

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

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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 a 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.