as what occurs as a result of the competition on-the-field. The product-related attributes contain associations such as star player, management, head coach and success, while non-product-related attributes contain associations such as logo, stadium, and game presentation. The benefits that are included in the TAM are based upon Keller's (1993) conceptualization of consumer perceived benefits of consuming the brand including symbolic, functional and experiential. From this, the authors formulate benefits such as team identification and peer group acceptance. Finally, the authors include attitudes in the TAM in the form of importance, satisfaction, and loyalty. While, Gladden and Funk (2002) provide evidence of reliability of the internal structure of their instrument, some discrepancies exist in regards to the external or predictive validity of the scale. While the scale is based upon the conceptual work of Keller (1993) surrounding brand associations, the particular application of the benefits and attitudes components of brand associations raises some concerns. Both Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (1993) define brand associations as those characteristics of a brand that are linked to the consumer's perceptions in memory, a definition that provides evidence for brand associations being consumer perceptions of an external entity, in this case a brand. The associations that Gladden and Funk (2002) create that comprise the brand associations concept of attributes fall under this definition, as they comprise consumers' perceptions of brand characteristics that they may come into contact with in their search for information or experience with a particular brand. However, the associations generated in the TAM that represent both the benefits and attitudes components of brand associations, notably fan identification, importance, and peer group acceptance, are not representations of brand characteristics, but rather the

result of internal psychological processes of consumers and their experiences with a particular brand. Thus, their inclusion in the model is problematic, and could lead to some form of bias when the scale is applied empirically. It could be argued that fan identification, peer group acceptance, and importance should be viewed as outcomes of positive brand associations (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001; Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Watkins, 2014). Additionally, many of the items that comprise the various associations in the scale are generated with a focus on sport attendance specifically, and thus the consumer perceptions of these brand associations are limited to their experience of attending a sport event (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006). However, the consumption of sport, has changed significantly over the last 15 years, with many fans favoring a spectating experience from the comforts of their own home (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). Thus, limiting brand associations to consumer's perceptions of spectating experiences could limit the meaning derived from the scale.

In response to these limitations Ross et al. (2006) developed a scale to measure team brand associations, called the Team Brand Associations Scale (TBAS). In contrast to the TAM, the TBAS did not differentiate brand associations on the basis of attributes, benefits, and attitudes, and utilized the influence of Berry (2000) to create a scale that comprised the consumer experience and internal and external communications with a professional sport team. Much like the conceptualization of spectator-based brand equity, Ross et al. (2006) grounded their work in the understanding of brand associations as drivers of overall brand equity, and ultimately consumer response. Thus, understanding what consumers perceive as the brand associations that comprise a professional sports brand becomes valuable to marketing managers as they work to

cultivate craft their brand's identity. Utilizing a free thought listing strategy, and analysis in the form of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, Ross et al. (2006) identified 11 brand associations in the context of professional sport team brands, among these associations are brand mark, star player, coach, stadium community, rivalry, history, traditions, and non-player personnel. In contrast, from the work of Gladden and Funk (2002) and the TAM, the associations presented by Ross et al. (2006) represent the external characteristics of a brand that a consumer may hold in memory, and not manifestations of internal processes such as fan identification or peer group acceptance. The TBAS has been applied to a variety of settings including the emphasis of brand equity in professional soccer (Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, & Maroco, 2013; Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado, & Maroco, 2015) and collegiate sport (Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008), as well as the segmentation of fans into clusters based upon their brand associations' perceptions (Ross, 2007).

2.5 NEW SPORT BRANDS

Ultimately, the study of brand associations in the context of sport provides researchers with the opportunity to further understand the role and value that branding and brand equity can have in terms of shaping sport consumer behavior. Regardless of their measurement, sport scholars have found that brand associations are drivers of brand loyalty, purchase intentions, and consumer affective commitment to a sport brand (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008; Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kaynak, Salman, & Tatoglu, 2008; Kunkel, Doyle, Funk, Du, & McDonald, 2016; Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). However, very little research has examined the growth and development of brand associations of new sport brands. As discussed previously, the

sport industry has become increasingly competitive and saturated with a multitude of options for consumers to choose from (Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013; Kunkel et al., 2014). The industry is also characterized by historic teams that through their tenure and on-field success have been able to craft strong visible brands that espouse clear brand images based upon a set of easily defined brand associations. Professional team brands such as Manchester United, the New York Yankees, and Green Bay Packers hold brands that secure their organizations' competitive advantages in the marketplace. However, new sport teams do not have the luxury or time to create historic successful brands, but rather must create brand images that are clear and convey value to the consumer (Grant et al., 2010). The sporting world is filled with examples of new teams and leagues that have both succeeded in creating a strong positive brand, and have maintained organizational and financial success through a concerted focus on their brand (e.g. Oklahoma City Thunder, Major League Soccer, and Colorado Rockies) as well as those that have not (e.g. Atlanta Thrashers, Tampa Bay Mutiny, and the USFL). This challenge is further amplified for new sport brands that are also minor league sport organizations, which is often the case due to collective bargaining agreements and organizational politics limiting major professional sport team expansion (Che & Humphreys, 2015). These minor league sport organizations often have very little control over their on-field product, and it is often of less quality than that of their major league competitors. They must then rely on different aspects of the organization to create a brand identity that subsequently elicits positive brand associations and brand image. Thus, understanding the way in which brand associations can drive positive consumer response for a new sport team could provide valuable understanding of the impact that brand associations have in contributing

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to the success of the organization. This would allow the examination to be free of influence from the league's brand or a star player's brand. It also provides a unique context to examine how particular brand associations develop throughout the organization's inaugural season, and the impact these associations may have in contributing to consumer response at various points in the season and into the future.

The study of new sport teams has received increasing focus in the sport management literature, as researchers and practitioners alike seek to understand the strategies that contribute to organizational success. While the context of the research has remained the examination of new sport teams, the theoretical focus of the scholarship differs. James, Kolbe, and Trail (2002) examined consumers' psychological connection to a new professional sport team, prior to the team's inaugural season. Through a survey of season ticket holders, James et al. (2002) found that not only do fans consider themselves fans of the new team, but also hold emotional attachment to the team despite the organization never having played a game. Katz and Heere (2013, 2015, 2016) examined the context of a new collegiate football team at a university, and the role that the football team played in creating a brand community amongst consumers. They found that brand communities did form among fans of the new team (Katz & Heere, 2013), and that those communities worked to empower consumers (Katz & Heere, 2015). Additionally, it was found that team identity towards the new sport team acted as a driver for university identification (Katz & Heere, 2016). McDonald, Leckie, Karg, Zubcevic-Basic, and Lock (2015) segmented consumers of a new Australian Football League (AFL) team, in an effort to more accurately understand consumer characteristics. From their work McDonald et al. (2015) suggested marketing strategies that would be most

effective in reaching different consumer groups. Lock, Funk, Doyle, and McDonald

(2014) examined a similar context in Australia, but focused on how consumers' team

identification can develop and change, and how the varying components that comprise

identification can influence one another during the early years of the organization.

While Katz and Heere (2013, 2015) provide evidence of the role of a new sport

brand to bring together and empower, there remains a relative scarcity in the literature

that examines new sport teams from a branding and consumer behavior perspective.

Kunkel et al. (2016) were among the first to engender such an examination. By focusing

on fans of a new professional sports team in Australia, the authors conducted a

longitudinal examination of how consumers' brand associations change over the course

of the team's inaugural season, and how these associations contributed to team loyalty.

Kunkel et al. (2016) found that brand associations in fact had formed prior to the team

playing their first game, stemming from the marketing efforts of the organization.

Throughout the season positive perceptions of brand associations increased from time

one to time two, decreased from time two to time three, and increased from time three to

time four, with an overall increase from time one to time four. Brand associations also

positively influenced team loyalty throughout the team's inaugural season. While

research exists regarding new sport brands, due to the unique contextual nature of each

study, greater depth is need to provide insight to the sport management literature across

multiple scenarios.

2.6 MEASUREMENT ISSUES OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

As previously outlined, scales have been developed, tested and applied to measure

sport brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006; Underwood et al.,

2001). However, issues do exist regarding the scale presented by Gladden and Funk

(2002) and the inclusion of constructs such as fan identification, importance, and peer

group acceptance to measure sport brand associations. Kunkel et al. (2016), in a similar

study in scope and context to this one, utilized Gladden and Funk's (2002) TAM model,

and adapted the format using single items to measure brand association constructs. This

simplified format, while found valid in some research, has also been found to be

problematic in others (Fornell & Lacker, 1981). Additionally, these single item

constructs do not allow for the examination of how each brand association construct can

drive team identification or loyalty individually over time. Rather in Kunkel et al.'s

(2016) study the authors examined whether a total brand associations measure, comprised

of single item constructs, impacted consumer purchase intentions in a sport brand's

inaugural season.

While Kunkel et al. (2016) provided interesting and valuable findings regarding

the development of brand associations of a new sport team; further examination of their

work reveals issues that could be problematic. The authors' measurement of brand

associations was based upon Gladden and Funk's (2002) TAM model that holds

problematic measurement issues surrounding the inclusion of fan identification,

importance, and peer group acceptance in their framework. The problematic nature of

the inclusion of these constructs as brand associations has been discussed previously, due

to the understanding of brand associations as external consumer perceptions of a brand's

characteristics (Berry 2000; Kaynak et al., 2007), while fan identification, peer group

acceptance and importance represent internalized constructs that are often a result of

experience with a brand (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001; Watkins,

2014). Additionally, brand associations were considered a one-dimensional first order

construct with each respective brand association (success, stadium, star player, etc.)

represented by one question item, the totality of which was summed to create one brand

associations score. This again could be problematic, as brand associations have often

been conceptualized in the literature as second order constructs, with each association

comprised of several items that contribute to an overall brand associations construct

(Bauer et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2006). In addition to these potential conceptual issues,

Kunkel et al. (2016) measure the outcome construct of team loyalty in the form of

purchase intentions. While the understanding of brand associations' impact on purchase

intentions presents valuable and interesting insight, intent to purchase team merchandise

and attend future games, doesn't measure all aspects of behavioral and cognitive loyalty

to a brand (Yoshida, Heere et al., 2015; Zaharia, Biscaia, Gray, & Stotlar, 2016). While

issues exist in Kunkel et al.'s (2016) work, it presents a formative groundwork from

which to examine further how brand associations may drive consumer response to a new

sport brand.

2.7 BUILDING A FAN BASE: SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory is a broad-based concept that has been used in various

disciplines in an effort to describe and explain the components individuals associate

themselves with, and how these define the ways in which they interact with the world. It

focuses on the group in the individual and assumes that part of the self-concept is defined

by our belonging to social groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Ashforth and Mael (1989)

described social identification as "a perception of oneness with a group of persons…(and)

stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group,

the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation" (p. 20). Tajfel (1978) offered the frequently used definition of social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63).

Generally, social identity definitions center on the individual possessing a social identity stemming from their association with similar individuals in groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Goldberg, 1992). These components have also been described as cognitively segmenting and ordering the social environment, to provide the individual with a systematic means of defining others, allowing the individual to locate his or herself amongst the social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Membership and identification with these groups allows individuals to assimilate with "like" individuals and differentiate themselves from those not sharing similar characteristics (Heere, Walker, Gibson, Thapa, Geldenhuys and Coetzee, 2013). Important to the concept of social identity theory, is that the identification process is engendered by the individual themselves (Turner & Tajfel, 1982). That is to say, individuals are not forcibly put into various groups, rather they are able to select their own true identity.

The basis of an individual's collective identification to a group has been investigated by scholars. Specifically, Ashmore, Deux, McLaughlin-Volpe (2004), conceptualized that an individual's collective identity, is comprised of multiple elements that vary and strengthen their respective identity. By understanding the different elements involved in an individual's collective identification process, outcomes of identification can be better understood and predicted. These elements include self-

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categorization, evaluation, importance, attachment, sense of interdependence, social

embeddedness, behavioral involvement, and content and meaning (Ashmore et al., 2004).

The benefits of social and collective identification are numerous, and have been found to

have positive impacts on social capital and psychic income generation (Crompton, 2004;

Clopton & Finch, 2010).

Inherent to the concept of social identity is the range of identities an individual in

society can have across their lifetime. These identities can range from demographic

groupings, such as gender, race, age, income, etc., or they can be focused on different

membership organizations, such as political affiliation, religion, unions, universities,

sports teams, region, etc. (Heere et al., 2013). Identity groups can become even more

focused and specific in their social roles assumed within these settings, such as sibling,

employee, student, parent, friend, etc. (Ashmore et al., 2004). Among these group

identities some are more direct and central to the individual's everyday life (gender,

parent, etc.), while others are more abstract and symbolic (sports teams, nation, religion,

etc.). Because these groups are so abstract, they need constant reinforcement in order to

remind an individual that they are part of their social identity (Heere & James, 2007).

Within the scope of sporting events and regional identity, these abstract identities are

further instilled when there are constant reference actions made (Heere et al., 2013). This

could come from team billboards displayed in public locations and state flags flown at

stadiums.

2.8 BUILDING A FAN BASE: TEAM IDENTITY

An individual's established social identity with a given sport team, or team

identity, is not merely a group identity, but provides a symbolic representation of other

aspects of the individual's social or community life (e.g., geography, ethnicity, vocation, gender, etc. (Heere & James, 2007). With this in mind, team identity suggests that individuals who see themselves as fans of a sports team view themselves as more than just consumers of a product, but rather members of an intricate organization (Heere & James, 2007). These understandings are what make the processes of team identity similar, yet unique, when compared to social identity theory. Similar to well-known consumer brands, sports teams have the ability to evoke strong emotional responses from their fans, which creates opportunities for stronger and deeper connections from individuals to their respective teams. Anderson and Stone (1981) were among the first discuss the symbolic power of sport teams as organizations for individuals to identify with other members of their community. This concept of sport as a vessel to create a sense of community can be seen manifesting itself in the existence of regional mascots and nicknames for a given city's professional teams. The Pittsburgh Steelers, Portland Trailblazers, and Minnesota Twins all provide opportunities for individuals residing in that city to connect themselves with the identity of a sports team because of the organization's regional moniker. From this connection an ancillary reinforcement of the individual's identity with their region is also obtained (Heere & James, 2007).

Team identity and its impacts on self-esteem, consumer behavior, certainty, commitment, and satisfaction have been examined in previous sport management literature (Dimmock & Grove, 2006; Heere & James, 2007; Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011; Mahoney, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000; Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Luellen and Wann (2010) examined the role a specific outgroup to the individual, in this case a rival team. They found that the existence of an easily identifiable and long-

standing rival team further strengthens the identification of an individual with his or her own team. This concept is easily traced and supported by the foundations of social identity theory and its understanding of in-group and out-group identification.

This has far-reaching implications for sports fans, as this allows them to view their teams and their communities together, as one holistic organization, rather than separately. This understanding is what makes the power of sport fandom to an individual so innately powerful. It is this hybrid organization that represents both community and team that engenders deep feelings of identification and pushes the sports fan past the point of consumer to active stakeholder and organizational member. Examining sports fans as more than consumers can also be seen through the ownership structures of professional sports teams that are publicly owned. From this, these individuals have both emotional and monetary stakes in their teams. In European professional sport, many organizations have ownership structures in which fans not only have a monetary stake in the club, but also have voting rights over the determination of the president of the organization (Heere & James, 2007).

Wann and Branscombe (1993) discussed that a fan of a sports team engenders a sense of team identification that provides them with a sense of belonging and attachment to a larger social structure. This social structure allows for opportunities for both social capital and psychic income generation that often result in the creation of broader communities that connect individuals across demographics because of their deep identification with a team (Clopton & Finch, 2010). These communities are often self-fueling entities that are filled with individuals searching for group empowerment that comes from being united in something that is bigger than themselves (Clopton, 2008;

Heere, James et al., 2011). The ability for sport organizations to create highly identified fans can be of critical importance, and can help to ensure long-term financial viability in the form of ticket, merchandise, and media consumption (Collins, Heere, Shapiro, Ridinger, & Wear, 2016; Heere & James, 2007; Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016). Team identification has also been found to contribute to a sport organization's overall brand equity, making it a desirable target for sponsorship and exclusive media rights opportunities (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001; Watkins, 2014).

2.9 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BRANDING

As individuals become identified with an organization, they begin to feel less as if they are an individual consumer, and more like a collective group. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) conceptualized that brands across industries act as vessels for the creation of a brand focused social identity. Within the sport management literature, Heere, Walker et al. (2011) proposed that team identification should be seen as a strong indicator of the sense of community people perceive in their fandom. These collective groups of identified consumers, whose attachment point is the sport brand, are known as brand communities (Grant et al., 2011). Through these brand communities, consumers begin to feel empowered, and feel as if they are members within the overall organization (Katz & Heere, 2015). This feeling of empowerment holds financial implications for the organization, often leading to greater financial return (Hedlund, 2014; Heere, Walker et al., 2011; Yoshida, Heere, et al., 2015). In the context of new sport brands, forging these communities of consumption could be a critical strategy towards establishing a market presence and strong positive brand equity.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) describe brand communities as a collection of consumers bound together by their shared attachment to a particular brand. These communities, according to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), are non-geographically bound, specialized, and are based on a set of social structures that community members must adhere to. Within each brand community three traditional markers exist: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Each of these markers are said to exist within whatever commercial, mass-media, or social ethos the brand is a part of, and thus the community is a representation of its social position. With the rise of modernity and consumer culture, brand communities provide an opportunity for social connectedness amongst individuals. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) stated that brand communities represent a fabric of consumer relationships, involving consumer-to-consumer relationships, but also consumer-to-brand relationships, consumer-to-firm relationships, and consumer-to-product relationships. Through building these relationships and creating opportunities for shared consumer experiences, organizations are able to strengthen consumer commitment and loyalty (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In addition to a range of consumer relationships, brand communities are characterized by a set of group created practices in which consumers engage in through their membership to the community (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). These practices have been categorized as being part of four distinct themes: social networking, impression management, community engagement, and brand use (Schau et al., 2009). Brands that are able to facilitate the creation of communities, and also work with consumers towards establishing these

practices are able to create engaged and empowered consumers that are easier to retain (Hedlund, 2014; Schau et al., 2009; Yoshida, et al., 2015).

As mentioned previously, while team identification is well understood in the sport marketing literature, a specific focus on how individual community-based brand associations contribute to sport team identification is needed. Through this focus, a closer examination of how external perceptions (brand associations) can influence internal attitudes and feelings (team identification) can be generated. As there has been an increased focus of sport management scholars to examine fans and teams through the lens of brand community (Grant et al., 2011; Heere, Walker et al., 2011; Katz & Heere, 2013; 2015; Woolf, Heere, & Walker, 2013), emphasizing the communal aspect of a sport team's brand could allow for greater understanding of how brand associations can impact team identification. As mentioned previously, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) described a brand community as a community of identified consumers marked by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility, while Underwood et al. (2001) also identified shared group experiences, social space, and rituals and traditions as components. Each of these components has been examined within the sport management literature as contributors to consumer behavior. The concept of social space has been defined in several ways, but both James et al. (2002) and Underwood et al. (2001) identify the role of a central physical location (i.e. a sport stadium or arena) where consumers are able to interact with one another. Sport management scholars have investigated the role of stadiums and their characteristics to drive team identification and consumer loyalty (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Lee, Heere, & Chung, 2014; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2011). Similarly, authors have also

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presented the importance of an environment within sport facilities that provides

opportunities for individuals to interact with and engage with one another (Sywers, 2005;

Warner & Dixon, 2011; Yoshida, et al., 2015). Ritualized behavior too has been found to

be a key contributor to sense of community, team identification, attendance and

merchandise consumption (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009; McDonald &

Karg, 2014)

Focusing on brand associations that are representative of these brand community

concepts could provide opportunities for sport organizations to build and retain a highly

identified, community-oriented, and empowered consumer base. Underwood et al. (2001)

proposed that brand characteristics such as shared group experience, history and

traditions, social space, and rituals would positively drive consumer identification.

Similarly, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) suggested that the creation of brand communities

by organizations, comprised of identified consumers, directly influenced consumer

behavior. Thus, the study of brand associations, as influencers of brand community, will

produce increased understanding of the brand-based characteristics of the sport

organization that lead to brand equity, community, and team identification with a sport

organization. It is important to note that this study both supports and contradicts previous

work regarding the causality between branding and team identification. Yoshida, Heere,

et al. (2015) argued team identity had an impact on brand equity rather than the reverse

relationship. As has been evidenced in both the branding, and sport management

literature, the value and ability of brand associations to drive consumer response is

significant. While much of the research regarding brand associations has used purchase

intent as metric for positive consumer response, there exists opportunity to further

understand the role of brand associations as drivers of consumer behavior. Therefore, the following research questions are brought forth:

R1: How do perceptions of brand associations change throughout a new sport brand's inaugural season?

R2: How does team identification change throughout a new sport brand's inaugural season?

R3: To what extent can the development of individual brand association perceptions explain the change in team identification?

Thus, bridging the knowledge of brand associations and the value of identified consumers could yield an understanding of how to attract, develop, and maintain a committed consumer base of a new sport brand. In order for individuals to become active, committed, and predictable fans of a team, building positive brand associations is not enough, rather, these brand associations should create opportunities for fans to develop some sense of team identity before they consume the product.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to effectively examine the manner in which brand associations develop and impact consumer identification over the course of a new sport brand's inaugural season a longitudinal quantitative research design will be employed. Through the use of growth curve analysis, changes in the trajectory of brand associations and team identification will be measured. In addition, growth curve analysis can also provide evidence of how the changes in brand associations contribute to changes in consumer identification toward the new sport brand. The findings from these analyses could provide a unique understanding to how brand associations develop and grow, and how these associations drive the identification of consumers of the brand. The insight has ability to hold pertinent implications for both researchers and practitioners in the effort to further understand what branding strategies contribute to organizational success, in the form of consumer response, for new sport brand.

3.2 RESEARCH SETTING

To satisfy the need for increased research regarding new teams, the author must utilize a new sport brand as a case in order to effectively understand the contribution and changes of brand associations and consumer identification. In this case a new professional minor league baseball organization was targeted for this study. The Columbia Fireflies are a Class-A Minor League Baseball (MiLB) franchise that play in the newly constructed Spirit Communications Park in Columbia, South Carolina. The team is a minor league affiliate of the MLB's New York Mets. The city of Columbia passed referenda for the construction of a new ballpark in 2013 in hopes of luring an organization to the city. In late 2014, the city was officially awarded a franchise, and construction of the ballpark commenced shortly thereafter. The former Savannah Sand Gnats of the Single-A South Atlantic League would relocate to Columbia, and after a community focused "name the team" contest, would be called the Fireflies and began play in April of 2016. With this progression the team provided a targetable case for this study, as the organization developed a new brand and would play in a new stadium. As a member of MiLB, the organization received guidance from the league as well as outside brand managers in the crafting of their brand identity. MiLB has put an emphasis on the creation of strong brand identities of their organizations through the implementation of *Project Brand*, a league-wide effort to create distinct identities of organizations that form a clear identity for the league (Hill, 2013). This has led to the branding of new organizations, and the rebranding of former organizations in an effort to create unique identities that also hold ties to the community (eg. Richmond Flying Squirrels, Lehigh-Valley Iron Pigs, Hartford Yardgoats).

Columbia is also home to the University of South Carolina, whose athletic teams, the Gamecocks, compete in the Southeastern Conference in Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). The Gamecocks hold a significant presence in the sport market in Columbia, and their football, men's and women's basketball, and baseball events consistently draw a large number of consumers. Additionally, nearby Lexington County plays host to the Lexington County Blowfish, a collegiate summer league team that plays in the Coastal Plain League. Beginning in 2015, the team plays in a newly constructed park, after having played in downtown Columbia for the previous years of its existence. Neighboring cities of Charlotte, North Carolina, Charleston and Greenville, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia also play host to professional minor league baseball teams, three of which also play in the South Atlantic League with the new Columbia Fireflies.

It can be ascertained that the Columbia Fireflies are not only a new brand, but are also in a market competing with existing sport brands, several of which that offer similar products during similar seasons. Acknowledging the existence of these competing brands allows for the understanding of how Columbia Fireflies brand associations develop and drive the development and change of consumer identification to the brand over time in competitive market, which has the potential to provide interesting and valuable findings.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

The researcher in this case created a partnership with members of the Columbia Fireflies organization, and through presenting the possible benefits of the study; the Fireflies provided the researcher access to the organization's social media and email

databases for the dissemination of study materials. Additionally, the organization

allowed the researcher to be present at all Fireflies home games, and several outside

community events such as local Saturday markets and the organization's "Fan Fest."

Utilizing these access opportunities, the researcher disseminated a survey instrument

through the Fireflies' email newsletter, in the form of a descriptive link, through both the

Fireflies' Facebook and Twitter accounts in the form of once daily postings, and through

in-person survey collection at outside game events such as the Saturday market

appearances and the "Fan Fest." Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, data

collection occurred at three different time points during the organization's inaugural

season. The first data collection time point (T1) began one week prior to the Fireflies'

first home game, and will conclude at the end of the first home stand for a data collection

window of 14 days. The second data collection time point (T2) began two weeks prior to

the Fireflies' final home game, and concluded on the date of the final home game, which

is also the final game of the season, for a data collection window of 14 days. The third

and final data collection time point (T3) began two months following the final game of

the Fireflies' season and remained open for two weeks, for a data collection window of

14 days. This time period was chosen to coincide with the end of Major League

Baseball's postseason, as well as allow for an adequate time period where individuals

were able to reflect upon the inaugural season without too much influence from

marketing and promotion for the upcoming season. After the first data collection, email

addresses of the respondents were collected through a prompting on the survey. These

email addresses were then used to contact individuals for the second data collection, in

which again email addresses from the respondents of the second data collection were

collected. Utilizing these final email addresses, the survey was disseminated to individuals who had completed both the first and second data collections. Through this longitudinal approach, analysis of how individuals' progression in regards to brand associations and team identification was made. This approach did have the possibility to create issues regarding longitudinal response bias, in which only those individuals who hold strong perceptions may have respond. However, this was combatted by increases in sample size (Singer & Willett, 2003).

3.4 SAMPLE SELECTION

A representative sample of Fireflies' consumers was targeted for this study. Through the previously described dissemination channels, the study only attracted those consumers who show some interest in the Fireflies. Due to the potential for longitudinal response rates to decrease (Litwin, 1995), an initial sample of at least 500 individuals (n = 500) was targeted. With possible web survey response rates to be as low as 11%, this sample size was chosen to ensure it would be large enough for longitudinal data analysis (Fan & Yan, 2010; Manfreda, Bosnjak, Berzelak, Haas, Vehovar, & Berzelak, 2008). This rationale stems from growth curve studies citing sample sizes as low as 22 to be valid and representative samples for analysis (Katz & Heere, 2016; Singer & Willett, 2003). In an effort to increase responses, the Fireflies agreed to offer incentives for participation in the survey. For each response an individual provided during the course of the study, they were entered into a random drawing for a ballpark experience, such as a stadium tour, watching batting practice on the field, or throwing out a first pitch of a home game. While this incentive was instituted in the data collection to increase responses, it may have increased longitudinal response bias in the form of recruiting only

those individuals who held strong perceptions of the Fireflies, and would like the opportunity to experience more aspects of the organization. Conversely, the incentive may have also served as a tool to attract passive consumers, who showed some interest in the Fireflies by self-navigating to the organization's social media pages, email newsletter, or live event, but would not have filled the survey out if the incentive had not been offered. Through these methods a sample of consumers who held perceptions of the Fireflies' brand was garnered. Through attracting these consumers, accurate interpretations of the possible changes in brand associations and team identification were made. Notably, these individuals were more often in situations in which perceptions of the Fireflies brand were generated through experience. Demographic questions regarding age, gender, and education, provided an accurate profile of the sample.

3.5 INSTRUMENTATION

As previously outlined in the literature review, scales have been developed, tested and applied to measure sport brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006; Underwood et al., 2001), as well as team identification (Heere & James, 2007; Heere, James et al., 2011; Mael & Ashforth, 1992, Wann & Branscombe, 1993). To extend the literature, combat any potential single item measurement issues, and further the understanding of community oriented brand associations an adapted brand associations instrument was used (Wear, Heere, Collins, Hills, & Walker, 2016). The communal brand associations measure was developed based on the work of Gladden and Funk (2002), Underwood et al. (2001), and Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). The scale incorporates brand associations that are traditional sport team product oriented (Gladden & Funk, 2002), but also brand associations that are based upon the typical characteristics

of a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Underwood et al., 2001). While past literature has regarded brand association constructs as parts to a larger brand associations score (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006), in this research the author examines each brand associations component individually as drivers of consumer outcomes (Biscaia et al., 2015). This allowed for a more accurate examination of the hypotheses that form the basis of this study. Through the focus on communal brand associations as well as traditional brand associations, analysis of the change and contribution of individual brand association constructs was examined. The communal brand associations instrument was tested across two different samples for two different sports, and was found to be valid and reliable (Wear, Heere, Collins et al., 2016).

To analyze perceptions of team identification, Mael and Ashforth's (1992) instrument of organizational identity (OID) was used. The scale seeks to measure an individual's perception of identification to a particular organization, and it has been applied in the marketing literature as a valid measure of consumer identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003) as well as in the sport literature to measure identification to a sport team (Clopton, 2008; Clopton & Finch, 2010; Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016). In contrast to the multidimensional communal brand associations scale, the OID scale is unidimensional and is comprised of six question items. This instrument has been used throughout the sport management literature, and was selected to allow for enough predictive strength to analyze the direct effect of each brand association on team identity. An example question item from the scale is, "when the (insert organization) is praised, it feels like a personal compliment." In this study, the organization was the Fireflies, and the responses to the question items indicated an individual's perception of identification

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to the Fireflies and the brand they portray. Similar to the communal brand associations scale, the OID scale comprised question items that were rated on a seven-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree).

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Prior to analyses, data from each collection time point were cleaned and screened for any missing values. Responses indicating missing values were deleted and absent from the data analysis. Following the data screening, descriptive statistics were calculated in order to gain an accurate picture of the responses, and to ensure the data displays normality. Cronbach's alpha values were calculated for each brand association construct, the overall construct, as well as for consumer identification with values of greater than .80 providing evidence for internal consistency of the scales (Lance, Butts, & Michel, 2006). Subsequently, composite reliability (CR) scores of the communal brand associations and OID scales, as well as for each individual brand association measure, were calculated with values greater than .70 indicating scale reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). With normality ensured, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted for both the CBAS and OID instruments. Three separate CFA's were conducted with the data after each data collection time point to ensure that scales maintained both reliability and validity as the sample size changed. Using IBM SPSS Amos, a measurement model was created and tested for reliability and validity. To assess the structural validity of the instrument, both convergent and discriminant validity were assessed by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct in the measurement model. AVE scores of greater than .50 provided evidence for convergent validity, while discriminant validity was shown through comparing each construct's AVE

score to the squared multiple correlation value of the other constructs and ensuring that the AVE value was greater than the squared correlation value (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Finally, examination of the measurement model's overall fit of the data was conducted through examination of several fit indices. In both the sport management and marketing literature the non-normed fit index (NFI), comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square estimation analysis (RMSEA), and chi-square over degrees of freedom value (χ^2/df) value have been used to indicate model fit. Values greater than .95 for both the NFI and CFI, values less than .08 for the RMSEA, and chi-square over degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) values less than 3.0 have been found to indicate good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1995).

Finally, following the CFA analyses and model testing, two types of growth curve analysis were employed to examine the change in each brand association construct, overall brand association perceptions, and team identification, as well as the impact that brand associations hold on the change in consumer identification. While several longitudinal studies in the sport management literature have used cross-lagged panel modeling to track change, the use of latent growth curve analysis allows for the explicit analysis of how each brand association construct can contribute to the change of consumer identification at various time points. Katz and Heere (2016) utilized growth curve analysis in the examination of how team and university identity constructs change over time, and how the change in team constructs contributes to or drives the change in the university identity constructs within the context of a new collegiate sport brand. In a similar vein, in this study the author sought to examine how brand associations and consumer identification change over time, and how the change in the brand associations constructs contribute to the change in the consumer identification construct.

Growth curve analysis is often discussed in the form of two different model levels. A Level 1 model, or unconditional growth curve model, is characterized by the dependent variable being an outcome of an individual's base line value or intercept, their linear growth trajectory, and random error associated with the change. In regards to the first (R1) and second (R2) research questions, a Level 1 model was used to examine how individuals' brand associations and team identification perceptions developed over time. This analysis was conducted using a multilevel growth curve modeling approach in which eight separate models were generated. Each model within the analysis measured intra-individual change in regards to their brand associations perceptions across all three time points.

In regards to research question three (R3), which sought to understand how these changes in brand association perceptions impacted consumer identification over time, a deeper level of growth curve analysis was required. A Level 2 model is characterized by a dependent variable as an outcome of an individual's baseline and their linear change that is influenced by some time-invariant characteristic. Such that, a Level 2 model is a relational examination of the exchange process between an individual's slope intercept and a predictor with a dependent variable as the outcome of this process. In this case team identification was the dependent variable, and the predictor or independent variable were the various brand associations constructs at each time level. Significant impacts between the independent and dependent variable were recognized through p values less than or equal to .05 (Singer & Willett, 2003). Finally, Singer and Willett (2003) suggest the calculation of a Pseudo-R^2 statistic for each model to gain a more accurate understanding of the fit of the model through the calculation of a Pearson correlation

between the marginal means of the variables and the individual observed responses of the variables.

As evidenced by Katz and Heere (2016) the use of growth curve analysis provides a valuable examination of how constructs not only change over time, but can also contribute to the change of other constructs over time. In the context of understanding the changing nature of brand associations and team identification of a new sport brand, the use of growth curve analysis could allow for valuable insight that attempts to answer the research question from which this study is based.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 LONGITUDINAL SAMPLE

As outlined previously data were collected from Fireflies consumers over the course of three time points during the team's inaugural season. Following general data cleaning and screening, time point one (T1) resulted in a total sample of 558 individuals. Time point two (T2), targeting only those individuals who responded to the first data collection, comprised 266 individuals. Finally, time point three (T3), targeting only those individuals who responded to both the first and second data collection comprised 119 individuals. While the final sample was smaller than the first it still follows general sample size reduction and response rate expectations when conducting a longitudinal study (Litwin, 1995; Fan & Yan, 2010). The final sample size of 119 individuals has been found to be large enough for longitudinal analysis, particularly that of growth curve analysis, with sample sizes as small as 22 being viable samples for analysis (Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Katz & Heere, 2016). The reduction in sample size is also consistent with existing literature examining fans of new sport teams in which as early as the first season a small group of "leaders" are key brand community members that serve as catalyst for the involvement of other fans (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015). In this case, it appears that by the final data collection it was the leaders that were the remaining respondents. Within the final sample, the average age

was 43.89 (SD = 12.91) years with 49% of the sample between the ages of 18 and 41, and the remaining 51% between the ages of 42 and 70. The gender distribution of the sample was 52% male and 48% female. Finally, the education distribution of the sample contained 16% of individuals holding a high school degree, 17% an associate's degree, 36% holding an undergraduate degree, and 31% holding a graduate degree. The overall sample appears to be quite balanced and diverse, and provided a quality base from which to analyze longitudinal change amongst consumers of the sport team.

4.2 ASSESSMENT OF MEASUREMENT MODELS

Following the descriptive analyses of the total longitudinal sample, assessment of the brand associations measures and team identity measure was conducted in order to establish reliability and validity for the structural and growth curve model used in subsequent analyses. The first stage of this analysis was to conduct a principle component analysis (PCA) in order to assess whether the combination and addition of new brand association components were reliable and valid. Utilizing a Direct Oblimin rotation, the PCA resulted in each of the question items loading on their respective constructs. Seven components held Eigenvalues greater than one, and explained 74% of the variance. Examining the scree plot revealed that eight distinct components existed before the Eigenvalues appeared to drop considerably in value. With the inclusion of the eighth component, which held an Eigenvalue of 0.973, 79% of the variance was explained by the eight components. Following the PCA including all question items, each brand association component was analyzed individually to test for unidimensionality of each brand association construct because each component was treated individually in subsequent growth curve analyses. Eight PCA's were conducted for each brand

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association component utilizing a Direct Oblimin rotation. Results from the eight PCA's found that each brand association measure was unidimensional with each holding just one component with an Eigenvalue of 1.00 or greater. The variance explained by the individual brand association components ranged from 60% to 80%. Internal consistency reliability was assessed by examining each brand association component's Cronbach's alpha and inter-item correlation values. For each brand association component Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .80 to .91, above the recommended cut off of .80 (Lance et al., 2006). Inter-item correlations for the items of each brand associations ranged from .30 to .65, while item-to-total correlations ranged from .50 to .81.

An additional PCA with Direct Oblimin rotation was conducted to examine the validity and reliability of the team identity instrument. While the scale has been used in numerous sport marketing studies (Clopton & Finch, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Wear, Heere, & Clopton, 2016), a PCA was conducted in order to ensure that the instrument was adequate measure of team identity, particularly for a new sport team having not played a game yet. The PCA revealed that the instrument was indeed unidimensional with only one component holding an Eigenvalue greater than 1.00, and explained 71% of the variance. Internal consistency of the instrument was demonstrated with a Cronbach's alpha value of .91, inter-item correlations ranging from .44 to .66, and item-to-total correlations ranging from .60 to .82. It's important to note that these analyses were conducted with the respondents from the first data collection (n = 558). After reliability and unidimensionality of the constructs was ensured, they were carried forward for the subsequent two data collections.

For each time point of data collection a confirmatory factor analysis or measurement model was created to analyze the reliability and validity of the instruments across the longitudinal data collection. Results of the three measurement models are presented in Table 4.1. Each measurement model displayed adequate model fit with RMSEA values of .08 or less, NFI values of .90 or above, and chi square over degrees of freedom ratios of less than 3.0 (Hu & Bentler, 1995). Within each model, each brand association component displayed evidence of reliability with Cronbach's alpha values of .80 or greater (Lance et al., 2006), composite reliabilities of .80 or greater (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and factor loadings of .80 or greater (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

AVE values of the constructs exceeded the recommended cut-off value of .50, which provides evidence of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was assessed by comparing each construct's AVE score with the squared correlations among the respective constructs. In each case, with the exception of style of play, and for each time point, the constructs' AVE score was greater than its squared multiple correlation providing evidence for discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). AVE and squared multiple correlations are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.1. Assessment of Measures for Longitudinal Sample at Times 1 - 3

Construct Item	λ (Range)	Cron. Alpha	CR	AVE	χ^2/df	RMSEA	NFI
Time 1					2.642	.078	.91
Brand Associations							
1. Brand mark	(.84 - .93)	.92	.94	.79			
2. History	(.74 - .85)	.82	.87	.64			
3. Rivalry	(.79 - .88)	.87	.90	.70			
4. Success	(.85 - .91)	.85	.91	.77			
5. Style of Play	(.89 - .92)	.80	.91	.73			
6. Shared Group Experience	(.82 - .91)	.89	.94	.76			
7. Rituals	(.79 - .85)	.78	.87	.69			
8. Social Space	(.86 - .92)	.88	.92	.79			
Team Identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992)	(.76 - .88)	.90	.92	.67			
Time 2					2.443	.072	.91
Brand Associations							
1. Brand mark	(.77 - .88)	.87	.91	.71			
2. History	(.71 - .92)	.80	.88	.72			
3. Rivalry	(.85 - .94)	.93	.94	.82			
4. Success	(.84 - .94)	.90	.93	.83			
5. Style of Play	(.92 - .94)	..85	.93	.71			
6. Shared Group Experience	(.76 - .88)	.84	.89	.67			
7. Rituals	(.83 - .88)	.83	.90	.75			
8. Social Space	(.78 - .83)	.89	.85	.64			
Team Identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992)	(.79 - .94)	.93	.95	.76			
Time 3					2.649	.080	.92
Brand Associations							
1. Brand mark	(.83 - .87)	.84	.88	.66			
2. History	(.75 - .87)	.83	.89	.67			
3. Rivalry	(.91 - .94)	.94	.95	.85			
4. Success	(.83 - .91)	.85	.91	.77			
5. Style of Play	(.94 - .95)	.89	.92	.80			
6. Shared Group Experience	(.82 - .89)	.88	.92	.75			
7. Rituals	(.81 - .88	.84	.89	.74			
8. Social Space	(.75 - .92)	.91	.85	.66			
Team Identity (Mael & Ashforth, 1992)	(.79 - .94)	.93	.94	.75			

Table 4.2. Average Variance Extracted and Squared Multiple Correlations Times 1 – 3.

Time 1	Brand mark	History	Rituals	Rivalry	SGE	Social Space	Style	Success	Team ID
Brand mark	*0.79*								
History	0.56	*0.64*							
Rituals	0.31	0.53	*0.69*						
Rivalry	0.16	0.52	0.54	*0.70*					
SGE	0.41	0.45	0.53	0.44	*0.76*				
Social Space	0.42	0.42	0.45	0.41	0.53	*0.79*			
Style of Play	0.44	0.43	0.41	0.56	0.44	0.47	*0.73*		
Success	0.36	0.57	0.37	0.49	0.37	0.57	0.66	*0.77*	
Team ID	0.46	0.54	0.46	0.39	0.41	0.55	0.53	0.49	*0.67*
Time 2	Brand mark	History	Rituals	Rivalry	SGE	Social Space	Style	Success	Team ID
Brand mark	*0.71*								
History	0.53	*0.72*							
Rituals	0.34	0.56	*0.75*						
Rivalry	0.32	0.66	0.50	*0.82*					
SGE	0.31	0.49	0.60	0.48	*0.67*				
Social Space	0.33	0.44	0.56	0.38	0.53	*0.64*			
Style of Play	0.43	0.46	0.47	0.54	0.45	0.35	*0.71*		
Success	0.18	0.58	0.34	0.46	0.34	0.30	0.58	*0.83*	
Team ID	0.29	0.57	0.56	0.46	0.58	0.40	0.43	0.30	*0.76*
Time 3	Brand mark	History	Rituals	Rivalry	SGE	Social Space	Style	Success	Team ID
Brand mark	*0.66*								
History	0.53	*0.67*							
Rituals	0.30	0.51	*0.74*						
Rivalry	0.24	0.54	0.55	*0.85*					
SGE	0.49	0.46	0.62	0.45	*0.75*				
Social Space	0.48	0.50	0.54	0.31	0.56	*0.66*			
Style of Play	0.46	0.66	0.46	0.63	0.43	0.46	*0.80*		
Success	0.42	0.56	0.51	0.39	0.51	0.47	0.60	*0.77*	
Team ID	0.39	0.50	0.55	0.56	0.55	0.45	0.54	0.48	*0.75*

4.3 UNCONDITIONAL GROWTH CURVE MODEL ANALYSIS

Following the assessment of the measurement model, an unconditional growth curve model was created to address Research Questions 1 and 2. The results from fitting the model are displayed in Table 4.3. In addressing Research Question 1, the results of the unconditional growth curve model support the notion that each individual brand association component manifests itself to varying degrees throughout the new sport brand's inaugural season. Some of these components manifested themselves quicker than others, and grew at different rates. The range of intercepts for the brand association components, or their initial values, ranged from 4.76 to 6.34. Notably, particular brand associations held high positive consumer perceptions, despite the team having not played a game. Brand associations such as brand mark (5.83), or social space(6.34) offered early ways for consumers to form perceptions regarding the new brand's logo and color scheme, or its newly constructed stadium. However, brand associations such as history (5.19), shared group experience (5.89) and rituals (5.56) also held largely positive perceptions despite the fact that consumers had little to no opportunity to experience and form perceptions related to these brand associations.

Examining the slope, of each brand association component within the unconditional growth curve model provides evidence of how each brand association changed throughout the new sport brand's inaugural season. All seven brand associations held statistically significant slopes from T1 to T2, which provides evidence that the season itself held some influence in shifting consumer perceptions of the new sport team's brand. Success held the steepest increase from T1 to T2 ($\beta = .75$, $p < .001$), followed by brand mark ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$), and social space ($\beta = .39$, $p < .01$). It is

worth noting that rivalry held a negative slope from T1 to T2 (β = -.36, p = .05), despite

having a higher intercept than other brand associations such as success. Examining the

slopes from T2 to T3, provides evidence of the variation of the rate of change of

consumer perceptions between data collections. While all brand association components

held significant slopes from T1 to T2, only the brand associations of hared group

experience, rituals, and social space held significant slope values from T2 to T3. The

slopes of these brand associations were positive, yet less dramatic when compared to T1

to T2, with shared group experience having a rate of change of .05 (p < .05), rituals a rate

of change of .05 (p < .05), and social space a rate of change of .03 (p < .05). Figure 4.1

graphically provides a visual representation of the changing nature of the brand

association components from T1 to T2, and from T2 to T3.

The results to address Research Question 2 can also be found from the

unconditional growth curve model. Team identity held an intercept, or initial value of

4.39. This provides evidence similar to the brand association components, in that team

identity perceptions had already formed amongst consumers of the new sport brand prior

to the beginning of the inaugural season. In looking at the slope of team identity from T1

to T2, a small, but positive, significant rate of change of .06 (p < .01) was found. From

T2 to T3, a larger, positive significant rate of change of .49 (p < .05) was found. The

increase in rate of change displayed by team identity is contrary to that of the brand

association components, and provides some evidence of how and when consumers may

begin to formulate stronger feels of identification to the new sport brand. Figure 4.2

provides a visual representation of the changing nature of team identity from T1 to T2,

and from T2 to T3.

4.4 CONDITIONAL GROWTH CURVE MODEL ANALYSIS

In order to address Research Question 3, inspection of the conditional growth curve model provides evidence of how brand associations impact team identity, and how the rate of change of brand associations affects the rate of change of team identity. Within the conditional growth curve model, four of the seven brand associations, brand mark, shared group experience, rituals, and social space, were found to have statistically significant impacts on team identity.

By examining the pseudo-R^2 values of the conditional growth curve model, results revealing the nature of change in both brand associations and team identification is ascertained. Pseudo-R^2 values represent the level of within-person variation in team identity explained by each of the brand association components. Said another way, the pseudo-R^2 statistics indicates the percentage of change in team identity that is explained by the change in brand association components. Despite the team being in its inaugural season, particular brand association components acted as powerful instruments in driving team identity. While the traditional team-based brand associations of history, rivalry, and on-field success explained very little of the change in team identity (.08% - .09%), brand mark caused 6% of the increase in team identity over the course of the team's inaugural season. Ultimately, it was the communal based brand associations that were larger drivers of the change in team identity. Rituals explained 25% of the change in team identity, shared group experience caused 27% of the change in team identity, and social space was the largest driver of team identity change at 37%. These values, as well as values of growth curve model fit (log likelihood and Wald χ2) are presented in Table 4.4. In an effort to find the best fit for the conditional growth curve model, a baseline model

using was run with compound symmetry repeated covariance assumptions. Due to the repeated measures nature of the data collection, after the baseline model was run, the targeted conditional growth curve model was run utilizing AR(1) heterogeneous covariance assumptions. Comparison of the baseline model and conditional growth curve model provided evidence that the conditional growth curve model with AR(1) heterogeneous covariance structure was indeed the best fitting model. This was done by comparing each model's log likelihood and Wald $\chi2$ values (Chou, Bentler, & Pentz, 1998). In addition to brand associations impacts on team identity, the results of the conditional growth curve analyses provide evidence that community based brand associations are key drivers of the change in team identity during the new sport brand's inaugural season.

Table 4.3. Summary of Growth Curve Analysis

Variable	Intercept	Slope T1 –T2	SE	p	Slope T2 - T3	SE	p
Brand mark	5.83	.624***	.097	< .001	.021	.127	.085
History	5.19	.388**	.119	.002	-.079	.188	.183
Rival	5.02	-.361*	.183	.050	-.058	.250	.250
Success	4.76	.752***	.177	< .001	.078	.181	.181
Style of Play	4.87	.091*	.181	.050	.084	.193	.264
Shared Group Experience	5.89	.396**	.117	.005	.051*	.131	.013
Rituals	5.56	.301*	.140	.040	.056*	.194	.044
Social Space	6.34	.331**	.113	.007	.030*	.080	.080
Team ID	4.39	.063**	.210	.006	.489*	.220	.022

Note: *$p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Table 4.4. Summary of Conditional Model

Variable	Impact	Pseudo-R^2	Log likelihood	Wald χ^2
Brand mark	.291856*	.060	-281.057	146.77
History	.113587	.008	-358.812	189.69
Rival	.112833	.008	-450.773	112.89
Success	.175768	.009	-400.973	177.45
Style of Play	.103474	.006	-425.674	185.45
Shared Group Experience	.465506**	.276	-215.417	74.67
Rituals	.072853*	.254	-377.052	84.05
Social Space	.377264*	.372	-216.209	137.78
Overall Model Fit Indices				
Log likelihood	-555.143			
Wald χ^2	281.19			

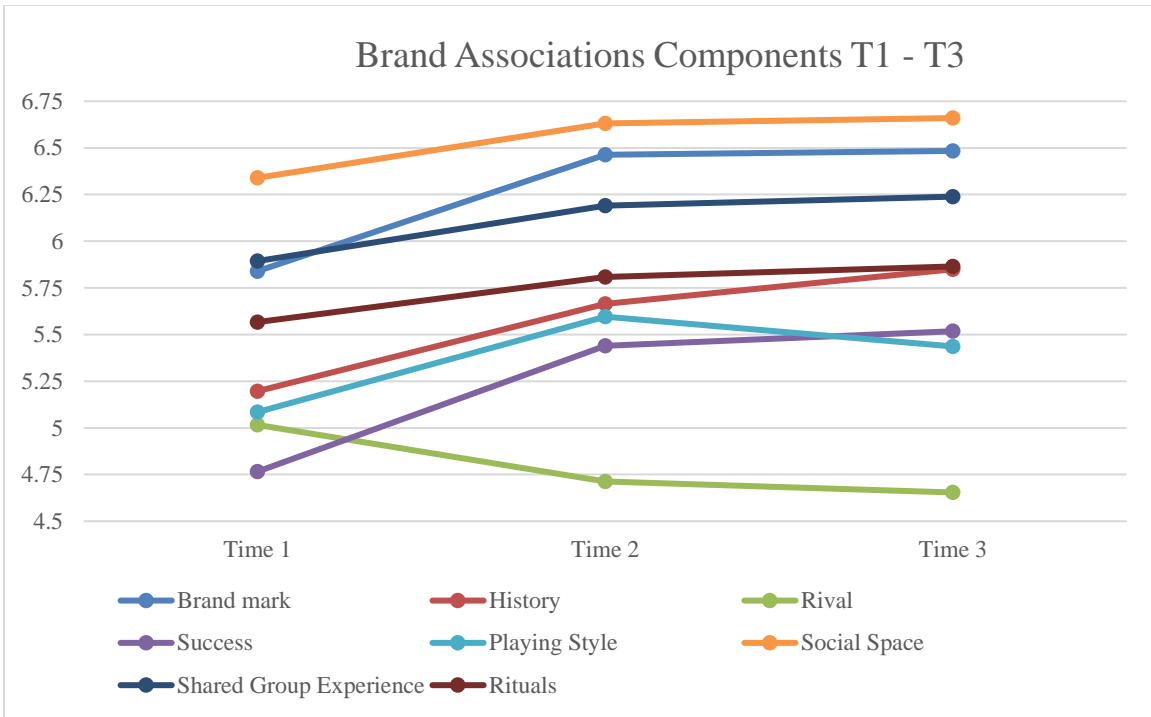*Note*: *$p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Figure 4.1. Longitudinal Development of Brand Associations Components.
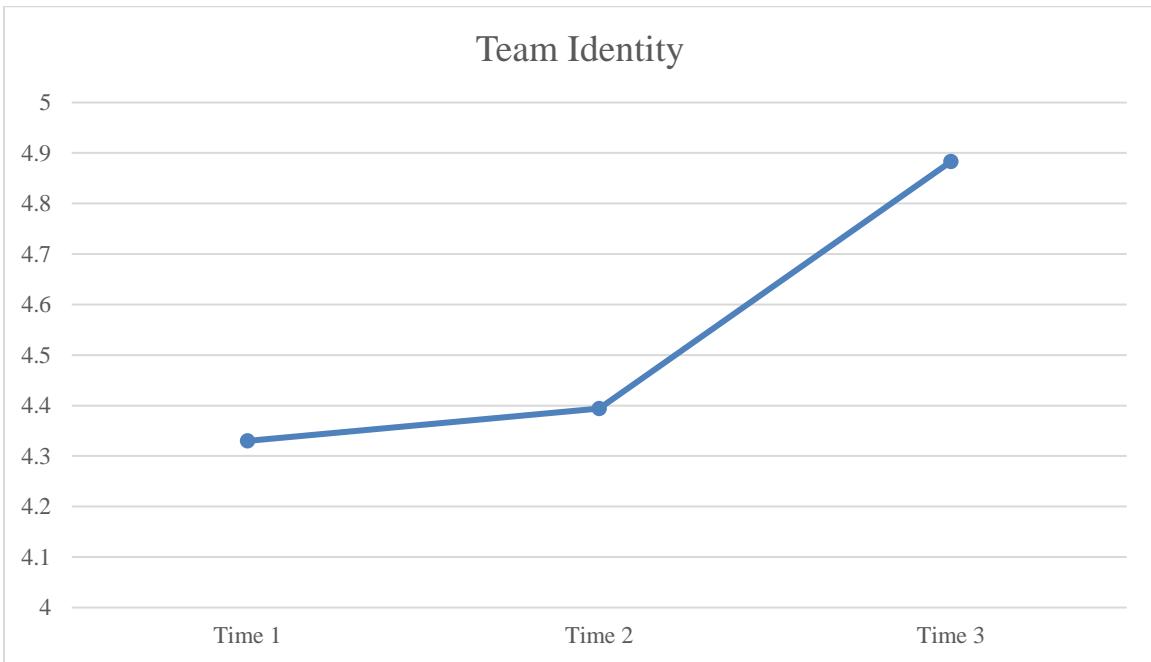

Figure 4.2. Longitudinal Development of Team Identity Components

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

As has been mentioned throughout, the author sought to find answers to research questions regarding the changing nature of brand association and team identity perceptions of consumers of a new sport brand. Additionally, the author sought to more closely examine how the change in brand association perceptions can drive the change in team identity. Through examining the results of the unconditional and conditional growth curve analyses, insights into the dynamic nature of brand association perceptions of a new sport brand can be ascertained. Moreover, the results provide a look into how brand associations can drive team identity to a new sport brand, and which specific brand associations are most impactful in guiding consumers to become identified fans of a new team.

5.2 DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE OF BRAND ASSOCIATIONS

The unconditional growth curve analyses provided a glimpse of the changing nature of brand associations of a new sport brand. Notably, consumers held brand association perceptions of the new sport team prior to the beginning of the season. The inaugural season, as a function of time, acted as vessel to change those perceptions. These findings are in line with previous studies that acknowledge sport consumers' early manifestation of perceptions towards new

teams (James et al., 2002; Kunkel et al., 2016). However, this study extends the current literature by providing a glimpse in to how specific brand associations change over the course of three timepoints during a new team's inaugural season. That is, this study revealed how the perceptions of the brand associations of brand mark, history, success, rivalry, style of play, shared group experience, social space, and rituals changed individually, because of the participants' experience with the new team's inaugural season. Within Figure 4.1 and Table 4.3, the unique nature of change and growth of individual brand associations can be seen. For the 119 participants of this study, perceptions of all seven brand associations significant changed from the first game of the season to the final out of the new team's inaugural year. However, only the brand associations of social space, shared group experience, and rituals significantly changed from the end of the season to several months later, providing some evidence of a long-term change rather than a season-based change. As was mentioned in the results, these three brand associations are off-field characteristics rather than on-field characteristics, which could provide insight into the importance of promoting a sense of community amongst consumers of a new team.

Of the three significant long term change brand associations, social space had the highest initial value. This is an interesting finding, and largely could be attributed to the increased attention and focus of consumers within the city on the newly built publicly funded stadium. In many new team scenarios, teams occasionally occupy previously built municipal stadiums (e.g. Gold Cust Suns, Kunkel et al., 2016), or may share existing facilities with other professional teams while construction of a new stadium is finalized (e.g. Orlando City SC, Tenorio, 2016). However, in this case, the arrival of the new team

was preceded by much speculation and planning regarding the building of the new stadium. In fact, the stadium construction began prior to the city of Columbia being awarded a minor league franchise. These actions may have provided the opportunity for individuals to begin to form stadium brand perceptions of the new sport team despite never having been inside and experience the stadium itself. However, stadium brand perceptions were not just high initially, rather they increased as consumers were able to develop experiences with the stadium, or were told about experiences from fellow consumers during the inaugural season. Perceptions could have also been shaped or formed by the increased notoriety of the stadium later in the season, as it was recognized as Ballpark of the Year (Ball Park Digest, 2016). These brand perceptions remained, and increased further several months after the conclusion of the inaugural season (T2 – T3). This could provide some evidence of consumers recalling their positive experiences with the stadium, as a vessel for community, sense of home, or representation of the team's overall brand. The role of stadiums as part of sport team brands is showcased throughout professional and collegiate sport, and in many cases, stadiums hold their own unique brands in conjunction with their team's brand (i.e. Fenway Park, Old Trafford, Allen Fieldhouse). These stadium-based characteristics too have been found to be vessels for consumer satisfaction through various physical and social characteristics the stadium holds (James et al., 2002; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010).

Previous studies examining brand perceptions of new sport teams have also found that consumers begin to form perceptions regarding the new team's stadium early in the team's existence. James et al. (2002) examined several stadium based perceptions of new sport team consumers, and found that consumers positively perceived the new stadium

despite never attending a game. Kunkel et al. (2016) found that stadium brand perceptions increased throughout the Gold Coast Suns' inaugural season, particularly as consumers were able to gain direct experiences with the stadium. For the 119 participants in this study, similar results were found, and stadium brand perceptions held both the largest initial and final value amongst all brand associations. It should be noted that while stadiums for most sport teams are particularly strong brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002), with the Columbia Fireflies being a minor league baseball team, the magnitude of stadium brand perceptions could have been heightened in this case. Minor league baseball receives little broadcast exposure across the United States, and for many consumers the only opportunity to experience a minor league baseball game is in the stadium (Bernthal & Graham, 2003). Minor league baseball leagues and teams across the country have come to understand this as the nature of the sport, and many teams and leagues place a concerted focus on providing engaging and quality in-stadium experiences (Koo, 2009). This alone could have had some influence on the stadium brand associations of Fireflies' consumers, compared to if the team was a major league, collegiate, or amateur sport organization. Regardless of possible influences, stadium brand associations held high initial values, and continued to increase as consumers gained experiences during the inaugural season, and increased yet again when asked to recall their perceptions several months later. With respect to Research Question 1, the continued growth of social space brand association perceptions provides insight into the development and change of fans sentiments of new sport team's stadium community.

Much like the brand association of social space, the association of shared group experience held a high initial value compared to other brand associations. Again, similar to social space, perceptions of shared group experience grew as consumers were able to obtain experiences with the new team brand during its inaugural season. As an organization, the Fireflies promoted their home games as a place for social interaction and camaraderie among fans. The stadium concourse and facilities were organized in a manner that created opportunities for fans to interact with one another in open communal spaces. Open berm seating and group picnic table style seating were anchored in the stadium concourse by a large communal bar and lawn game space in the outfield. The open layout also encouraged physical movement about the stadium for fans, which created greater opportunities to engage and interact with other fans throughout the park. These characteristics, coupled with the aforementioned nature of minor league baseball attendance, appears to have created a catalyst for the development and growth of positive brand associations perceptions of shared group experience. Perceptions of shared group experience continued to grow after the inaugural season's conclusion, and in fact grew at a rate greater than that of stadium. Thus for the 119 participants in this study, shared group experience was an important component and positively perceived characteristic of the new sport team's brand that increased as consumers experienced the inaugural season, and also by reflecting on the season after it had ended. The importance of social interactions amongst fans to a sport organization's success has been well documented in the sport management literature (Sywers, 2005; Underwood et al., 2001; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015; Yoshida, Heere et al., 2015). This study provides continued support of that importance, but extends the literature by

providing evidence of the dynamic nature of shared group experience as a key brand association for a new sport team's brand.

The final brand association that exhibited long term, significant change was that of rituals. Similar to both social space and shared group experience, rituals held a fairly high initial value above the midpoint of 4.0. This, much like social space and shared group experience, was an interesting finding and provided evidence of consumers of the new sport team forming perceptions based upon expectations rather than actual experiences. While baseball has several universal ritualistic behaviors that are involved in its consumption (e.g. singing during the seventh inning stretch), many teams and organizations have ritualistic characteristics that are unique to their organization (McDonald & Karg, 2014). Thus, the finding that Fireflies' consumers had already anticipated some form of ritualistic behavior in conjunction with the team's brand was both interesting and intuitive. Unsurprisingly, as consumers developed experiences with the new sport brand, perceptions of ritual-based brand associations increased. Throughout the season the Fireflies organization introduced various rituals into a daily game day experience for fans. In addition to the traditional national anthem and seventh inning stretch rituals, the break between the top and bottom of the sixth inning became ritualized by the dancing antics of the "Fly Guyz," who would surprise fans with a new choreographed dance routine at every home game. Eating contests occurred during the break between, the second and third inning, and a promotion with regional fast food chain Bojangles rounded out the game day rituals between the eighth and ninth innings. Notably, each of these rituals were distinct, anticipated, and repeated at every home game during the inaugural season. For the participants in this study, this seems to have

provided an opportunity to develop experiences with the ritual-based brand

characteristics of the new sport brand, and develop subsequently increased perceptions

from the beginning to the end of season. These ritual-based brand associations appeared

to be unique and memorable for Fireflies consumers, as perceptions of rituals increased

again several months after the conclusion of the season. While rituals are often

mentioned in the discourse of traditional sport fandom (Underwood et al., 2001), this

study examined rituals as an association of the overall team brand. The high initial value,

as well as the dynamic growth and change of rituals as a brand association provides

evidence that consumers both anticipate, and develop positive perceptions of ritual brand

characteristics of a new sport team.

In regards to Research Question 1, as was mentioned previously, all seven brand

associations significantly changed from the beginning of the new sport brand's inaugural

season to its conclusion. Over this time, seven of the eight brand association positively

changed, with the exception of rivalry which decreased from the beginning to end of the

season. In the case of this study, the growth of seven of the eight brand associations

provides evidence that consumer experience with the new sport during the inaugural

season acted as a catalyst that positively grew brand associations perceptions. This

illustrates the experiential nature of minor league baseball consumption, and also the

value of experiential based consumer behavior for new sport teams as they work to grow

their brand's perceptions. Notably, history held a high initial value from consumers

despite the team being new. However, while the Fireflies were a new team, a minor

league baseball team had previously called Columbia home, and were also a New York

Mets affiliate. This could have triggered positive perceptions of history-based

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characteristics despite the franchise being new in the area. This is in contrast to the findings of Grant et al. (2011) who found that managers of new teams had difficulties in establishing history based characteristics within their new brand. In the case of rivalry, participants in this study found that positive perceptions of rivalry-based brand characteristics, such as games and matchups against nearby teams, decreased as they experienced the Fireflies' inaugural season. While rivalry perceptions decreased over the course of the season, perceptions were still positive, and above the midpoint of 4.0 by the end of the season. It seems that consumers anticipated the importance of rivalry to be positive over the course the season, but by close of the inaugural season these perceptions of rivalry-based brand associations shifted from importance to indifference. This could be due to the characteristics of minor league baseball as a sport product that have been previously mentioned, where the focus is on the experience within the stadium rather than the result of the team's on field performance. Additionally, many great sporting rivalries are built up over the course historical meetings between rival teams (Tyler & Cobbs, 2016), and thus a one season examination of a new team may not be an adequate reflection of future rivalry perceptions.

Ultimately, over the course of all three data collections, only the brand associations of social space, shared group experience, and rituals held statistically significant changes. That is, from the first game, to the final out of the season, and again recalled several months later, consumers' perceptions of these characteristics of the Fireflies brand continued to increase. Each of these associations holds theoretically grounding in traditional characteristics of communal-based sport consumption (Underwood et al., 2001), and are often used as a way to provide evidence of the

existence of a brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2002). These three brand associations are also in line with existing research regarding sport brand development strategies. Through a qualitative investigation of sport consumers, Kunkel et al. (2014) found that fan engagement, game day experience, and unique team identity were paramount in developing positive sport brand perceptions amongst consumers. It could be said that social space and shared group experience brand associations developed through participants' game day experience, which emphasized fan engagement and interaction. While the concerted effort by the Fireflies to promote and develop rituals has provided the team with an opportunity to craft a unique brand identity. This uniqueness may have influenced the large initial value and significant growth of brand mark brand associations. Markedly, for the participants of this study, the inaugural season provided a catalyst to grow the communal-based brand association perceptions of the Fireflies, and from this, the new sport brand created the opportunity to leverage these communal-based associations into consumer team identity.

5.3 DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE OF TEAM IDENTITY

Understanding the nature and influence of change in consumer behavior was a major thrust of this study, and informed both Research Question 1 and Research Question 2. Research Question 2 sought to understand the changing nature of team identity to the new sport brand. The results from this study provide evidence that as the 119 participants were able to develop experiences with the new sport brand over the course of its inaugural season, and even several months later, they begin to feel a greater sense of identification to the new team. That is, consumers grew in their fandom to the Fireflies as the inaugural season progressed. As can be seen in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.3, the initial

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value of team identification was quite close to the midpoint of 4.0. By the end of the inaugural season, consumers' identification to Fireflies displayed significant growth, but at fairly low rate. This in line with previous literature regarding the development and change of team identity of new teams (Katz & Heere, 2016). However, when consumers were asked to recall their feelings of identification several months after the inaugural season had concluded their identification towards the Fireflies increased at a larger rate. Particularly, this provides evidence that while the inaugural season was a catalyst for the growth of team identification, it was not until several months after the conclusion of the season that feelings of team identification truly began to rise away from the midpoint of 4.0. This is in an interesting finding and provides new insights into the manner in which team identity develops for new sport teams.

Existing literature regarding the longitudinal development of team identification of consumers of new sport teams has provided mixed findings. Wann (1996) investigated the change in individuals' team identification over the course of a team's season. He found that as the season progressed, and fans developed experiences based upon the team's performance, their identification, involvement, and evaluation of the team changed. Lock et al. (2014) utilized a multidimensional measure of team identification in an effort to examine how the structure of its components changed from the beginning of a team's inaugural season to the beginning of its second season. Utilizing a cross-lagged structural model, the authors found that team identity components at the start of the inaugural season exhibited a positive change when measured again at the beginning of the team's second season. While Lock et al.'s (2014) study focused on the structure and stability of team identity dimensions over time, it provided insight into the way team

identity develops for new sport teams. As mentioned previously, Katz and Heere (2016) examined the development of both team identity and university identity components of a new university sport team. In contrast to Lock et al. (2014), Katz and Heere (2016) analyzed these changes over the course of the first three years of the new sport team, and provided evidence of how each component of team identity changed from year to year. The authors found that certain components increased. The current study, builds upon the literature by providing a true longitudinal study with more than two data collection points, and through this provides opportunities to examine when and how team identity changes. Additionally, the data in this study were collected over three time points during the new team's first year in existence. By doing so, the current study provides an opportunity to examine at what time point team identity develops, as well as the magnitude of the change during what has been found in the literature to be a key period of team identity growth for new teams. In this case, while the season acted as a trigger to begin the development of team identity for consumers of the new team, it was not until several months after the season concluded that feelings of identity to the new team began to grow significantly. This both confirms previous longitudinal team identity studies (Katz & Heere, 2016; Lock et al., 2014; Wann, 1996), and extends the literature by providing analysis of the longitudinal growth of team identity over the course of three time points during year one, and within a new professional American sport team context.

5.4 DYNAMICS AND IMPACTS OF CHANGE

While Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 were focused on the nature of development of both brand associations and team identity of a new sport team, Research Question 3 was developed to garner insight in to how individual brand

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associations act as drivers of team identity. As was presented in the results, the

conditional growth curve model represents how, over the course of all three data

collections, the development of each brand association explains the change in team

identification to the Fireflies. That is, rather than an examination of impacts in a cross-

sectional nature, or in a comparative nature across three time points, this study presents

the influence of brand associations on team identity from a developmental perspective.

By doing so, the results represent how each brand association drives team identity

throughout the entirety of the team's inaugural season, as well as several months later.

Ultimately, it was the brand associations of brand mark, social space, shared group

experience and rituals whose changes significantly explained the development of team

identity during the Fireflies inaugural season.

The brand association of brand mark held one of the highest initial values of all

seven brand associations, but it did not display significant change from the second to

third data collection. Closer inspection of this result reveals that the rate of increase from

beginning of the season to the end was the second largest amongst all brand associations.

The name and logo of the team was released simultaneously six months prior to the

beginning of the inaugural season. The Fireflies embraced their moniker, and continued

to grow their branding and merchandise offerings. Throughout the season, marketing

efforts reinforced the local ties that the nickname was derived from, which may have

aided in the increase of the perceptions across the inaugural season. These actions were

in congruence with previous efforts by uniquely named minor league baseball franchises,

who have found that by embracing their unique monikers and branding, fans soon to will

embrace them as well (Ballouli, Grady, & Stewart, 2016; Dwyer, Le Crom, Tomasini, &

Smith, 2011). The brand mark of the Fireflies in this case represents a tangible

representation of the new team that transcends the on-field and in-stadium experience.

This unique nature of ubiquity across consumer environments could explain why, among

the traditional sport-based brand associations, brand mark stood out as a positive driver of

fandom. Being the only professional sports team in the city of Columbia, South Carolina,

Fireflies merchandise and memorabilia could represent more than just the team it was

made for, but a way of showing pride for the city (Heere & James, 2007; Heere, James et

al., 2011). Alternatively, the branding, logo, and the associated merchandise could just

be physically attractive to consumers, and from this satisfaction, an identification to the

team it represents could be formed. Regardless of the reason for consumers' positive

perceptions of brand mark characteristics, the study supports the findings of Kunkel et al.

(2014), which found that teams with a unique, attractive, and individualized brand mark

identity can increase their consumer involvement. While this study is limited in its ability

to provide the cause of brand mark's impact on the growth of identification to a new

team, the presentation of the changes in impact is a contribution to the body of

knowledge regarding brand associations and their ability to drive fandom to new teams.

As was stated in the results, of the three statistically significant brand associations

relationships, across all three data collections, increases in social space perceptions

explained the largest percentage increase in team identification from the beginning of the

season until several months after the final out. The results present that 37% of the

increase in team identification can be explained by the increase in positive perceptions

regarding social space brand associations. As mentioned previously, prior studies have

examined and provided evidence for the importance of other consumers in regards to

consumer behavior (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2015). This study furthers this assertion by providing evidence that for new teams it is not only important to create a sense of community within the stadium and facilitate social interaction, but also market and promote these characteristics as key brand associations. Possible reasons for the growth and level of positive perceptions of social space were presented previously, but to reiterate, the stadium the Fireflies played their inaugural season in was newly constructed and publicly funded. It was at the heart of a great deal publicity, and was a planned anchor for a citywide redevelopment plan. That said, the finding that social space itself helped to shift participants from being consumers to identified fans throughout the season is a contribution to the literature. Lee et al. (2013) examined the specific sensory based characteristics of sport stadiums, and found that the stadium alone is enough to drive feelings of identification towards the host team. Brakus et al. (2009) found that sport team brand related stimuli occurring and existing in the stadium space impact team loyalty. Similarly, Uhrich and Benkenstein (2011) found evidence that the physical properties of sport stadium, as well as the behavior of other customers in the stadium led to a positive overall affective consumer response. James et al. (2002), within the context of new teams specifically, found that the novelty of a new stadium was a significant influence for fans to purchase season tickets of a new sport team. Previous literature has emphasized the importance of stadiums as vessels for community formation and interaction amongst consumers (Heere, Walker et al., 2011; Underwood et al., 2001). It is important to reemphasize that the brand association of stadium in this case does not simply represent perceptions of its design or physical features, but also its ability to facilitate interaction, and the sense of home it creates for consumers. Many sport team

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brands across the industry have come to be known by the sense of community that is created by their stadiums, or the ability of the stadium to represent the character of the team and its home city. Stadiums such as Wrigley Field, Fenway Park or Lambeau Field are well known for their ability to be both community anchors, as well as external representations of their home teams through holding unique physical and emotional characteristics. To this end, it may not be entirely surprising to find that for teams with such stadiums, stadium based brand associations may indeed drive identification to the team (Lee et al., 2013). In the case of the Boston Red Sox, the Green Monster, the Pesky Pole, the Triangle, and the community surrounding Yawkey Way represent potential stadium brand associations that could impact team identification. However, in contrast to the Boston Red Sox, the Columbia Fireflies played their inaugural season in 2016, not 1901, and in a stadium opened in 2016, not 1912. Thus, the ability of social space based brand associations to explain the increase in team identification within the first season provides evidence, in this case, that promoting and marketing a new team's stadium community can make marked difference in the development of identified fans.

This finding contributes to the sport marketing literature regarding the benefit of social space based brand associations and their impact on consumer behavior for new sport teams. In this case, an understanding of the importance of social space band associations is found early in the new team's inaugural season, and provides evidence that the influence of these associations is consistent throughout the season. This is a finding consistent with previous research regarding the positive impact of stadium characteristics on consumer behavior, but expands the literature by providing evidence of

the continued influence of stadium associations to explain increases in team identification of new sport teams from a longitudinal perspective.

The results from the conditional growth curve model indicated that an increase in shared group experience brand associations perceptions explained 28% of the growth of team identification. That is, as feelings of identification to the Fireflies increased over the course of the inaugural season, 28% of that increase could be explained by an increase in individuals perceiving the Fireflies brand to represent fan-to-fan social interaction and a sense of community. With shared group experience representing the social interaction and fan to fan comradery that the Fireflies brand embodies. As was mentioned previously, the layout and design of the stadium, coupled with the nature of minor league baseball consumption, provided an ideal environment for the brand association of social space to grow throughout the inaugural season. Warner and Dixon (2011) found that when sport organizations were able to create social interaction characteristics within their facilities, which were characterized by the ability of individuals to share experiences in a common physical location, individuals perceived a greater sense of community about the organization. Similar findings were presented by Sywers (2005) who presents the Chicago Cubs bleacher regulars at Wrigley Field as creators of their own social space at the stadium, which contribute to an overall feeling of community.

The findings of shared group experience's role in explaining the increase in team identification confirms the value of fan social interaction and sense of community in driving identification of fans. However, the contribution of this study in this case is that social interaction amongst fans is not only a driver of team identity for established sport

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team brands, but is a key driver of creating identified fans for new sport teams. This furthers the existing knowledge regarding the important role of other fans in fostering positive consumer behavior for teams. Yoshida, Heere, et al. (2015) and Katz and Heere (2013, 2015) recently emphasized the importance of non-team related brand community associations. These authors found that the interaction with other fans is an essential part of the game day experience, and the results of the conditional growth model support that view. Along with the experiential nature of shared group experience brand perceptions, the Fireflies actively promoted fan interaction in their various marketing and social media channels. For the 119 participants in this study, the fact that the Fireflies brand was synonymous with social interaction and a sense of community within the stadium, led consumers look upon the brand more positively, and subsequently were more apt to feel identified to the new team. These findings provide implications for managers of new teams in the manner in which they promote their game day experience, as well as facilitate in stadium activities. While the shared group experience findings could be largely context specific, they still provide possible implications for new minor league teams as they seek to develop positive perceptions of their brand, without being able to rely upon team history, playing style, star player, or other sport and time related associations.

Rituals was the final statistically significant brand association driver of team identification over the course of all three data collections. Increased perceptions of ritual-based brand associations over the course of the three data collections explained 25% of the change in consumers' identification to the new team. This provides evidence of the value of rituals and traditions in contributing to social identity as posited by Underwood

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et al. (2001) and reemphasized by Boyle & Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014). However, Underwood et al.'s (2001) original conceptualization utilized established, well-known teams (e.g. University of Alabama Crimson Tide, Boston Red Sox, etc.). In their tests of the framework both Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014) examined fans of established, well-known collegiate and professional basketball teams. While Boyle and Magnusson (2007) found that rituals and traditions of a collegiate basketball team had a positive impact on team identification, Watkins (2014) found a non-significant impact for a professional basketball team. The findings of this study contribute to the branding and team identification literature by displaying that rituals not only have a significant impact on team identification, but that an increase in ritual-based brand associations explains 25% of the increase in team identification. Additionally, these findings are presented within the context of a new minor league team, rather than established, well-known collegiate or major league teams.

As was presented previously, the Fireflies were very quick to capitalize on the traditional ritualization of baseball consumption, as well as create new and unique rituals to their in-game product. The value of ritualization has been presented across marketing topics, most recently in the area of brand community characteristics (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; McDonald & Karg, 2014; Underwood et al., 2001). McDonald and Karg (2014) identified that the role of sport rituals in the sharing of knowledge amongst fans, promoting social integration, and maintaining existing team and spectator traditions. Drenten et al. (2009) investigated the ritualistic nature of tailgating and found that individuals were largely driven by the desire to interact with other individuals and feel a collective identity toward a group. Underwood et al. (2001) were among the first put

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forward the role of rituals and traditions as tools to build social identity amongst fans. Grant et al. (2011) furthered this assertion, and found that while managers of new teams may not have been entirely successful in implementing and marketing rituals and traditions in their new teams' campaigns, there was an overall agreement of their importance. McDonald and Karg (2014) provided evidence of the longitudinal nature and importance of rituals for new sport teams. The authors found that ritualized behaviors drove team identification to the new sport team, and not the reverse. The Fireflies seemed to understand the value of rituals and traditions quite well, and in addition to creating ritualized in-stadium activities, they promoted and integrated these rituals within broader marketing communications. One of the rituals mentioned previously, the "Fly Guyz" nightly sixth inning dance routine, was received so positively by fans that the organization created a "Fly Guyz" Twitter social media account to post videos of the evening's dance routines. Similar to both stadium and social space brand associations, ritual-based brand associations were tangible aspects of the new sport team that consumers could formulate perceptions early on in the team's existence through their in-stadium or marketing communication based experiences.

The findings provide evidence that for the participants in this study, rituals extended beyond actions taken by the fans or the organization, and transcended into identifiable characteristics of the team brand. This is not unlike other sport teams whose brands are characterized by particular rituals (e.g. Green Bay Packers and the Lambeau Leap). However, this study provides evidence that rituals, if activated and embraced effectively by the organization, can be key drivers of identified fans to a new sport brand, as early as the brand's inaugural season. This furthers the understanding generated by

McDonald and Karg (2014) regarding the longitudinal nature of rituals and team identification of a new sport team. McDonald and Karg (2014) found that ritual behaviors and team identification held significant correlations during the second and fourth seasons of the new team. The current study extends the literature by providing evidence that increases in ritual based brand associations drive increases in team identification, and are not just simply correlated, and provide a more robust, in-depth interpretation of the development and growth of this impact throughout the new team's inaugural season.

Ultimately, these findings expand the sport marketing literature in regards to the impact of particular team brand associations on consumer behavior. While both Gladden and Funk (2002) and Ross et al. (2006) identified an extensive list of team based brand associations, this research expands upon that list through identifying associations with a communal focus. The results provide evidence of the role of brand associations driving team identification, a finding that is in line with previous research regarding brand associations and their impact on team identification as well (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001; Watkins, 2014). Finally, this research provides evidence of the intricacies of brand associations, and the variation of each association and its impact on consumer behavior. While some scholars have examined brand associations from a unidimensional perspective, using single item measures (Kunkel et al., 2016) or composite measures (Gladden & Funk, 2001), the results of this study provide evidence that not all sport brand associations are the same, and that each association can contribute to consumer behavior in different aspects. Additionally, the results of this study contribute to a greater understanding of the long-term impact of brand associations upon

team identification, a finding that could be a considerable value for new sport teams as they seek to establish a foothold in a crowded market.

With rituals, shared group experience, and social space brand associations explaining 25%, 28% and 37% of the increase in team identification over the course of the inaugural season, several possible strategies exist for managers of new sport teams. Notably, a considered focus on the communal nature of sport consumption must be understood. As this study presents, this not only means creating this environment within the stadium, or as part of the game day experience, but rather emphasizing these communal brand associations throughout the new team's marketing and promotion. For new teams, particularly those in small markets, or competing at the minor league level, this focus on brand associations that are not dependent upon star players or on-field prowess provide attainable and implementable marketing and promotional strategy. Additionally, as the results of this study showcase, this communal brand association focus in marketing and promotional strategies is not only realistic, but also impactful in growing and increasing team identification during a new team's inaugural season.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS, & LIMITATIONS

6.1 CONCLUSION

This study proposed three unique research questions that sought to understand the longitudinal nature of brand associations and team identification of a new sport team. Both Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 were developed in an effort to understand how both brand associations and team identity develop and change during a new sport team's inaugural season. While it is important to note the contextual nature of this study, the findings and discussion presented previously still provide insight into the nature of change for new sport brands. As has been found in multiple studies regarding new teams (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2002; Katz & Heere, 2016; Kunkel et al., 2016) consumers begin to develop perceptions and attitudes towards new teams early in the team's existence. However, the development of perceptions regarding particular characteristics and associations of the team has been found to vary based upon context and team studied.

For new sport team organizations, understanding the nature of how consumers develop perceptions regarding the various characteristics of the new team's brand provides opportunities for managers to develop poignant and strategic marketing plans. By knowing that brand associations that are communal based hold high initial values amongst consumers, and have continuous significant growth throughout the year,

managers of new teams could focus on these characteristics early in their organization's existence. By doing so they provide opportunities for consumers to form positive brand image and brand equity perceptions of the new team that often lead to financial and organizational success (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Ross, 2006). Additionally, these associations also provide the opportunity for the development and formation of team identity. This further reinforces the notion that while the totality of a brand's image and equity provide considerable influence in consumer behavior, perceptions regarding unique brand associations are critical drivers.

Additionally, understanding the development of team identification for new sport teams is paramount for sport managers. As has been mentioned previously, new sport organizations, across varying levels of professionalization, enter in to a hyper-competitive market, and must quickly find a way to create identified and loyal fans (Grant et al., 2011). However, as has been presented previously, the nature of how and when individuals become identified to a new team has varied across sport levels and contexts. Thus, providing additional insights regarding the manner in which team identification takes place in unique contexts contributes to expanding the overall body of knowledge regarding fan development of new sport teams. For managers of new sport teams, the findings regarding the development of team identity during the inaugural season provide an opportunity to more accurately develop strategies and actions to capitalize on identified fans. Utilizing the findings from this study, it may be beneficial for managers to temper their expectations regarding moving consumers of new teams in to fully indoctrinated fans by the final game of the season. Rather, knowing that initial consumers of a new team may not begin to feel truly identified until several months after

the season ends, managers may capitalize on this time period as one to promote the sale of tickets for the following season, merchandise, or exclusive paid team media. As identified fans are more likely to be influenced by team related marketing (Heere & James, 2007; Kwon, Trail, & James, 2007; Yoshida, Gordon et al., 2015), knowing when fans become identified may guide managers of new teams towards strategies that begin to forge long-term financial success.

The first two research questions were descriptive in nature, and sought greater understanding of how brand associations and team identification changed during the inaugural season of a new sport team. While similar investigations have been made (Katz & Heere, 2016; Kunkel et al., 2016) this research was the first that examined the development and change of individual brand associations, instead of a unidimensional measure for all brand associations of a new team. It also focused on a new context and setting in research of new teams targeting the context of a minor league professional team. The data collection also was unique as it focused on the new team's first season, and allowed for the observance of changes in perceptions several months after the inaugural season ended.

In addition to descriptive changes in brand associations and team identification growth, the study also investigated the ability of changes in individual brand associations to influence changes in team identification. It did so utilizing a conditional growth curve model that found the magnitude of each brand association's impact on team identification holistically during the team's inaugural season. From this analysis it was found that it was the brand associations that are communal-based (i.e. rituals, social space, and shared group experience) that were the key drivers of team identification over the course of all

three data collections, and it was also these brand associations' rate of change that

explained the greatest percentage in the development of team identification. As

mentioned previously in Chapter 2, these communal brand associations have theoretical

commonalities with the characteristics outlined by Underwood et al. (2001), and are

factors that are characteristics of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). With the

increased focus within the sport management literature to view sport fans and teams

through a brand community lens, closer examination of how this lens can be applied to

marketing and brand management aspects sport organizations is needed.   This is

particularly true within the context of new sport teams that often enter in to

hypercompetitive markets competing with other sport and leisure organizations who are

more well-known and established. Thus, the ability to create a community of identified

fans for these news teams is imperative. In these communities, fans create a sense of

community with other fans of a sport team, and develop a sense of empowerment that

could have substantial impacts on consumer behavior (Cova & Pace, 2006). This study

provides pertinent insight to managers of new sport teams or leagues regarding the

manner in which they develop strategies to promote and market their new brand utilizing

and creating communal based associations. By doing so, these managers create

opportunities for individuals to begin to develop a sense of identification towards the new

team.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS

From a managerial perspective, this study provides evidence of several critical

strategies for new sport teams that could be employed in particular contexts.

Understanding the nature of growth and development of each brand association as the

season of a new team progresses provides insight that could be used to design and schedule promotional or marketing characteristics. Findings regarding the specific nature of growth of brand associations focused on the communal nature of consumption (i.e. rituals, social space, shared group experience), as well as associations that are easily identifiable (i.e. brand mark) provides a starting point for new team managers to consider as they build their organization's brand over the course of its inaugural season.

Additionally, findings regarding the ability of communal brand associations to hold the greatest influence in fostering team identification also presents potential managerial implications. The role that communal brand associations played in impacting team identification was constant throughout the Fireflies' inaugural season, and even several months following the season's conclusion. With this known, it could be of interest to sport team marketers and brand managers to focus more on the non-team related brand associations that espouse a sense of community. Instead of marketing the on field success or style of play, they are encouraged to focus on the fan experience; the rituals associated with this experience and other communal brand associations. For new sport teams, the marketing focus on the communal nature of consumption is also within manager's control, and does not require the team to perform well on the field during its inaugural season.

The findings presented in this study contradict the current marketing strategies of several professional leagues, such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), that are highly focused on star players and on field success. While this could be the nature of individual spots, this study suggests that it is much more efficient to focus on the communal aspects of the brand, particularly for new sport teams as they seek to build

identified fans. As mentioned previously, many sport organizations have large, closely-knit and loyal fan bases (Lock & Funk, 2016), and the findings of this study emphasizes the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of how these closely-knit fan bases interact and support each other in the development of identified fans and ultimately communities within new teams.

6.3 LIMITATIONS

Despite the contributions brought forth in the study, there are several limitations. First, despite the diversity of the sample, the focus on fans of minor league baseball may limit the generalizability of the findings. The behaviors and perceptions of minor league baseball consumers may differ from consumers of other sports such as football or soccer, or of other types of baseball such as major league or collegiate. The assertion that non-team related or communal-based brand associations are more influential in fostering consumer behavior warrants further attention in varying sport related contexts.

The data collected in this study longitudinal in nature over the course of one season. Thus, there exists an opportunity for researchers to investigate how brand associations impact team identification and consumer behavior over the course of multiple seasons for a sport organization. Additionally, the Columbia Fireflies are a new sport team, and have only been existence since April 2016. This provides the opportunity for future research to examine the context of consumers of existing sport teams. Understanding how existing sport organizations might balance the use of traditional and communal brand associations to develop identified fans and drive consumer behavior would be a contribution to the literature.

Finally, the findings of this longitudinal study could provide a useful tool for scholars and practitioners in the examination of the aspects of a sport team's brand that create consumer attachment, and subsequent consumer behavior during a team's inaugural season. Yet, due to the contextual nature of this study, the findings should be interpreted critically. For instance, in this particular case study style of play did not appear to be of particular importance to the consumers, which is a valuable insight for the marketers of the respective team. However, if this study were to be repeated by marketers at sport teams such as FC Barcelona or AFC Ajax, teams that brand themselves actively to maintain a certain style of play, this brand association might be much more important. Further research across sports and sport organizations should be made to more accurately understand the value of a team's style of play, as well as other brand associations. Additionally, the minor league baseball context could have influenced the impacts and development of particular brand associations. As has been mentioned throughout, the way minor league baseball is consumed is unique when compared to other professional and collegiate sports. Thus, it would be tenuous to project that similar findings would be discovered if the study were replicated by a new major league team such as the Las Vegas Knights of the National Hockey League (NHL). Ultimately, the study provides and presents opportunities for future research regarding the role of brand associations in driving consumer behavior and creating community. Such contributions to the literature may help to guide the financial feasibility and overall community value of new sport teams to their communities.

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APPENDIX A – IRB APPROVAL FOR STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

This is to certify that the research proposal: **Pro00052761**

Entitled: *Branded for Success: A consumer brand perceptions analysis of a new sport team*
Submitted by:

Principal Investigator:	Henry Wear
College/Department:	Hospitality, Retail, & Sport Management
	Sport and Entertainment Management
	Carolina Coliseum, Room 112B
	Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(**2**), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **2/8/2016.** No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

Lisa M. Johnson
IRB Manager

APPENDIX B – SAMPLE SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The Department of Sport & Entertainment Management at the University of South Carolina supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study.

We would like to know how you feel about the Columbia Fireflies brand. We have provided some statements we have made about these entities and would like your feedback. Completing the survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Your contribution will be kept anonymous, and no identifiable information will be collected will be collected. Any confidential information obtained will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, or electronically on an encrypted storage device to the extent allowed by law. Your cooperation is voluntary; if you are uncomfortable about any of the questions asked, feel free to stop the survey at any point. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a member of the targeted population for this research, and its results will help to build a greater understanding of new sport brands.

This survey is part of a research project conducted by Henry Wear of the Department of Sport & Entertainment Management at the College of Hospitality, Retail & Sport Management at the University of South Carolina. If you have any questions or concerns about this survey, contact either Mr. Wear (hwear@email.sc.edu) or the University of South Carolina Office of Research compliance (803-777 7095).

Thank you for your cooperation,

Henry Wear
Principal Investigator
University of South Carolina

How Do You Feel About The Columbia Fireflies?

The following are statements regarding your perception of Columbia Fireflies. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each statement using the scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

	Strongly Disagree			Neutral			Agree
The Fireflies' uniforms and caps represent the team well.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The history of the Fireflies is marked by many exciting events and personalities.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies play an exciting brand of baseball.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies are associated with good memories.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies' colors represent the team well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies' logo is attractive.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The team's nickname fits well with what the Fireflies represents.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies have a rich history.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The games against the Fireflies' rivals are the most intriguing games of the season.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fireflies' rivalry games are very interesting.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies have great rivalries.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies performance seems to meet people's expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individuals seem to have fond memories of the Fireflies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies play an interesting brand of baseball.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies always attempt to play an attractive style of baseball.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies play a style of baseball that is enjoyable to watch.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies have been successful over this season.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
People seem to look forward to the Fireflies' rivalry games.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies have performed well throughout this season.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When someone criticizes the Fireflies, it feels like a personal insult.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am very interest in what others think about the Fireflies.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When I talk about the Fireflies, I usually say "we" rather than "they."	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Fireflies' successes are my successes.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When someone praises the Fireflies, it feels like a personal compliment.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
If a story in the media criticized the Fireflies, I would feel embarrassed.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE COLUMBIA FIREFLIES?

The following are statements regarding your perception of the Columbia Fireflies. Please indicate your agreement or disagreement with each statement using the scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree).

	Strongly Disagree		Neutral			Strongly Agree
The stadium where the Fireflies play their games has an inviting atmosphere.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
Even if they are strangers in daily life, people socialize with each other in and around the Fireflies' stadium.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
A game day at the Fireflies' stadium provides a sense of community belonging.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
The Fireflies' stadium has character that fits well with the team.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
At Fireflies' home games the interaction among fans is an enjoyable part of the overall experience.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
It is hard to imagine a Fireflies' home game where rituals do not take place.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
Fireflies' games are great opportunities to socialize with other people.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
Rituals, such as the 7th inning stretch, are an essential part of the Fireflies' game day experience.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
There is a wonderful atmosphere during Fireflies' home games.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6
Rituals are at the heart of showing support for the Fireflies.	1 7	2	3	4	5	6

To finish off, we would like to ask you a few things about yourself. You can respond by circling the right response or filling in the blank.

1. **What is your age?**

2. **What is your gender?**

Male   Female

3. **What is your education?** (circle the appropriate response)
High School   Secondary Degree   Bachelors   Graduate   N/A

4. **How many Fireflies games are you planning to attend?**   5. **How much are you planning to spend on Fireflies merchandise this year?**

6. Please print your email so we may contact you regarding your stadium tour: