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Child Sport Fan Behavior: An Examination of the Effects of Socialization, Branding, and Alternatives on Children's Psychological Connections to Sports Teams

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CHILD SPORT FAN BEHAVIOR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF
SOCIALIZATION, BRANDING, AND ALTERNATIVES ON CHILDREN'S
PSYCHOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS TO SPORTS TEAMS

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Anthony Horton, who has supported me through this entire process and who has made me a better researcher, better teacher, and a better person. Without you, I would not be where I am today. Your encouragement has meant the world, and your ability to see the light in the dark has helped me not only complete my doctoral work but has also helped me see how my work fits in the bigger picture of the sports industry.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Mei Nakamoto and Lawrence M. Reifurth. I am so grateful to both of you for all you have done to prepare me for this life and the path I chose. It was your unwavering love that led me to this doctoral degree and the completion of this dissertation. I am extremely proud to be your daughter and to have had you as guiding forces throughout this journey.

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ABSTRACT

This three-study dissertation focuses on child fans of professional sport teams and the ways in which they become fans and attach themselves and connect to these sport brands. In Study 1, the researchers focused on the socialization into fandom of young children and the effects of communities and the game-day environment on this socialization utilizing qualitative observations and interviews with children ages 6 to 14 and resulted in an expanded understanding of the dame-day aspects that attract and excite children most. In Study 2, the researchers focused on the aspects of a new team's brand that children ages 5 to 14 associate with a new team to better understand the important aspects of branding and marketing that impact children's perceptions and connections to a sport brand. The researchers utilized drawings to understand the aspects of a brand that represented the team for these children and expanded the literature on team branding and imagery effective with young fans. Finally, the researcher focused on the abilities of children ages 5 to 18 to identify with and be loyal to sport teams given the choice to remain loyal through a choice experiment in Study 3. Results of this study highlight the differences between team identification and team loyalty as well as the differences in behavioral loyalty frequencies given different conditions.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When sport fans discuss the origins of their fandom, most reference back to their childhood. They reflect on that time with a sense of reverence, but the large majority of fans speak in vague terms about *when* and *how* their fandom began (Gladden & Funk, 2001). They remember the people involved (Reifurth, Bernthal, & Heere, 2018), or possibly a particular event that spurred (or threatened) their continued attachment to a specific team (Hyatt, 2007), but the progression of their initial exposure into attachment, and later into a stable identification, is rarely a focus of research (a notable exception is offered by James, 2001). Instead, teams have acknowledged the importance of young fans and have created countless marketing and sales campaigns targeting younger populations without truly understanding what it is that children are attracted to about their sports product or how to keep those children attached over the course of their lifetimes. It is an example of sports teams repeatedly throwing spaghetti at a wall just to see what, if anything, sticks, instead of attempting to understand which noodles stuck (and why) to prevent wasting perfectly good spaghetti in the future. In this analogy, the spaghetti noodles are company resources such as time and money. The more resources a company wastes, the fewer profits the company has overall (Cooper & Kaplan, 1992). Therefore, it is important for sports teams to start focusing on the understanding of child fan relationships to their services to both limit their expenditures and increase the value of their product overall.

Understanding children's sport consumption is vital to the sport industry's future because these young sport consumers represent an enormous lifetime value. Brands with loyal customers are able to generate revenue from the same individuals for longer periods of time without having to expend money to attract new business (Funk, 2008; Guest, 1964). While some brands target specific age groups, sports products can be consumed by every age in multiple forms (Baker, McDonald, & Funk, 2016). Those sports brands that are able to attract consumers at a young age increase the time span during which those consumers will invest in their product.

Not only is a child fan likely to be worth more to an organization, a more valuable outcome of young fans is the stability and longevity of their fandom (James, 2001). Research has shown that brand relationships made in childhood last longer than those made later in life (Guest, 1964), making young fans much more valuable to a sports organization than an adult fan because the child has a much greater likelihood of becoming an unwavering loyal supporter than his older fan counterpart.

The components that make up the team, such as the coaches, star players, front office personnel, and even sometimes the branding and marketing strategies of the team may be extremely different even a few seasons after an initial identification to the brand is formed (Baker et al., 2016). This makes the importance of remembering past experiences with a team, or nostalgia, an important aspect of fandom for many. Sports fans experience collective nostalgia through recollections of specific teams and specific successful eras, enhanced by the media's reminders and the creation of halls of fame to highlight the storied histories of these franchises (Snyder, 1991). Nostalgia in a sport setting has been defined as a strategy to selectively filter and recreate the past for the

purpose of offering a positive escape used to improve relations with fans (Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005), highlighting sport managers' beliefs that nostalgia in sport can have powerful effects on fan relationships to a team. Sport organizations have historically used this nostalgia to maintain and grow their fan bases through reminders of historic franchise moments (Pajoutan & Seifried, 2014; Seifried & Meyer, 2010), yet the phenomenon of nostalgia can only be taken advantage of if we understand if (and when) young consumers build a connection to the team.

Team identification itself has been defined as a sport fan's perceived connectedness to a sport team and the tendency to view the team's successes and failures as one's own (Gwinner & Swanson, 2003). While a great deal of research has focused on the outcomes and components of team identification (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010; Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999; Ross, 2006; Wann, 2006a; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015), comparatively fewer studies have focused on the formation and development of this identification to a team (Jacobson, 2003; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996). Previous research shows individuals' team identification depends on their attachment points related to a team, which can vary from fan to fan (Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002). One of the most salient attachment points for new fans is to already-identified fans of the team who then socialize the uninitiated individuals into fandom (Kolbe & James, 2000).

The degree to which childhood attachment is caused by socialization through or into a fan community relative to an attraction to the team itself (i.e. star player, team performance) is unclear (Delia & James, 2018; Lock & Heere, 2017). It is this issue of community influence on the socialization of children into sport fandom that was the focus

of the first piece of this dissertation. This manuscript has been published in Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal. The copyright release for this article can be found in Appendix A. This article, entitled "Child Game-Day Socialization: The Importance of Community to Emotional Involvement on Game Day", looked closely at the ways in which this setting and the surrounding socializing agents affect the overall process of child fan socialization.

It is clear from previous research that children do not possess the same cognitive abilities as adults (Alvarez, Ruble, & Bolger, 2001; James, 2001; Piaget, 1970), which makes them vulnerable to different marketing tactics from adults (Brucks, Armstrong, & Goldberg, 1988; John, 1999). Children also tend to lack control over their own lives and are much more dependent on others (both for information and for facilitation of behaviors such as game attendance) than adults, which changes the ways in which they are able to interact with brands (Alderson & Goodey, 1996). This makes agency a unique component of a child sample when measuring aspects of identification such as behavioral patterns and interconnection to the team, two aspects that play large rolls in the measurement of group identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Heere, James, Yoshida, & Scremin, 2011). Children and adolescents are much more sensitive than adults to the opinions of others (Brown, 2004), which make children more susceptible to group think and social pressures when making choices (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Kalmus & Keller, 2009; Lachance, Beaudoin, & Robitaille, 2003). With all of this knowledge and previous work highlighting the differences between adults and children, it is surprising more research has not been conducted on children when focusing on the initial formation of brand relationships. Therefore, it is necessary to specifically study

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the relationship of children and sports brands and children's abilities to recognize, recall, and comprehend brand messages. The researcher focused on this issue in the second study of her dissertation, entitled "Creating Fans from Scratch: A Qualitative Analysis of Child Consumer Brand Perceptions of a New Sports Team".

While the literature in marketing suggests that brand distinctions can be made as young as three years-old (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; McAlister & Peterson, 2006) and brand preferences can also be made around this age (Bahn, 1986), a study conducted on the formation of sport team identification show that recall of the age at which an individual became a fan of a sport team was between six and ten, and becoming a true fan did not occur until an average of about age 15 (Kolbe & James, 2000). This shows a significant difference in the age at which marketing and child development researchers have found children capable of identifying with a brand and the age at which sport management researchers claim brand (team) identification truly forms. Researchers have not been able to show, and have put little effort to investigate, what happens between the ages of three and fifteen that causes children to transition from a mere brand preference to having a stronger, lasting identification to a sport brand. James (2001) found that the level of description with which children described their identification to a team increased with age, but he did not examine directly his subjects' abilities to exhibit loyalty to their identified team. One way in which to do so is to present the subject with an alternative option. It is this choice experiment that was the focus of the third piece to the author's dissertation, entitled, "Experimentation with a Child Fan's Ability to Exhibit Loyalty in the Face of Alternatives".

Each study represents a significant literary contribution to the understanding of the psychological connection a child has to a sports team. Where Study 1 focuses on how a child interprets and makes sense of sport fandom, highlighting the abilities and utilized resources of young fans, Study 2 takes this a step further by examining what messages are being interpreted and internalized by those new to fandom based on the abilities and resources young fans tend to utilize. Study 3 utilizes the findings of Studies 1 and 2 to then examine the behavioral patterns of young fans.

CHAPTER 2

STUDY 1: CHILDREN'S GAME-DAY EXPERIENCES AND EFFECTS

OF COMMUNITY GROUPS[1]

Regardless of the generation or the economy, parents of all income levels

sacrifice to give their children things that make them happy. It has been estimated that

individuals born after 1994, typically referred to as Generation Z, spend about $44 billion

each year, most of it in the form of allowance from parents (Shay, 2017). When we

include the sway children hold over what their parents buy, this number is estimated to be

closer to $600 billion (Jones, 2017). With so much buying power, this generation should

be a major focus of sport management research. However, this has not been the case.

There have been numerous studies focusing on children as sport participants (e.g.,

Bowers & Green, 2013; Martin, Ewing, & Gould, 2014), but very few on children as

sport fans and on their consumption of sport through fandom (James, 2001).

Heere and James (2007a) proposed viewing the sport team as a community in

which the fans do not see themselves as consumers of a product, but as a member of a

group. More recent research (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015; Yoshida, Heere, & Gordon,

2015) has supported that view and has suggested that the fan community and/or the

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interaction between fans is more important to game attendance than the actual game itself. Based on that perspective, then, we could argue that the most important question for marketers is not what attracts an individual to a game, but how individuals can be socialized into the fan community and develop an attachment to that community (Heere, Walker, et al., 2011).

Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) indicated that stadium, history, ritual and traditions, and the group experience were important characteristics of the brand community, and they were likely to play an important role in the development of this attachment. This was supported by a study of Uhrich and Benkenstein (2012), who emphasized the importance of the live game experience in developing team attachment. The game-day experience, therefore, plays an integral part in both the development of an emotional connection towards a team as well as towards the community of fans that attend games together.

Most prior research has focused on how adult fans socialize into these communities (Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015), yet James (2001) argued that most people were socialized into fandom and chose their favorite teams at a very young age (6-10 years old), and that this early socialization was what led to an unwillingness to switch these team preferences later in life. Therefore, it is critical for researchers to focus on children and how they make sense of the game day experience and socialize into the fan community. How children socialize into these communities during game day has yet to be studied. While children are most often introduced to sport fandom by their socializing agents such as family members and friends, (Kolbe & James, 2000; McPherson, 1976;

Melnick & Wann, 2011; Tufte, 2007), very few studies have looked at how game attendance has affected this socialization experience.

Therefore, it is the general aim of the authors to explore the game-day experiences of children in order to better understand how these experiences allow children to socialize into the team community and become fans of the team. These findings should aid researchers and sport marketers in their understanding of how to build a fan base among future generations and increase the sustainability of the fan community.

Literature Review

Understanding children's sport consumption is vital to the sport industry's future because these young sport consumers represent an enormous lifetime value, and once they select their favorite team, they are unlikely to switch to a competing team. Previous research has argued fans initially develop an awareness of a team through socialization (Kolbe & James, 2000; Lewko & Greendorfer, 1988), and then develop an attraction to the team (Hansen & Gauthier, 1989). This suggests that the input of other fans is important to the development of an attraction to the team (community). Attraction, defined as a preference for a team that is not necessarily durable or stable (Funk & James, 2001), has been posited to transition into an attachment once that team preference becomes a psychological commitment through consistent exposure and involvement of emotion (Boninger, Krosnick, & Berent, 1995). When an individual is able or willing to show enduring commitment to their fandom, which has proven resistant to change over time, he/she is then said to be loyal (Murrell & Dietz, 1992).

Brand loyalty has been found to last longer when the attachment to the brand initially forms at a young age. Guest (1964) conducted a longitudinal study and found

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that brand preferences formed between the ages of seven and eighteen led 23% of the

sample to use those same brands 20 years later. Holbrook and Schindler (1991) found

that a nostalgia effect occurred for brands used or supported when young, which

encouraged both re-attachment and continued attachment to brands that an individual

favored in childhood. While attending a game is not the sole determinant of whether a

child builds an attachment to a team, it is deemed an important experience in this process,

and one that arguably can 'make or break' the child's desire to become a fan (Wann,

Martin, Grieve, & Gardner, 2008).

Brand Attachment and Brand Communities

According to attachment theory, humans naturally form and maintain

psychological ties to particular objects over their lifetimes, exemplified by rich and

accessible memories and feelings about those objects (Milkulincer & Shaver, 2007).

Brand attachment is the emotional connection or relationship created from interactions

with a brand where the brand begins to be considered as part of the self (Park et al.,

2010). Many studies have examined brand attachment at young ages (Anderson, Kellogg,

Langer, & Sallee, 2015; Guest, 1964; Santha et al., 2016), but few have looked at the

aspects of a sports team to which young fans attach themselves.

Previous research has indicated an individual can become a consumer of sport by

either connecting to the team itself or, more commonly, creating a connection to the

social network surrounding the team (Katz & Heere, 2013). The team's brand community

is a specialized non-geographically bound group of individuals connected through a set of

social relationships centered on a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). A brand community

helps to develop a shared consciousness, traditions, and rituals, all of which help

individuals find purpose in membership in the group. Carlson, Suter, and Brown (2008) found that theme park consumers' brand loyalty was more impacted by the relationships to their fellow theme park attendees than by their connection to the park's brand, giving support to the importance of community interactions during consumer experiences (Holt, 1995).

Fans, therefore, play a part in the development of loyalty in other fans by utilizing existing relationships with community members to develop loyalty to the sport team the community supports (Yoshida et al., 2015). These brand communities not only provide positive psychological benefits through membership in a group (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), they also increase the commitment to the brand by creating a communal brand connection (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Wong, 2009). The large amount of social interaction and bonding that naturally occurs in a brand community fosters increased loyalty to the brand itself (Oliver, 1999; Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015). These horizontal relationships between fans within the same brand community have been found to foster stronger connections to the brand than vertical relationships between the brand and the fans (Carlson et al., 2008), leading sport management researchers to believe it is extremely important to foster these brand communities to build loyalty to the team over time (Holt, 1995; Yoshida et al., 2015). However, the importance of community relationships compared to the young fan's relationship to a team has yet to be examined by researchers. Therefore, the authors posed the following initial research question:

1. Are team-related or community-related relationships more prominent in the connection between a child game attendant and a sports team?

Socialization into the Community

With the importance of brand communities on loyalty development has been firmly established in the literature, it becomes critical to understand how to socialize individuals into these communities. Research in other areas has shown that the fan community may actually be more important to a child's socialization into fandom than it is for adults. According to Aboud (1988), six-year-old children are initially unable to comprehend differences between individuals, and only distinguish between broad-reaching differences (e.g., physical features) between large groups. They must use their socializing agents to make sense of their surroundings when unsure or unfamiliar with a situation or experience. This sense-making is a common way for individuals entering a novice community to learn to adapt and cope in their new environments (Louis, 1980). The use of cues, interpretations, and engagement in approved actions have all been shown to enhance an individual's ability to make sense of his surroundings (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), and it is through these forms of sense-making that an individual gives meaning to his role in an organization (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015) and learns to value that membership (Anderson et al., 2015).

This meaning given to group membership through sense-making is one of the benefits that comes from socialization. Research that has been conducted in this area has shown that adults are able to socialize into new brand communities by increasing their involvement in the group (Katz & Heere, 2015). While sport management researchers have looked at ways in which adults have been socialized into sport fan communities, children's socialization into these communities has focused primarily on identifying *who* is responsible for general socialization into sport fandom and not specifically *how* these

various socializing agents affect the socialization into the communities surrounding the sport.

It is possible that the different socializing agents affect a child's socialization process differently. Various groups of fans (e.g. family members versus friends), for example, may affect a child's attachment differently in a game-day setting. This idea has been supported by previous literature on child socialization into sport fandom. Family members have been viewed as sources of information and security for children being initially socialized into sport fandom (Melnick & Wann, 2011). Further, Kenyon and McPherson (1973) found family members were the main motivating force behind children's sport participation before entering high school. Greendorfer and Lewko (1978) later supported this finding in younger children, specifying the importance of fathers on their children's sport socialization. Much more recent research has built off of these studies and supported the importance of families, particularly fathers, to child sports fans' socialization (Melnick & Wann, 2011; Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014; Spaaij & Anderson, 2010). Friends have also been identified as strong socializing agents due to an individual's desire for their approval and acceptance (Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Tufte, 2007). Kenyon and McPherson (1973) found that, although parents were the most influential socializing agents before high school, peers become more influential than parents and other family members once adolescents reached high school age. James (2001), Lewko and Greendorfer (1982) found that peers may gain greater influence over children's sporting interests as children begin school, and they may overtake parents as the biggest socializing agents by early adolescence. In fact, Partridge, Brustad, and Babkes Stellino (2008) found that children primarily look to adults until about 10-12

years-old, when children begin to prefer their peers over adults for direction and guidance.

It is clear from previous research that both family members and peers have significant impacts on children's socialization into sport fandom, but it is not very common to be able to study the effects of both groups on children at the same time. The game-day experience brings both of these prominent socializing agents into the same context, creating an ideal environment in which to examine the effects of both groups on children in attendance. Children usually attend with one group or the other, and these group attendees provide the child with potentially different socializing experiences in the same game-day setting. Therefore, the researchers posed a second research question:

2. How do various socializing agents (particularly focusing on adults versus peers) affect child socialization in the game-day setting?

Emotional Contagion in the Consumer-Community Relationship

While the actual decision to attend a sporting event is very often not in the control of the child, the child does control what aspects of the game-day experience he or she enjoys. The game-day experience is not only ideal for studying socializing agents, it is also an opportunity to identify parts of the live sporting experience child fans are attracted to and enjoying most. While no research has focused on this, it is likely that a very enjoyable aspect for many child fans would be the atmosphere of the game itself. It is the event atmosphere created by the larger brand community that teaches a new group member to value the group customs and attracts them to continued attachment and social identification with the group (Holt, 1995; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010). One of the main ways in which atmosphere helps to encourage continued attachment is through what is

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known as emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), where an individual "catches" another's emotions. Recent research has suggested that people naturally pick up on emotional signals from others (Cote, 2005), and that individuals are more expressive when they are with others than when they are alone (Hess, Banse, & Kappas, 1995). Sport spectators involve themselves in emotional contagion through social activities such as anthems, songs, body gestures, group movements, rituals, ceremonies, and displays of team colors, all of which elicit pride in the team, magnified by the emotions of the group as a whole (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). It has even been found that surrounding fans with smiling employees increased their likelihood to purchase tickets and recommend the team (Larson, Jensen, & Wang, 2016). These social activities create memorable and longer lasting impressions of the sports team for the spectators as well as increasing community attachment and game attendance frequency (Yoshida et al., 2015).

Sport management scholars have focused predominantly on individual fans' emotions towards a team as opposed to their emotions toward the community surrounding the team or the groups with whom the fans attend games (Crisp, Heuston, Farr, & Turner, 2007; Wann, 2006c). The few studies that have looked at sport consumer emotional contagion in a group setting have looked at the entire stadium as a group (Holt, 1995; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2010, 2012). Sporting events are inherently social events where fans come in groups to attend the games, meaning group interactions are extremely important to the event experience. The act of spectating enhances the fan experience itself as well as increases the value of the team and, in turn, the society with which the team is associated (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). By looking more closely at not only

the socialization differences between these various types of attending groups but also how these groups within the brand community affect child attendees' emotional contagion, this study aimed to better understand the emotional influence of these groups on the fan experience. Therefore, a final research question of this study was posed:

3. How do various socializing groups affect emotional contagion during game-day experiences of child attendees?

Methodology

IRB approval was obtained to ensure the ethical standards of the research design for the safety of the child participants. As our goal was to better understand children's game day experiences and how they socialize into the community during game day, a qualitative approach was used to study the behaviors of children at sporting events. A qualitative study approach was chosen because surveying (young) children provides difficult challenges, particularly in the field (Borgers, de Leeuw, & Hox, 2000). Because of the limitations associated with survey research among children, we chose to observe them in this 'natural setting' and interview them informally. The informal interviews all began with questions such as, "What team are you here to see?", "How many games have you been to before this one?", or "What is your favorite thing about [this sport/team]?", but questioning tended to differ based on the child's interests and familiarity with the team and in-game environment.

Observations of the interactions between children and their group members and the emotional responses of the children throughout the games were the central component of the data collection, and the interviews were conducted to better understand the observations and to triangulate the data (Denzin, 1970; Thurmond, 2001). As

socialization is a sociological phenomenon, relying on observations is deemed to be an appropriate method, while interviews provide more insight into what is being observed.

Research Setting

Observational and interview data were collected at seven professional sporting events throughout the Southeastern and Midwestern United States over a four-month period. National Football League (NFL), National Hockey League (NHL), and National Basketball Association (NBA) games were included in order to increase the generalizability of the results. College sport games were excluded because they are unique to the United States, and its inclusion may limit generalizability.

All observations and interviews were conducted by the primary researcher on-site at the events in order to capture the live reactions, behaviors, and emotions of the participants. Participants were observed both in their seats as well as while walking around the concourses or arenas, before, during and after the games. The primary researcher sat in the highest sections at each sporting event, enabling her to observe as many spectators and as many different types of groups as possible, which included groups of adolescent peers, children sitting with adults, children sitting with a mixture of both adults and peers, children of various ages and racial backgrounds, and children exhibiting different levels of involvement in the game-day experience. These observations allowed the researcher to record relevant data as the socializing agents and the fan community surrounding the participants were actively influencing the participants' actions. This minimized the reliance on recall of emotions or actions that survey research would have necessitated, and provides insight into the influence of these factors on the participants that the participants may not have been aware of or may report

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inaccurately, as has been shown to happen with recall of information (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000; Ready, Weinberger, & Jones, 2007).

Sampling and Data Collection

The experiences of participants, estimated to range in age from six to fourteen years old approximately, were examined using observations made on-site in the concourses of stadiums or arenas before, during, and after games, and in the seats of the stadiums or arenas throughout the games. The exploratory nature of our study led to the inclusion of a broad age range in order to initially identify overarching phenomena present in all children socializing into sport fan communities through game attendance. The observations consisted of approximately 60 children in 35 different groups spread across the seven live sporting events. These observations typically began 30-60 minutes before each event and did not conclude until 30-60 minutes after the event ended. The extended observations were utilized to better understand the emotions and behaviors of the fans when not preoccupied with the ongoing sporting event. This totaled approximately 23 hours of observations. Field notes were typed out on a mobile device and converted to a Word document once the field researcher returned home from games. For one game, field notes were recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed into a Word document after the event. Observations focused on children's behaviors during the sporting events based on researcher awareness of the importance of socialization and the attraction of the live-event atmosphere created by both the game and the surrounding fans: What they were excited by, their overall involvement in the game itself, their interactions with the people they came with, and their responses to in-game action and activities such as "fan cam" promotions and cheering.

Interviews were also conducted at the sporting events. Interviews were not conducted at one event due to researcher illness, and in another event, the focus on observations (and related field notes) precluded time for interviews. Children previously observed by the researcher, as well as children the researcher chose at random, ranging in age from six to fourteen were asked to be interviewed in order to gain insight into their thoughts on their game-day experiences or clarification on the meaning or purpose of certain observed behaviors. Only children older than six years old were interviewed due to the inability of younger children to verbalize reasoning behind their actions (James, 2001). Interviews were only conducted after both parental consent and child assent were obtained. While parents were allowed to remain present while their child was interviewed, the interviewer discouraged participation from the parents before beginning the interviews and directed all questions to the child. Interviews lasted approximately 5-10 minutes depending on the openness of the child being interviewed and the length of answers given to the researcher's questioning.

Interviewing children can be difficult in part due to their suggestibility, especially when compared to older individuals (Ceci & Bruck, 1993; Leichtman, Morse, Dixon, & Spiegel, 2000). Free recall and open-ended questioning were utilized, which are typically the most accurate forms of reporting information from others (Dent & Stephenson, 1979; Poole & Lamb, 1998). Interviews also avoided suggestive contexts, as young children have been shown to give inaccurate reports when contexts lead them to believe a certain answer is desired (Tobey & Goodman, 1992). In total, 26 interviews were conducted with child attendees totaling over 70 pages of transcribed data. Demographics of the interviewed children are in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Demographics of Interviewed Children

Interview #	Age	Gender	Attended with	Game Type Attended
1	6	F	Family	NFL
2	6	M	Family	NHL
3	6	M	Family	NHL
4	8	M	Family	NFL
5	8	M	Family	NHL
6	8	F	Family	NHL
7	8	M	Peers	NBA
8	8	M	Family	NFL
9	8	M	Family	NBA
10	8	M	Family and Peers	NFL
11	9	F	Family	NHL
12	9	F	Family	NHL
13	9	M	Family	NBA
14	10	M	Family	NFL
15	10	F	Family	NFL
16	10	F	Family	NFL
17	11	M	Family	NBA
18	11	M	Family and Peers	NFL
19	11	M	Family and Peers	NHL
20	11	M	Peers	NBA
21	12	F	Family	NFL
22	12	M	Family	NFL
23	12	M	Family	NFL
24	13	M	Family	NBA
25	14	M	Peers	NBA
26	14	M	Peers	NBA

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the qualitative data analysis method utilized by O'Leary (2005). The method entails a four-step analysis process: reading the data, creating notes and memos to increase understanding, organizing and coding, and finally searching for patterns in the coding to draw conclusions. All recorded field notes and interviews were transcribed after each professional sporting event, and these transcriptions were then

uploaded into nVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program. Using an open coding method, this software allowed first basic, and later more complex, patterns to be identified in the data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) by the primary researcher.

A variation of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized in order to help shape the analysis and direction of the findings. It was applied using nVivo, with a caveat being that data was not analyzed after every single game. Specifically, four rounds of analysis were conducted: the first round came after three sporting events' observations and interviews were collected and transcribed; the second round came after one more sporting event was concluded; the third round came after two more sporting events; and the final round came after the final event's data had been collected. The rounds were broken up based on convenience, as data was unable to be input into a secure computer with nVivo for extended periods of time. Data collection ended when information saturation was reached; that is, when no new patterns were emerging in the data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Themes discovered by the primary researcher (i.e., the themes presented in the following section) were discussed with the other researchers in order to strengthen the analysis and to ensure limitation of the primary researcher's own opinions on the analysis and results (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The results of this study all relate to the original three research questions: 1) Are team-related or community-related relationships more prominent in the connection between a child game attendant and a sports team; 2) How do various socializing agents (particularly focusing on adults versus peers) affect child socialization in the game-day

setting; and 3) How do various socializing groups affect emotional contagion during game-day experiences of child attendees? While previous research shows that family and peer socialization are strong factors in the attachment of children to sport teams in an everyday context (McPherson, 1976; Melnick & Wann, 2011; Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996), results from the current study indicate that the game day is an important component of the socialization process. The results of this study clearly showed evidence for the idea that young fans are using their horizontal ties to other fans and their game companions as instruments by which to attach themselves to their favored team. Emotional contagion levels were observed to be different depending on the type of social group with whom the child attended the sporting event.

Atmosphere More Important Than the Game Itself

There was a strong tendency for children to enjoy the atmosphere of the game more than the game itself, extending to children the findings of Holt (1995), and Bauer, Sauer, and Exler (2005), which shows that atmosphere is often one of the most important determining factors in overall satisfaction and motivations for attendance at sporting events for college students and adults. It was clear from the observations that children enjoyed the game play more when the crowd reacted emphatically to the play (Field Notes January 3, 2016; Field Notes December 12, 2015) than when a difficult play was accomplished without acknowledgement from the crowd. When one 14-year-old child was asked directly whether he liked the actual basketball game or the atmosphere more, his response was emphatically atmosphere, because "it's so fun. And I can watch basketball anyhow, but [this] crowd is awesome" (Interview March 7, 2016).

Further support for the "atmosphere over contest" finding is provided by the fact that children did not attend to the action throughout the entire game but did engage in the atmosphere-building activities regularly throughout the experience. These atmosphere-building activities such as the "fan cam", chanting, and singing or dancing to music appeared to act as signals to the children that they could let out their pent-up energy. For example, "when the 'fan cam' was on, all four boys stood up and waved towels. They all wanted to get on the screen" (Field Notes February 6, 2016). Before the fan cam was on, these children were quietly sitting in their seats looking slightly bored or restless. It was clear that many children, like the ones in this observation, craved the attention and the praise that came with being on the "fan cam". The presence of the team mascot also seemed to excite the children at the game.

> In the lower level behind the basket a group of boys is getting excited because they can see the [home team] mascot is in their section. They are all standing up and screaming. Some are waving their hands attempting to get [the mascot]'s attention. When [the mascot] made his way over to them, the boys screamed louder and jumped up and down. One even gave [the mascot] a hug before [the mascot] moved to a new section. (Field Notes, March 7, 2016)

While many young children seemed disengaged throughout much of the game, the large majority would focus again when these breaks in the action and attention-giving opportunities took center stage at the events. This supports the work of researchers such as Boyden and Ennew (1997), who found children tend to have shorter attention spans than do adults. Until they develop the ability to focus for a long enough period to attend

to an entire sports game, it is perhaps likely the child will attempt to connect to the community around the team more so than to the team itself.

Emotional Contagion and Expression Mimicry

Children showed instances of emotional contagion both to the small social groups with whom the children attended as well as to the crowd surrounding them. At multiple sporting events, children sitting with quiet peer groups (Field Notes March 7, 2016) or quiet adult groups (Field Notes December 31, 2015; Field Notes January 3, 2016) would remain quiet during many of the plays where the rest of the crowd would be cheering, showing a lack of emotional contagion with the fan community at large. However, there were instances where children chose to exhibit emotional contagion with the crowd over their immediate group members as well. The following is an example of such a case:

> Two young boys were sitting next to two adults (one male, one female) but are barely talking to them. The boys cheered pretty often while the adults silently watched the game. At the very end of the quarter a home team player made a half-court shot and the crowd cheered loudly. The two boys stand up and cheer and look at each other in awe. The adults remain silent and sitting. Once the crowd and the boys calm down the adult male stands up and moves one seat away from the boys so that there is a seat between the adults and the kids. The boys don't seem to notice. (Field Notes February 28, 2016)

The children in the above scenario mimicked the emotions of the crowd clearly more so than the adults with whom they attended. This again relates to emotional contagion literature and suggests the ease with which children's emotions are influenced.

Children not only varied with whom they chose to exhibit emotional contagion but also varied in their levels of emotional contagion when attending with different types of groups. There was a stark difference in expressiveness between children that attended a sporting event in a group with a majority of adults and children that attended in a group with a majority of other children. Children who attended with peer groups were much more expressive on average and seemed to take more enjoyment from the game than children attending with family or adult groups. The expressiveness difference was clear through observations:

> A group of children (mostly boys) in the fourth row behind the basket with two older men on one side seem to all know each other. They saw that the camera for a promo was facing them (the people on screen had their backs to [the children] and the children were all in the background of the shot) and they got up and jumped around and waved things and looked up at the screen to see themselves. (Field Notes February 28, 2016)

> There was a little girl who kept looking over at the adult male she was sitting with and occasionally talking to him. When the rest of the stadium erupted in cheers after a play, she looked at him, saw he was remaining silent, and she did the same. (Field Notes March 7, 2016)

The difference between these two observations shows a pattern that was seen throughout the data, and not just in certain settings or sports. More emotional involvement, or expression of this emotion, could lead to a larger number of positive memories of the team, increasing the likelihood of attachment to the brand. This is in line with LeBlanc, McConnell, and Monteiro's (2015) work, which notes that emotional expression leads to

the creation of positive memories, and that positive memories increase the likelihood of feeling attached to an object.

Not only did children's emotions and expression levels of those emotions differ when comparing children attending with peers versus adults, children attending with adults were also found to differ by the expressiveness levels of the adults with whom the child attended. Children with demonstrative adult companions were more demonstrative in their fan expression, clapping and cheering more than children with more reserved adults. This phenomenon is evident in the following examples taken from field notes:

Young girl sitting with adult couple dressed in home team gear. The adults are very exuberant and loud and cheer often, and the girl does the same. She is dancing and stands up with her little towel and waves it. The adults cheer and talk to her during the game…When a home team player dunked…the girl got up and yelled and waved her towel and the adults cheered next to her. (Field Notes February 6, 2016)

There is a male adult with two boys in the section next to me. The adult is very reserved, and so are the boys…Occasionally they all talk, but for the most part they just watch the game. The older boy cheers sometimes but only claps for a few seconds. He never got out of his seat or fist pumped [like other children in attendance were seen doing]. Very little emotion was shown. The younger boy and the accompanying adult did not cheer once while I was observing them. (Field Notes December 31, 2015)

Sense-Making and Legitimization in the Game-Day Experience

Many children, particularly the younger ones, were observed using older people around them to help them understand the customs of the event they were attending, which supports literature that children tend to look to adults for their sources of socialization until about ages 10 to 12 (Partridge et al., 2008). Young children looked to other members in their group for cues as to how they should behave as a fan. For example, many young children attending with adults would only cheer when these adults cheered (Field Notes December 12, 2015; Field Notes January 18, 2016; Field Notes March 7, 2016). Children also used the information they learned from the established members of the fan community to prove to others that they, too, knew the customs of the community. One such child, when asked if she knew of any of the players, stated:

Girl: I don't know their names, but I'm mostly going for the thirty-five and five.

Researcher: Thirty-five for the [home team] or thirty-five for the—

Girl: [Home team]!

Researcher: Okay. Now, why is that?

Girl: It's…'cause I've heard that they're really, really good players. (Interview December 31, 2015)

The girl had learned the numbers of the players from the other fans around her, and then used the interview as an opportunity to display her newfound knowledge. It is clear here that the young girl's use of player numbers in the interview was not expressing her own emotional attachment to the team or the players but was used to show the interviewer that she was a member of the community. That player knowledge became valuable because the child knew it was shared by other community members. These

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children looked to members within the fan community to teach them the acceptable customs of fandom. This was especially evident in the younger children observed. Children of varying ages under ten years old were seen at multiple sporting events asking parents or other adults questions:

> A little boy about three or four has a three-point foam finger (forming a circle with the thumb and pointer and the other three fingers sticking straight up). The little boy is outlining the hole with his finger and asking a female adult something. She makes the same shape with her hand as the foam finger to show him they are the same shape. The young boy holds up the foam finger when [the opposing team is] shooting free throws while everyone else is making noise, as if to participate in the distraction tactics. (Field Notes February 28, 2016).

For younger children, instead of a desire to *prove* membership, the observations showed an active desire to be *taught* how to obtain membership to the fan community. While the older children had already developed ways to socialize into the fan community, younger children were still trying to figure out the culturally significant practices that would identify them as a member of the fan community. In doing so, they attempted to mimic the actions of the crowd around them and to learn the customs of the indoctrinated fans with whom they were attending.

While children who attended games with adults were primarily busy learning acceptable practices within the community (e.g., learning when to cheer), children who attended games with other children attempted to utilize these learned behaviors in a social manner. This is known as gaining legitimacy, where members prove they truly know about the brand and therefore deserve membership within the group (Muniz & O'Guinn,

2001). Younger fans tried to legitimize themselves in front of others at games to exemplify their true fandom. One young teenager walking around the arena concourse with some of his friends wanted his friends to know that he knew the difference between the old and new things in the arena, as if being a regular or repeat visitor was something to be admired (Field Notes January 18, 2016). A younger boy around 10 to 12 years old was observed at another game saying things like "Get on your man!" and "Three! Shoot a three!" (Field Notes, February 28, 2016). For the first teenager, telling his friends about his knowledge of these changes in the arena was evidence that he knew things about the team's facility that an individual in the out-group would not know. The younger boy chose to express his knowledge of the game to those around him, showing confidence in his in-group knowledge.

While the primary researcher focused mainly on children who were attempting to engage with the team community at games, there were some children who did not show a desire to engage in the community practices at all. When asked who she was a fan of, one eight-year-old girl said she was a fan of cheerleading (Interview December 31, 2015). She did not watch the team on television, she had never been to a game before, she did not possess team memorabilia, nor was she wearing the same colors of either team playing that night. Her father had brought her to the game, but she was neither trying to learn nor prove her membership in the fan community into which her dad was attempting to socialize her.

Importance of Badging and Memorabilia as Expression Tools

Observations showed evidence that memorabilia played a key part in the child's attachment to the team, supporting the work of Schau, Muniz, and Arnould's (2009)

concept of the importance of badging in fan community engagement and value creation. At multiple sporting events, staff passed out varying trinkets, and children as young as three or four, and even teens, seemed to covet these items and utilize them throughout the games to express their excitement about the game and the events going on around them. One such example was seen at an NBA game:

> Once the game started, a large group of boys filed in a few rows ahead of me. An arena worker was passing out free noise-makers (white plastic tubes that you had to blow up yourself). All of the children in my section wanted them, and the two extremely enthusiastic boys at the end had fun trying to catch the bags that the worker threw to them. Once they had blown them up, they would loudly bang them together at any point others were banging them. (Field Notes December 12, 2015)

The same was observed at a second game months later:

> A group of children rushed to get white balloon-like tubes being passed out by arena employees. The group was too far back in the section to get a lot of these noise-makers, but the children that did receive one seemed to be very possessive of their balloons. They kept the noise-makers in their hands, not letting them go, and waved them around a lot. The children that did not have a noise-maker were not as exuberant and would watch the kids that did have the noise-makers. The group I was observing then got on the jumbotron, and they all stood up and tried to get on camera and dance. They were all smiling and holding up their noise-makers, and those that didn't have noise-makers held up their team merchandise. (Field Notes March 7, 2016)

The possession of the noise-makers increased the children's enthusiasm during this game, while other team merchandise accomplished similar rises in excitement by the child attendees at other games where noise-makers were not distributed. The observed importance of memorabilia to children's desire to express themselves in a game day context furthers Kalmus and Keller's (2009) research that found memorabilia enhanced popularity and acceptance in a group. The memorabilia given to the children enhanced their expressiveness during game day events and allowed the children to express their attachment to one team over another. Jerseys and shirts were common ways for children to express their team preferences, and children were very eager to point out their attachment to the team through their memorabilia. One nine-year-old boy described the importance of memorabilia to his attachment to specific players in the following way:

Boy: My second favorite would be Roddie White.

Researcher: Okay, and why is he your second favorite?

Boy: Because I've got many things of him.

Researcher: Okay. Do you have things of Julio Jones'?

Boy: No. Not much.

Researcher: What [do you have]?

Boy: I've got a signed scarf (Interview January 3, 2016)

For this boy, memorabilia were not the deciding factor in his decision to like one player over another, but it clearly played a role in his attachment and the feeling of closeness he had to the players that he liked. Memorabilia became a way to not only badge an event but to physically prove an attachment to part of the team (i.e., the players).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight into the ways in which children experience game day and have both theoretical and practical implications. To that end, we offer four propositions that could provide a foundation for future research. First, young children lose attentiveness to game play throughout the game, and instead respond to the overall atmosphere of the event (Boyden & Ennew, 1997). It is clear that to engage younger fans, promotions and in-game activities that foster a livelier atmosphere should become more common throughout games. Children were extremely involved and expressive during promotions where they received attention and were able to be active, such as when the "fan cam" was on them or when the mascot gave them attention. While promotions such as these may sometimes distract from the game play itself, our results suggest that they will increase children's involvement and interaction level with the brand and provide positive experiences and associations that increase the likelihood of loyalty developing later in life (Gladden & Funk, 2001). To that end we offer the following proposition:

> Proposition 1: Children are more responsive to the overall atmosphere of the event than to the actual game itself.

Second, our findings further sport management literature through the discovery of children varying their own game day fan behavior based on the level of expressiveness of and their interactions with their group members, providing more depth to the literature on fan interaction to date (Holt, 1995; Katz & Heere, 2013, 2015; Yoshida et al., 2015). It was found that the expressiveness levels of children's adult companions were similar to the expressiveness levels of the children themselves, and that overall, children attending

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with peer groups tended to be more expressive than those attending with adult groups. Children expressed less emotion if they attended a sporting event with a non-expressive adult or a group with a non-expressive adult majority than if they attended with a more expressive adult or a group with a more expressive adult majority. Further, children expressed less emotion if they attended with an expressive adult or adult majority than if they attended a sporting event with peers. This extends the emotional contagion literature of Decrop and Derbaix (2010) to include the distinct effects different age groups (i.e. peers of the same age versus adults) have on expression levels in child attendants of sporting events. These varying expression levels in children may lead to differences in community attachment levels and game attendance frequency (Yoshida et al., 2015). Thus, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Children mimic the behavior and expressions of their immediate surroundings.

Proposition 2 leads the researchers to believe that sports teams would likely benefit from seating groups of peers together or near one another in order to take advantage of the high level of emotional contagion exhibited amongst peer groups on game day. The researchers understand that teams may be wary of dedicating whole sections of seats to certain groups, and that this dedication of seats is a risk when trying to sell out an arena. However, a more farsighted, downstream focus points to the need for teams to encourage young fans' attachment to the team and enjoyment of their game-day experiences. Seating peer groups with other groups of children will enhance the emotional contagion not only within the groups of peers who attended the game together,

but also the emotional contagion felt by the individual groups due to the heightened emotions of the groups nearby.

The finding of children learning from adults within the fan community and sharing with other children within the fan community has important theoretical implications. Not only does this provide support for Katz and Heere's (2013, 2015) work stating community membership is (at least initially) more important than team attachment, it furthers this research by differentiating between the purposes of different groups within this fan community for children. The child fans utilize both adult groups and peers for knowledge acquisition and peer groups for the dissemination and sharing of that knowledge. It may be pertinent to the development of team identity from community identity, then, that these children have access to both adult and peer groups that are part of the fan community.

James' (2001) work on young fans, which to date is still one of the few studies that focused on children, had a strong focus on sense-making, similar to this study. However, James (2001) only discussed the connection between child and sport team (vertical sense-making), where the child makes sense of their identification with the team individually. In this study, the authors furthered James' (2001) research by incorporating the horizontal ties a child has to the fan community surrounding the team, adapting the focus from brand attachment to brand community. As such, this study contributes to our understanding of how children use these novice experiences to make sense of the community and their role within it (Brown et al., 2015; Louis, 1980; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Our findings of the practices that children develop to aid in the sense making process is consistent with the work of Schau et al. (2009), who emphasized the

importance of learning community practices and culture for new community members. These practices provide the new member the opportunity to show they are legitimate members of the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, we offer our third proposition:

Proposition 3: Children make sense of the event through their interactions with the other fans, their peers and/or their family.

The importance of memorabilia to the expressiveness of children during games suggests that teams should ensure that children are prime targets for items being given away at games and that giveaways should be incorporated into game day activities to the extent possible. For example, if shirts, a common giveaway item, are being distributed, fans should be encouraged to wave them like towels in order to increase the expressiveness of the children in attendance. In-game incorporation of these giveaways and other memorabilia will enhance the likelihood that the child will interact with the item and thus increase the likelihood of attachment to that item, the fan community, and the team, a phenomenon that has been shown to hold in the case of non-sports brands (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009). This leads to the final proposition:

Proposition 4: For children, badging is one of the most important practices to show that they are legitimate members of the community.

Proposition 4 leads to the suggestion that sport marketers make efforts to ensure children who attend their events are given memorabilia they can take home or claim as their own. Not only does this encourage child attendees to badge and see themselves as true members of the fan community, it also provides the team with increased marketing away from the venue itself due to more individuals (i.e., the child fans) displaying team-

related memorabilia. The memorabilia need not be costly, as children seem to enjoy many of the less expensive giveaways such as noise makers and foam fingers, so the team's bottom-line need not be considerably affected by these child-targeted giveaways at games.

Future Research and Limitations

Regarding future research, more must be done to learn how and why children socialize into members of the community. It has to be stated that regardless of socialization strategies, not all children attending these events will develop a connection with the team. As supported by one of our interviewees, some children simply do not enjoy their time at the stadium. However, what we found is that the game itself might not be the key factor in deciding whether their time is enjoyable or not. There were many children who obviously enjoyed the event but did not pay much attention to what happened in the game. The difference in the children oblivious to what they were watching and the children actively cheering during plays and interacting with their group was evident in this study's observations, but there is no research on why or how these two groups are different, nor how an individual moves from one group to the other. Future work should examine this topic to determine what factors actually cause a child to desire to make the transition to active engagement with the team and the game environment.

Future research is needed to determine whether the observed enhanced emotional expressiveness that children exhibited with peer groups as opposed to family groups can lead to an increase in positive memories of the team, and possibly more positive feelings and emotions towards the team brand. Expression increases have been shown to affect

attachment to brands (LeBlanc et al., 2015), and it is plausible that this phenomenon could also exist in a sports team context as well. If research confirms the existence of this relationship within the sports team context, among children or adults, sports industry professionals could create greater attachment to their teams through in-game promotions and activities designed to foster greater attendee engagement and emotional expressiveness. A possible way to address this is to study changes in facial expressions during games and possibly even to record neurological activity throughout a sporting event. The exploration of physical changes in children's expressions may help to confirm the specific aspects of the game-day environment that affects them most, and brainwave technology may be able to further the understanding of the unseen impact of different game-day aspects.

Another area of future research is seeing how game-day socialization relates to, and possibly even affects, the other ways in which children are socialized into fandom. While this study highlights the importance and effects of the fan community and the game-day experience, it is unclear how these agents affect overall team identification or loyalty formation in relation to other socialization factors. Comparing team identification or loyalty of children socialized primarily by peers or primarily by adult influencers would greatly further this line of research and give a more holistic understanding of how children socialize into sports team communities.

Future research is also needed to explore potential age-related differences in the socialization experience of children during game day. While comparing and contrasting different age groups was not the purpose of this exploratory study, we realize that the relative importance of different socialization factors and/or agents may vary by age.

The current study is not without limitations. As just stated, this study did not focus on potential age-related differences in game day socialization. Rather, given the lack of prior studies on the game day socialization experience of children, we found it appropriate to initially focus on overarching phenomena present in all children socializing into sport fan communities through game attendance.

All children have a desire to please (Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Knowing this allows us to better pose questions in interviews to avoid suggestive language or leading questions, but it is possible that even in doing so, children may have altered some answers in order to please the researcher or their accompanying adults and/or friends. Younger children may also have difficulty verbalizing their thoughts, making their answers potentially different from their intended message. They also are sometimes unable to comprehend what others say, making it difficult for them to answer questions due to miscommunication. This inability to articulate thoughts coherently and understand the meanings of others tends to disappear as age increases due to larger vocabularies and better reasoning skills, but it could have affected younger children in this study. The primary researcher attempted to mitigate these problems by repeating questions and clarifying meanings for interviewed children. Coding and interpretation of the data also maintained the intended meaning of the children's statements. To address this limitation, future studies could explore other methods, such as video-recording and photographing, as alternative methods to examine this particular population.

A final limitation of this study is the fact socializing agents and marketing or entertainment activities were examined without consideration of their unique or separate influences on the child fans. It is unclear if a child fan's use of badging to legitimize their

membership as a fan is influenced by socialization through the adult and peer groups with whom they attend, by the fact game-day events such as the fan cam give them an opportunity to show off this badging to the larger community, or if it is a combination of both influences. Assuming both may play significant roles in the importance of badging to child fans, future research would need to address the convolution of these separate factors by more directly studying the effects of each and how they independently affect a child's utilization of badging to legitimize their membership.

Children are a fascinating group of fans with particular interests and abilities. This study gives future researchers a solid basis off of which to build future studies involving child fans and will hopefully inspire others to engage in this stream of research. It is clear that child fans are the future of all sports, and it is the desire of the researchers that future studies will consider this niche fan group when attempting to understand a fan base.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY 2: CREATING FANS FROM SCRATCH: A QUALITATIVE

ANALYSIS OF CHILD CONSUMER BRAND PERCEPTIONS OF A

NEW SPORT TEAM[2]

Professional sport teams are regularly recognized as being some of the most

valuable in the industry and have strong brands with wide exposure and awareness

(Heere, Walker et al., 2011). Yet, particularly in the United States, the sport team market

is ever changing, which means that every year new sport teams enter a competitive

market, in which most of the people in their new markets have existing allegiances to

other teams. Within Minor League Baseball (MiLB) in particular, this change is ever

present, with teams changing or renegotiating their Major League Baseball (MLB)

affiliations every two to four years (Hill, 2018).

The challenge for these newcomers is to remain competitive and financially

viable within the industry and build a fan base in their new community (Grant, Heere, &

Dickson, 2011). One of the strategies to overcome this challenge is to focus on young

children, who have not yet developed any allegiance to existing sport teams. According

to James (2001), children develop the cognitive capacity to become fans of sport teams

between the ages of five and nine, which means that young children under the age of 10

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[2] Reifurth, K. R. N., Wear, H. T., & Heere, B. Submitted to *Sport Management Review*,
11/18/2018

are still deciding which team to support. This means both exposure to the team has already occurred by this age, and associations to the team have already (potentially) begun to form. While these young children may have begun to form some kind of a connection to the team and its brand through this exposure, the process of how they become consumers, in particular of new sport teams to which their own family and peers have no strong loyalties, is unclear.

It has been posited that fans may not be attaching to the team itself but to a specific component of the team such as a player or players, coaches, other fans, or even the location of the team itself. Robinson and Trail found that different points of attachment can affect overall spectator motives (2005), and Wu, Tsai, and Hung (2012) found that attachment points have indirect effects on team identification levels and long-term loyalty to teams. Prior researchers have shown that spectators of new sports teams do demonstrate high levels of team identification (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Katz & Heere, 2016; Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009), but the points to which they are attaching have not been identified. If we are to believe attachment points affect identification to teams, it is important to identify the specific facets of the brand to which fans, particularly those still developing their identifications to teams (i.e., children), are attaching themselves.

Thus, the purpose of the study is to extend the literature on brand associations made by children by focusing on the unique minor-league-baseball setting and new and developing brands to help new sport teams better reach young fans and spectators. New sport organizations have received some attention in the sport management literature (Doyle, Lock, Funk, Filo, & McDonald, 2017; Grant, et al., 2011; Katz & Heere, 2013,

2015) with the main focus of these studies being on both brand perspectives of sport managers as well as brand community formation of new fans. However, very little is known about the way child consumers perceive a new sport team over the course of its first season.

With new teams, it is easy to find individuals who are still unaware of the team or who have little interaction with the brand. It is the branding decisions of the team and the advertising and marketing campaigns of the team that affect the level of experience one has with the new team. Little is known about how these varying levels of experience with a team change the ways in which new consumers, particularly children, connect to the team and brand. Consequently, in the case of child consumers, investigating these perceptions could allow for further understanding of what brand aspects drive consumer behavior and ultimately consumer loyalty, components that could provide insight on the brand components that make individuals "fans for life".

Literature Review

The value associated with a product due to its brand name or logo is commonly referred to as brand equity (Aaker, 1991). This added value is controlled by the consumers who develop opinions and feelings toward the brand that are translated into the product's market value. As consumers' opinions and feelings towards the product shift, so too does its brand equity. This customer-based brand equity conceptualized by Keller (1993) and expanded by Keller (2003b) has four main steps used to build a strong brand: brand identity, brand meaning, brand responses, and brand relationships. These concepts are hierarchical in nature and have been illustrated in pyramid form from Keller's (2003b) work in Figure 3.1.
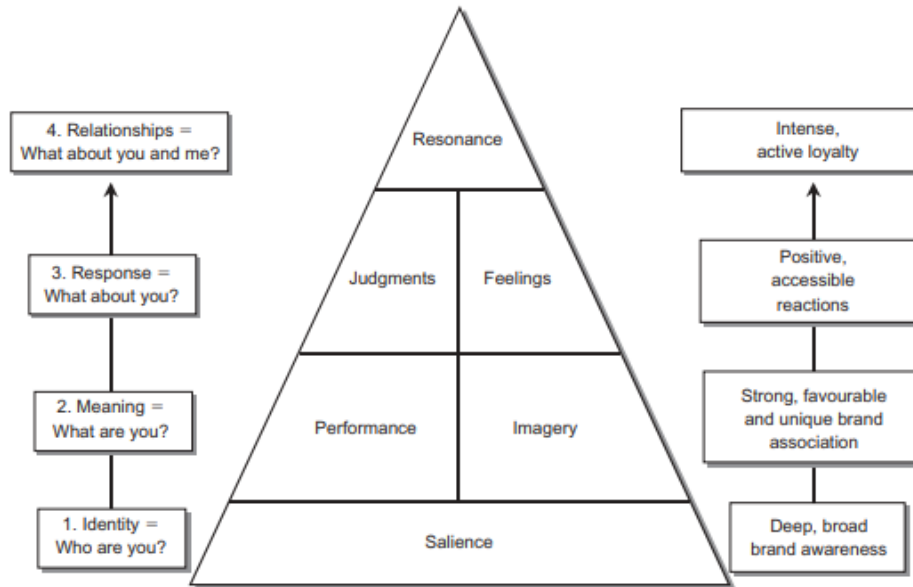
Figure 3.1 Customer-Based Brand Equity Pyramid from Keller (2003b)

Each step contributes unique qualities to the overall relationship between the consumer and the brand. To create brand equity, a brand must establish a solid foundation in the first step and build upon that step to reach the pinnacle of the pyramid. Without this foundation to build off of, the equity built will be weak. It is therefore pertinent to encourage strong branding from the most basic connections formed at the beginning of the brand relationship to ensure the strongest brand relationship later. The most basic connection is made by forming a brand identity between the customer and the product which involves the creation of salience (Keller, 2003b). This salience involves awareness of the brand and the depth and breadth of that awareness. The next step involves creating meanings associated with the brand itself, which focuses on the brand's image in the minds of consumers. Overall brand image is determined by the strength of the brand's associations, the favorability (or importance) of the associations to the customer, and the uniqueness of the associations made with that brand. Another aspect of brand meaning that helps build strong brands is the brand's performance, which is the

ability of the product to meet customers' functional needs through inherent product characteristics (Keller 2003b). A sport team's performance cannot always be controlled by practitioners, but it is still an important characteristic of both the team's brand and the desire of individuals to become involved with the brand and its activities.

Brand responses, the third step in the customer-based brand equity pyramid, focus on the judgments and feelings of customers toward the brand (Keller, 2003b). Judgments include the customer's opinions and evaluations of the brand, while feelings consider the emotional responses and reactions of customers toward the brand. The final step of brand relationships is based on the resonance of the brand with the customer and the extent to which a customer feels one with, or identified to, the brand. These latter two steps, particularly the step of the brand relationship, are expected to be of little importance to a new team who has not had time to develop many responses or relationships, so much of the work of this study will focus on the first two steps of the pyramid.

While Keller (1993; 2003b) focused 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 these frameworks from an empirical perspective, attempting to decipher the role that brand equity plays in shaping consumer behavior. 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, branding and brand management are 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).

In addition to the work of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993; 2003b), Berry (2000) conceptualized a new brand equity framework within the context of the service industry. Utilizing the theories of both Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), 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 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). Related to this study, an understanding of both the service-based brand equity framework and the customer-based brand equity framework become critical

in understanding the various components that may influence an individual's overall perceptions of a sport brand.

Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is an extremely important element to the success of brands (Keller, 1993) and is the key element to the first step of the customer-based brand equity pyramid: brand identity. Without brand awareness, brand associations are not likely to exist at all (Ross, 2006). It is closely related to both brand associations and images because increased brand awareness has been shown to strengthen brand associations and, in turn, brand image (Aaker, 1991; Tong & Hawley, 2009).

Brand awareness has been defined as a consumer's ability to identify the brand under different conditions (Keller, 2003a). It is commonly broken down into two distinct constructs: brand recognition, associated with the ability of the consumer to retrieve knowledge of the brand with a priming stimulus (i.e., a photo of the brand's logo in hand), and brand recall, which requires more cognitive processing as there is little to no priming involved to aid in knowledge retrieval (Anderson & Bower, 1974). While a consumer only needs to be aware of a brand through one of these means, it is more common for consumers to be able to remember a brand with the help of a stimulus than it is to recall a brand with little aid in identification. Most studies, therefore, have looked at either brand recognition as an identification basis for brand awareness and sometimes include recall to identify more aware consumers (Percy & Rossiter, 1992; Singh, Rothschild, & Churchill, 1988; Valkenburg & Buijzen, 2005; Walsh, Kim, & Ross, 2008). However, recall is a more accurate measure of the aspects of a brand that stick

with a consumer as there is no stimuli to prompt the connection to a brand as there is when one has recognition of information.

Marshall and Aitken (2006) looked at brand recall when they asked New Zealand school children between 8 and 11 years-old to draw their favorite possessions. With no other instructions, the children drew some unbranded (jewelry, clothes, pets) items but also drew many branded without suggestion of naming specific brands from the researchers. The inclusion of brands in drawings of important possessions showed that children could recall specific brands that were relevant to their lives and that these children were aware of brands, not just the products, but what has not been studied is what aspects of a brand are identified at these early ages as representing the brand for the young consumer.

Within the sport marketing literature, the concept of brand awareness has been recognized by scholars as a key contributor to brand equity (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Walsh et al., 2008) and has largely been examined from the perspective of sponsorship and advertising recognition and recall (Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013; Hwang, Ballouli, So, & Heere, 2017; Levin, Joiner & Cameron, 2001; Tsuji, Bennett, & Leigh, 2009). These studies have operationalized brand awareness as component of brand equity, and also as an individualized measure to examine the recall and recognition of brands and sponsors. Findings have indicated in certain sport contexts individuals are able to recall brands more readily on the basis of presentation setting (i.e. television vs. video game), amount of exposure in virtual advertising, and degree of team identification for a team and its associated sponsors (Tsuji et al., 2009; Walsh et al., 2008). With regard to brand recognition, studies have found that sponsor brands that are

most congruent with the sport context are more apt to be recognized amongst competing brands, and that no differences exist in recognition rates on the basis of game presentation. While these studies have created a significant knowledge base in the examination of brand awareness in the sport sponsorship and advertising space, there remains a gap in the literature that examines how sport brand awareness among young consumers, as well as sport brand awareness from a team brand perspective instead a sponsor brand perspective.

Brand Associations, Performance, and Imagery

Brand associations are aspects of a brand that a consumer remembers (Aaker, 1991). These brand associations can be created through association with attitudes, attributes, or benefits (Keller, 1998). Brand associations held in a consumer's mind reflect the brand imagery and performance, the key components of the second step in the customer-based brand equity pyramid (Keller, 2003b). Brand imagery is the reasoned or emotional perceptions about the brand (Keller, 1993). Consumers employ a product's brand image when creating an overall perception of a product, and those brands with strong brand images in consumers' minds enjoy better perceptions of brand quality and value (Jacoby, Olson, & Haddock, 1971). Prior researchers have found that children looked at brand images and brand attributes as symbols of the actual product (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005; Germain, Wakefield, & Durkin, 2010; Ward, Wackman & Wartella, 1977). These attributes, such as the overall performance of the sport team (e.g., a winning team or a losing team) and the associated image of the brand (e.g., winners and losers) represent the product and symbolize its value to the consumer (Aaker, 1991). Since brand images and attributes represent the product in the eyes of young consumers,

it is important to understand both the overall brand image and the associations that make up the brand image for consumers in order to identify what it is about a brand that consumers value. This second step of the customer-based brand equity pyramid focusing on brand imagery, performance, and associations will be the main focus of this study, particularly since the focus is on a new team with little time to build deeper relationships with consumers and many children likely still developing their awareness and image of the sport team brand.

Previous research by Gladden and Funk (2001) on brand associations in a sport setting led to the creation of the Team Association Scale (TAS) which identified 13 brand associations divided into team attributes (team's success, star player, head coach, management, logo, stadium, product delivery, and tradition) and benefits (pride in place, escape, fan identification, nostalgia, and peer group acceptance). Gladden and Funk's (2002) later work added three attitudinal brand associations (importance, affect, and knowledge) to their original list of brand associations, culminating in 16 unique types of associations commonly found in the minds of sport consumers classified into three major categories representing brand attributes, benefits, and attitudes.

Many of Gladden and Funk's (2002) associations such as success, star player, logo design, identification, and peer group acceptance would most likely create brand equity among child fans as well, seeing as previous literature has highlighted the importance of many of these or similar attributes in the child consumer literature (Schmidt, 2003). Likewise, Ross, James, and Vargas (2006) created the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) to highlight the 11 brand associations found through free-thought listing and a confirmatory factor analysis that have significant effects on the

relationship between fans and their favorite sports teams. Kunkel, Funk, and King (2014) discovered 17 distinct brand associations for leagues as opposed to teams that highlighted the similarities in brand associations made to sport organizations overall (e.g.,all included success, team history, players, commitment to the team, and the logo). Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler (2008) discovered non-product-related brand attributes like the brand's logo or traditions associated with the brand or team have significantly larger impacts on attitudes and behaviors than product-related attributes like success, star players, or head coaches, which makes it likely branding and branded imagery will be more prominent than the product-related associations to the brand. However, it is unclear how each would affect a child exactly, especially in the novel sporting environment focused on in the current study.

While Gladden and Funk's (2002) study and Ross et al.'s (2006) study both used previous research on brand associations to produce their respective 16-item and 11-item lists of possible associations sport fans make to teams (Keller, 1993; Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986), as did Bauer et al. (2008), all focused on sport teams with high-profile athletes and sizeable marketing budgets, resources many teams (especially at the minor league levels) do not possess. New teams may also not possess many of the same brand associations that exist for established teams due to the fact there has not been time to develop lasting memories of these associations with the product. It is also possible that younger fans do not form the same brand associations as adults, making the need to study these new and developing fans even greater. Prior researchers have shown that, until the age of about 13, children are not able to process information and absorb branded messaging as effectively as adolescents and adults (Moore & Lutz, 2000; Roedder, 1981).

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Zhang and Sood (2002) found that 11 and 12-year-old children rely more on surface cues (e.g., brand name characteristics) and less on deep cues (e.g., category similarities) than adults to evaluate brand extensions, highlighting the differences in brand evaluations overall between these age groups. It is therefore necessary to examine brand associations and images made by children for new sport teams without limiting the list of possibilities to the sixteen found for established teams.

Brand perceptions of child consumers

Children learn both their roles as consumers and form their consumption preferences through socialization (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Dotson & Hyatt, 2000; Ward, 1974). Pagla and Brennan (2014) found that socializing influencers such as siblings, parents, and close friends had significant effects on children aged 7 to 12 on the formation of brand attitudes. While this supports prior researchers who have stated child consumers are very impressionable (Bravo, Fraj, & Martinez, 2007; Roberto Baik, Harris, & Brownell, 2010), many children have been shown to be able to form their own opinions on brands once exposed to them (Mehta et al., 2010). In this study, the authors look specifically at children due to their relative unsophisticated view of brands and their cognitive inability to complicate their thoughts in regards to brand perceptions (James, 2001).

Mere exposure and familiarity with brands plays a part in child brand awareness, without needing the overt influence of socializing agent's opinions (Arredondo, Castaneda, Elder, Slymen, & Dozier, 2009). This exposure and familiarity will only increase with age, as time gives individuals more opportunities with which to become familiar with a brand. Age has been found to be a significant factor in the creation of

brand awareness in child consumers (Dotson & Hyatt, 2000; Fischer, Schwartz, Richards, Goldstein, & Rojas, 1991). As children get older, their abilities to discern differences and to form more complex opinions of brands continue to increase.

Brand awareness has been found to develop at very young ages. Schmidt (2003) discovered children as young as six months old were able to develop mental images of a logo. Pre-school-aged children can recognize and request certain brands consistently over others (Gotze, 2002; John, 1999). High levels of brand awareness have been noted among children aged 4 to 11 (Brennan, 2005). However, all of these previous studies have focused on specific aspects of a brand to determine if that aspect was or was not recognized by child consumers. The detriment of this methodology is that it does not uncover other brand aspects that children are aware of, nor does it allow for a comparison of awareness levels of different brand elements. Thus, we propose the following research questions: 1) What brand associations are being formed toward a new sport team by child consumers, and 2) Do these associations differ based on experience with the brand?

Measuring Brand Images Through Children's Drawings

A strong brand image can encourage brand loyalty (Bauer et al., 2008), which makes understanding the brand image in the mind of the consumer extremely important when attempting to market a product appropriately. Understanding the differences in brand associations made between two groups allows marketers to better tailor their marketing campaigns to these groups and their preferred focus or foci, which in turn increases brand equity (Ross, 2007). When focusing on child subjects, the reliability of the chosen methodology, used in this study to assess brand imagery, becomes more of a concern. Some children lack the ability to comprehend certain words, phrases, or

mediums (Angell & Angell, 2013; Borgers & Hox, 2001; Holoday & Turner-Henson, 1989; James, 2001). Children are also much more easily affected by the involvement of a researcher. Children exhibit a strong acquiescence response bias, leading to inaccurate results when presented with yes/no question formats (Bruck, Ceci, & Melnyk, 1997). These issues make survey research extremely difficult to administer when dealing with a child sample and makes the use of ad hoc methods preferred in studies utilizing child subjects (Pine & Veasy, 2003).

To overcome the challenges associated with survey research among young consumers, the qualitative data collection in this case study utilizes a cognitive drawing method to allow children to represent their perceptions and emotions regarding a team's brand in a more attainable, visual manner (Hume, Salmon, & Ball, 2005; Wang & Burris, 1997). Qualitative drawing methods have been found to increase experience-based recall ability amongst children (Hume et al., 2005) and have been used when focusing on child subjects due to children's familiarity with the medium (Punch, 2002). In the case of this study qualitative drawing was used to investigate child consumers' ability to recall their brand perceptions of and experience with the minor league baseball team.

Researchers in the field of psychology have been utilizing drawings to understand children since the 1800's, where Ricci noted that child drawings tended to reproduce real entities without necessarily closely adhering to their actual visual appearances (see Ezan, Gollety, & Hemar-Nicolas, 2015). This realism found in child drawings has given a sense of legitimacy to its use in understanding information processing in young consumers and has aided in child expression when this expression is difficult through words (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006; Luquet, 1927; Pridmore & Landsdown, 1997).

Children create what is known as a graphic language, or a vocabulary of shapes learned from their surroundings and stored in their memories that they use to express themselves (Ezan et al., 2015).

Researchers have approached child drawings in three distinct ways. The first uses drawings to assess children's intelligence level (Ezan et al., 2015). In this approach the complexity of the drawings is evaluated in order to determine a child's level of graphic language. It is not often used in the field of marketing or consumer research due to the limited relevance of intellectual development to these fields. The second approach to analyzing child drawings utilizes drawings to detect children's enduring psychological characteristics such as their emotions and feelings (DiLeo, 1983; Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). This approach has been employed by previous researchers to understand how children represent a certain consumption situation (Donnenfeld & Goodhand, 1998; Marshall & Aitken, 2006) or product (Ezan et al., 2015).

The third drawing analysis approach referred to in this article as the developmental approach, looks at children's cognitive maturity similarly to the first approach but notes the similarities in the children's graphic languages at various cognitive developmental stages (Lowenfeld & Britain, 1975). While not using defined cognitive developmental stages, particularly due to the unreliability of using age as a general marker of development progress, analysis takes into consideration age and similarities in abilities of the drawers when attempting to understand the content of the drawings. This approach has been used most frequently in the field of consumer research to determine the awareness of certain elements such as brands, logos, and colors at certain developmental stages (Ezan, et al., 2015; McNeal, 1992; McNeal & Ji, 2003). It

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is this third approach, used without relying heavily on the stage of development of participants, that was utilized by the authors to frame the interpretations of the child drawings in this study.

When interpreting the content of child drawings, researchers in the field of psychology have noted the importance of the first impression given off by the drawing (Ezan et al., 2015). The process of evaluation therefore begins with an attempt to grasp the drawing as a whole before focusing on its parts. Once these initial impressions are noted, analysis aligning with the developmental approach is based on first an individual analysis of the elements in a single drawing, and then the detection of similarities between like drawings. This technique enables researchers to compare similarities to groups by age, thereby allowing for themes to develop by age similarities and for the main elements of groups of drawings to determine importance of certain aspects of the subject of the drawings (Ezan et al., 2015). It also allows researchers to determine what aspects of a subject or brand are valued by a consumer (Dennis, 1966).

Methods

Research Design

The researchers worked with a local single-A minor league baseball team just finishing its inaugural season to test children's brand associations for the new team. This allowed the researchers to test the associations made by individuals at different ages but with the same level or amount of exposure to the brand. The minor league team utilized its school reading program email list to disseminate information about a drawing contest being sponsored by the team. School-aged children who participated in the drawing contest would be eligible to win prizes such as tickets to a future game for them and their

families and their drawing made into cover art for the game-day program for the game they chose to attend.

Interested schools were given detailed instructions on the exact directions to provide to their students to ensure consistency throughout the sample. These instructions included the materials students were allowed to use, the set-up for the study to ensure each student completed his or her own drawing with no help from others, and the exact prompt they would provide to students. The researchers chose to not directly supervise data collection, which limits the reliability of the drawings and their content due to an inability to ensure the consistency of levels of influence from outside sources (e.g., teachers, internet, parents). The researchers chose this method, however, due to security and safety precautions on campuses and the importance of the overall comfort of the child participants. Many children tend to shut down in the presence of strangers and individuals around whom they are not yet comfortable (Kagan, Reznick, & Snidman, 1988), and many others tend to adjust their responses in order to appease individuals with whom they wish to form a relationship (Tobey & Goodman, 1992). Both responses can affect the content of child drawings in this study. To ensure child participants were comfortable with the authority figure leading the exercise, the teachers were asked to facilitate the creation of the drawings and to ensure the adherence to all provided guidelines (see Appendix B).

The new team had utilized standard advertising methods (i.e., radio commercials, news outlet advertisements, community appearances) to promote their upcoming season, but the team had done little to target younger fans specifically. The team had done some direct marketing toward families and had set up a reading program with local schools to

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encourage children to become involved with the team and team activities, but these tailored efforts were minimal over the first year before this project commenced. There were more general calls for residents of the surrounding community to attend games using radio, newspapers, and in-person promotional efforts throughout the first season. This led to the possibility of some participants already having brand awareness and previous knowledge of the team while still leaving the possibility of many being unaware of the team at all. This made it likely the child subjects were only comprehending the most basic or simplistic marketing messages sent out by the team, but the exact messages and associations being made were not known. This made it possible to utilize Gladden and Funk's (2002) list of brand associations identified by adult fans as an initial list of associations to look for, but knowing the existence of cognitive limitations of the child sample caused the researchers to keep an open mind during the analysis.

A key criterion to brand research is the child's knowledge of the brand name (Ji, 2002), therefore the researchers used the brand (team) name as the primer for the research subjects. However, in order to test for brand awareness, the fact that the name was associated with the local baseball team was omitted from the prompt, so the child participants were allowed to draw the most relevant associations to the generic name instead of specifically to the desired brand. The prompt read, "Draw what comes to mind when you think of the Columbia Fireflies". Fireflies are an indigenous species to the local area where the baseball team plays, and fireflies are well-known to the residents of this area of the country. Without already being aware of the baseball team and its brand name, many children would naturally associate the statement with the indigenous flora and fauna of the local area. In this way, the researchers were able to differentiate

between branded and non-branded imagery while also seeing the difference in awareness throughout the sample.

After completing their individual drawings, the teachers asked each student to describe the team in an open-ended question format: "Who are the Columbia Fireflies?" Open-ended questioning was utilized to avoid leading questioning that may have affected the child participants' answers (Poole & Lindsay, 1995). Participants that correctly described the minor league baseball team were considered aware of the team, while those that either incorrectly described or admitted not knowing who the team was were considered unaware of the team. A second question asked participants if they had been to the team's games in the past after answering the awareness question.

Participants and Research Setting

A total of 11 schools participated in the contest, turning in a total of 144 individual drawings. The ages of participants ranged from 5 to 14 years-old. See Table 3.1 for a complete age distribution of participants.

Table 3.1 Age Distribution of Study Participants

Age	Number of Participants
5	8
6	14
7	19
8	21
9	24
10	24
11	14
12	7
13	5
14	8

The students' normal classrooms were used as the setting for their drawings to maintain the normality for the participants during the experiment. In total, 69.4% (n=100) of the 144 participants were aware of the local minor league baseball team and only 34% (n=49) had been to a game. Going to games was an important distinction in terms of brand awareness and brand imagery knowledge and recall due to the extra exposure to branding from the ballpark experience. The organization displayed the team store right as patrons walked into the stadium, which showcased branded team merchandise such as shirts, hats, cups, and outerwear. The team mascot also made regular appearances both on the concourse and on the field throughout games. Outside of game attendance, the team had done community engagement events and player and mascot appearances throughout the local area at schools and around the downtown area of the town in which they played. They passed out branded merchandise to local schools and universities, created a reading program to engage youth in the local schools, and engaged with youth and other individuals via their social media accounts where they highlighted team-related hashtags. The team also invested in daily radio advertisements on popular local radio stations to increase the awareness and excitement surrounding the team, but the added exposure to the brand and brand imagery through attending a game at the team's home stadium may affect the types of branded imagery children were aware of and could have included in their drawings.

Data Analysis

A guided drawing technique was utilized in which specific instructions were given to the subjects to guide the focus of the drawings to allow for generalizable results (Ezan et al., 2015). Children were given sheets of paper and asked to draw what comes

to mind when they think of the local minor league baseball team. These completed drawings were then collected by the team and delivered to the researchers for analysis.

Collection was done before the start of the second baseball season to avoid influence of the team's increased presence in the surrounding community. These drawings were first coded for emergent themes utilizing the coding framework presented by Barlow, Jolley, and Hallam (2011), and then coded again using brand association themes from the sport management literature (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014; Ross, 2006). While Kunkel and his colleagues (2014) identified brand associations made at the league level as opposed to the team level, many of the 17 associations were similar to, relevant to, or the same as the associations of Gladden and Funk (2002) who focused on associations made at the team level. The initial open coding used to first generate broad themes (e.g., baseball, family, branded) allowed the researchers to analyze the data generally and to identify basic patterns throughout the entire sample by highlighting similarities in messages or the drawings themselves (Berg, 1989).

After broad initial themes were identified, it became clear that the existing brand associations identified by Kunkel, Funk, and King (2014) and Gladden and Funk (2002) did not incorporate all of the brand associations found in the drawings, partly due to the novelty of the brand and possibly in part due to the simplistic cognitive abilities of the child sample. The researchers re-examined the broadly-identified themes as well as the codes that did not fit the previously-identified themes to develop new themes specifically tailored to the results of this study. Triangulation of the coding and themes between the researchers was performed to reduce the over-interpretation of the data and to strengthen the consistency of the findings (Goldner & Levi, 2014).

Results

There were associations identified through the coding process that supported the previous work of Gladden and Funk (2002), Ross, James, and Vargas (2006), as well as Kunkel, Funk, and King (2014). One brand association that appeared in many participants' drawings was the acknowledgement of competition and success of the home team. In several drawings, participants drew scoreboards where the home team had more points than their opponent. This occurred even when no branded imagery (e.g., logos, social media hashtags associated with the team, etc.) existed, as seen in Figure 3.2. This seems to support the idea that, for young fans of a new team, the association of success and competition is strong and relevant to their connection to the team and the team's brand.
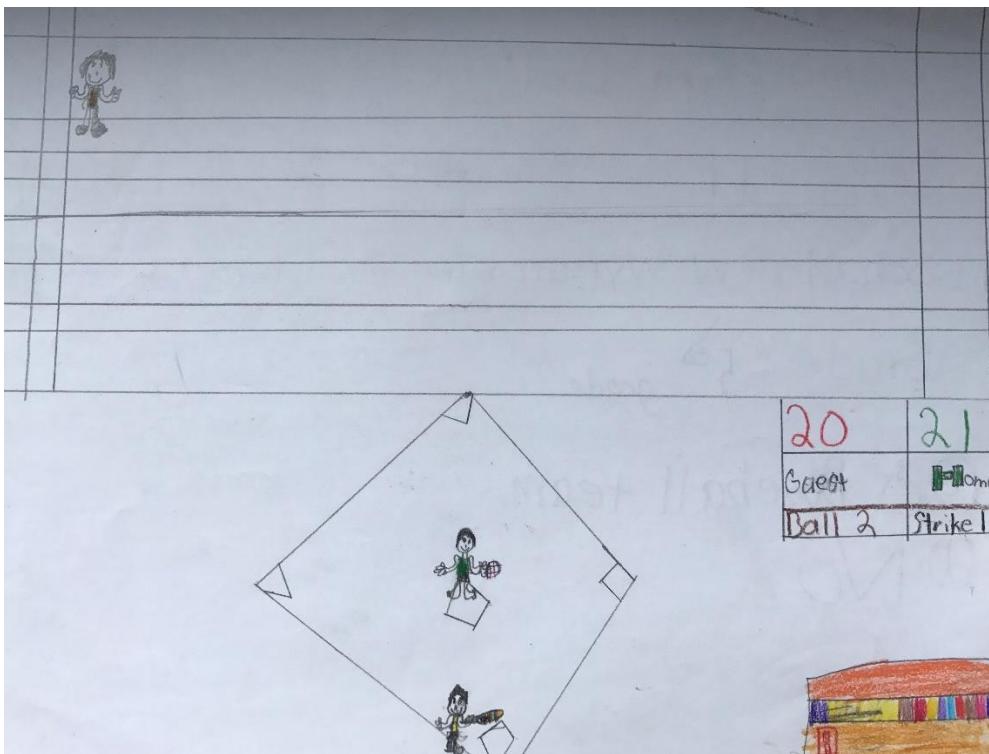
Figure 3.2 Drawing Contest Submission from 11-Year-Old Student Showing Home Team with Higher Score than Competition

A second association identified through the coding process that supported the work of previous researchers was the importance of the logo. The logo appeared in drawings by child participants as young as seven and as old as twelve. The logo appeared in drawings from participants who reported attending previous games and those who reported never attending a game before. The logo was commonly present on traditional memorabilia like hats, shirts (see Figure 3.3), and even a few baseballs, but a few drawings showcased the logo on its own, under a railing with a skateboarder skating over it, or surrounded by actual firefly bugs. This may mean the logo is separate from the clothing and memorabilia it is traditionally placed on and has a separate meaning and importance to the children than branded merchandise.

Figure 3.3 Drawing Contest Submission from 11-Year-Old Student Showing the Team Logo on a Shirt

The researchers discovered several findings of interest beyond the adult-focused work of Gladden and Funk (2002), Ross and his colleagues (2006), as well as Funk and his colleagues (2014) that highlighted some differences in brand associations made by the children in this study. For example, there was no use of brand colors, sayings, logos, mascots, or branded memorabilia at all, let alone consistently, in drawings from participants age 6 or younger. This supports previous literature on branding which states sophisticated symbolism is difficult for children to comprehend until sometime between the ages of 7 and 11 (John, 1999; Piaget, 1970). Instead, the initial brand image consistently utilized by children was the sport itself. Until the age of eight, participants either drew images completely unrelated to the team's brand (e.g., a semi-truck as seen in Figure 3.4) or drew depictions of a ballpark, baseballs, baseball bats, or people playing the sport of baseball, as seen in Figure 3.5. This suggests that, with little priming, the sport the team plays is the first connection made by children to the overall team brand. The absence of any branded imagery for all participants younger than 7 is significant, as many of these participants reported being both aware and having attended games in the past.

Not only did branded imagery begin appearing in participant drawings sporadically at age 7 and regularly by age 8, the frequency with which these branded drawings appeared increased as the participants grew older. Two out of nine 8-year-olds who were aware of the team and who had attended the team's games in the past used branded imagery (see Figure 3.6) as well as one out of ten 9-year-olds, four out of ten 10-year-olds, and four out of six 11-year-olds. The participants who were aware of the team but who had no history of attendance at team games began using branded imagery at age

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Figure 3.4 Drawing Contest Submission from 7-Year-Old Student Unrelated to the Team
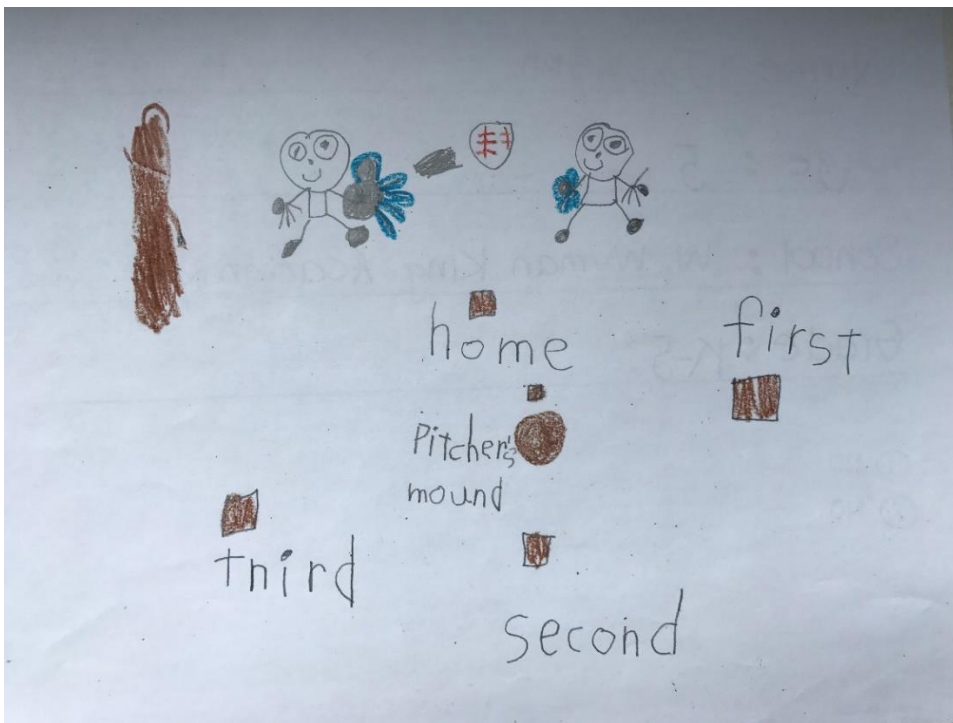
Figure 3.5 Drawing Contest Submission from 5-Year-Old Student Exemplifying Sport Branding

Figure 3.6 Drawing Contest Submission from 8-Year-Old Student Utilizing a Team-Sponsored Social Media Hashtag (Aware of the Team, Attended Previous Game)

11, with two out of nine 11-year-olds and three out of five 12-year-olds utilizing branded images.

Another theme that emerged in drawings from the younger participants was community. While previous research in brand associations has highlighted the importance of community pride (Kunkel et al., 2014) and peer group acceptance (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002), these associations seem to be distinct from the type of community association showcased in the drawings of the child participants. The drawings in the sample that referenced community focused on the positive emotions of the large numbers of spectators. While it is important to note there are other possible interpretations that can be made of a group of individuals in a drawing, the fact these drawings primarily showed large groups of people watching baseball made the

researchers interpret these drawings of groups of people as symbolizing the community, or people, surrounding and associated with the team. There was never a drawing of fans who were frowning or alone; each drawing of the community included three or more individuals sitting or standing together, and all spectators are smiling. Kunkel et al.'s (2014) community pride association focuses more on the ability of the sport or team to elevate the image of the surrounding city or town, and Gladden and Funk's (2001, 2002) peer group acceptance association focuses more on the internal acceptance an individual feels when his/her friends and family openly accept and support his/her team sport preference, an internal sentiment which would not be visible in images of the spectator's external emotions. Neither of these brand associations were supported by the imagery in the drawings of the participants in this study.

Previous researchers have also emphasized the role of specific socializing agents such as parents and close friends in children's formation of brand attitudes (Pagla & Brennan, 2014), and the results of this study show these specific socializing agents seem to be less significant when dealing with associations made with the brand. Instead, the emphasis is on the fan community surrounding the team and the importance of the crowd and fan attendance to brand associations of young fans. Both children who reported having previously attended the team's games and children who reported never previously attending included images of crowds and spectators in their drawings and spanned the age range of the sample. Figure 3.7 exemplifies the types of drawings seen in the sample incorporating imagery of spectators watching a baseball game along with heavy baseball-related images. It should be noted, however, that the majority of community and spectator imagery in the drawings occurred between the ages of 7 and 9, and the majority

were seen in drawings from children who reported never previously attending the team's

games in the past. This may be caused by the heavy community branding the team did

before the beginning of as well as during the season, creating a brand association for

those children who had not experienced the game atmosphere themselves that may have

been replaced by other brand associations for those who had attended a game before the

drawing contest occurred.

Figure 3.7 Drawing Contest Submission from 7-Year-Old Student (Aware of Team,
Attended Previous Game)

Another theme found through the coding process was the notable difference

between participants who were unaware of the team versus those participants who were

aware of the team before the study. Those who identified themselves as being unaware

of the baseball team after having completed their drawings drew general images

referencing the team's name or namesake (i.e., fireflies) more often than branded images.

Participants who self-identified as being aware of the team drew branded images

representing the team's logo, mascot, branded memorabilia, and social media hashtags or sayings much more frequently than participants who identified themselves as being unaware of the team.

Attendance was also associated with higher rates of branded imagery. Only 2 of 43 participants who reported being unaware of the team and never having previously attended the team's games used branded imagery (it is unclear how or why these participants drew branded images when they reportedly were unaware of the team's existence). Six out of 52 participants who reported being aware of the team but never having previously attended the team's games used branded imagery. Both of these groups had significantly fewer instances of branded imagery in the drawings, especially in comparison to the amount of branded imagery in the drawings of the participants who reported both being aware of the team and having attended games in the past (11 out of 46 respondents). A difference in age at which branded imagery began appearing in submitted drawings was also apparent between participants who reported previously attending games and those who did not. Those who attended games may have been exposed to more branding than participants who had not attended, causing the brand associations to develop at earlier ages (i.e., 7) than those participants who had not attended games (i.e., age 11).

The combination of awareness and attendance also led to a wider variety of brand associations in the participants' drawings. For example, one participant who was aware of the team and who had previously attended games used sayings and hashtags associated with the team, three used team colors, one drew the team mascot, and six drew the team logo either on its own or printed on memorabilia such as hats or jerseys. Only sayings (1)

or the team logo (5) were utilized in drawings by participants who were aware of the team but had never attended a game. However, a few drawings utilizing the team logo for the participants who were aware of the team but who had never attended also tended to incorporate imagery unrelated to the team or the brand. For example, one such drawing had a skateboarder balancing on top of the team logo, and another drawing had the logo above a forest of trees (see Figure 3.8). The utilization of branded imagery with an unrelated setting did not appear in drawings from participants who reported being both aware of the team and previously attending team games. It seems that attendance helped the participants make more grounded connections to the sports brand than awareness alone.

Figure 3.8 Drawing Contest Submission from 12-Year-Old Student with Branded Imagery in an Unrelated Setting (Aware of Team, No Previous Attendance at Games)

Discussion

The results of this study provide us with relevant implications relating to both the branding of new teams and the brand associations made specifically by young fans. One key implication of the current study is the lack of branded imagery in drawings from participants younger than 7 years-old. While this was not a quantitative study, the lack of branding (not brand awareness) until the age of 7 may have significant practical implications for sport marketers and brand managers. The lack of branded imagery may have something to do with the developing cognitive abilities of young children (James, 2001; Piaget, 1970; Reifurth, Bernthal, & Heere, 2018), which may mean practitioners will need to invest in increased branding efforts, both in quantity of exposure and quality of the messages (Keller, 2003b), for 6-year-olds and younger children to develop brand associations made more easily in older children.

This increase in branding for children under the age of 7 may not be worth the higher investment required to accomplish such a campaign. Brand associations require higher-level thinking abilities (Aaker, 1996) in order to both differentiate between and form preferences for specific brands, abilities which children at ages 5 and 6 are still developing. This means more familiarity (and more direct interaction) with the brand may be required for these younger spectators to make the lasting brand associations practitioners look for from their audiences. It also means that practitioners may want to avoid marketing to children under the age of seven if resources are lacking due to the poorer return on investment they would receive from younger individuals.

Previous researchers have shown that children younger than 7 have the cognitive abilities to differentiate between, and recognize, specific brands (Gotze, 2002; John,

1999; Schmidt, 2003), which suggests that earlier exposure to the brand may help to increase children's abilities to form lasting brand associations (Arredondo et al., 2009). This was supported in the current study by the fact children who reported attending games previous to the drawing contest incorporated more branded imagery than those who had never attended a game before. It was also noted that participants who reported never having attended a game before did not start using branded imagery in their drawings until they were much older (i.e., 11) than participants who reported attending a game previous to the study (i.e., 7), which highlights the importance of not just exposure but exposure through attendance. These results suggest that attendance at sporting events may increase the effectiveness of branded messaging and internalization of brand imagery and associations for young sport fans.

Seeing how attendance seems to positively affect rates of branded associations made by children, new sports teams should make every effort to bring children out to games to encourage increased brand associations made by younger fans. It may also help to bring children out in groups with their peers, as previous researchers have shown this leads to higher rates of emotional expression and enjoyment levels (Reifurth et al., 2018).

While exposure through game attendance appears to aid in earlier brand associations, it is unknown from the current research whether the five and six-year-old participants who reported attending previous games were exposed to the team more or less frequently (or exposed at the same rate) than participants seven years-old or older, as the number of games previously attended was not asked of the participants in this study. It is also unknown if the participants were exposed to other forms of branded messaging outside of the ballpark such as through social media, newspapers, community outreach

events, television, or radio advertisements, all of which could have affected the children's familiarity with the brand. Future research should take rate of exposure to the brand through attendance and branded messaging into consideration to see if exposure affects brand associations differently at various ages.

While the researchers did not initially code drawing content based on previous research, it was evident that some patterns were consistent with earlier work on brand associations that were of note. The importance of the step 2 associations from Keller's (2003b) customer-based brand equity pyramid focusing on performance and imagery, for example, was evident in the prominent use of elements relating to the success of the team. The importance of team success as a brand association is supported by previous research on sport team brand associations (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2006) as well as some previous research focusing on new sports teams (Lock et al., 2009). This also supports the work of sport management researchers studying motives of sport spectators and their desire to associate with successful others (Cialdini et al., 1976; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002; Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Jensen et al., 2016). However, the fact that team success was one of very few brand associations identified in this study from previous research, all of which focused on adult fans, highlights its relative importance to the brand for young spectators, which contradicts Reifurth et al.'s (2018) study on child fans' game-day experience. This furthers the work being done on child fans by showing that, although children may not openly mention team success as enhancing their game-day experience, it is a strong and early brand association made with a new team.

While adult fans have reported many brand associations to sport teams previously, and many of those have been found when looking at new sports teams specifically, children only focused on two of these previously-researched brand associations. Children seem to value the team's success heavily when presented with a new team, making it critical for sports practitioners looking to create new fans to identify games the team is likely to win and to push for greater child spectator attendance at those games over others. Previous research by Reifurth and her colleagues (2018) found that children did not pay attention to the game intently while in attendance, but it is evident in the results of this study that the outcome of these games is often associated with the team in the eyes of children when building their understanding and connection to a sport team.

While it is difficult for sports teams to control the caliber of play and success of their teams, it is pertinent for new sports teams to encourage youth attendance at games the team is most likely to win in order to aid in their brand attachment and identification with the team over time. Increasing youth attendance at (and awareness of) games the team wins, a key component of the second stage of Keller's (2003b) customer-based brand equity pyramid, will help to develop a strong foundation for brand equity. This is not to say that children should only attend games against weak opponents, but it may help practitioners promote stronger connections to the brand and increase the likelihood of loyalty developing as the children age and maintain their connections to the team. While winning is not the only way a team can be successful, the literal interpretation of the home team with a higher score in many of the drawings within the sample gives practitioners a solid brand association (success through winning) off of which to build.

One interesting non-finding was the lack of mascot imagery in the participants'

drawings, particularly considering past research has consistently highlighted mascots'

importance to young children's relationships with brands (Bond & Calvert, 2014;

Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Kraak & Story, 2014). The team had utilized the mascot in

many aspects of the in-game experience during inning breaks and fan engagement

activities outside of the park, so it was thought the children (both through attendance and

through the team's other marketing and PR efforts) were aware of the mascot. Reifurth et

al. (2018) discovered that sport team mascots enhanced the excitement of child spectators

at sporting events, exemplifying mascots' importance to an enhanced game-day

experience for young fans, but only one participant in this study clearly included the

team's mascots in a drawing meant to represent the team. Previous literature on

established brand mascots has shown children as young as 4 preferred brands associated

with known and liked mascots over brands with unfamiliar mascots (de Droog, Buijzen,

& Valkenburg, 2012; Keller et al., 2012), which supports the idea that the lack of mascot-

related imagery in this study may be related to the novelty of the team and not the age of

the sample. The team used in this study was fairly new, having only just completed their

first season at the time of the drawing contest. With very little time to create the positive

brand relationships typically associated with use of a mascot (Brown, 2010; Phillips,

1996), mascot relevance as a brand association may not develop until later on in a child's

connection with a team. This finding (or lack thereof) extends the literature on new-team

brand imagery, highlighting the lack of emphasis of mascots on young fans' team

connections within the first year of branding efforts. Future research should examine

when the mascot, known to be a powerful brand influencer, becomes relevant and integral to the brand image for both new teams and young fans.

This study focused on interpretations of drawings made by children, but the researchers were unable to reach out to participants to gain an understanding of the drawings' contents from the children's perspective. The ability to have the children interpret their own work and explain the reasoning behind their drawings would better inform the researchers of the meaning behind the content and alleviate much of the reliance on researcher interpretation. Future research should incorporate interviews with the drawers to ensure interpretation of drawing content is accurate and representative of the thoughts and actual associations made by the participants.

While the results of this research highlight the differences between brand associations made by adults and brand associations made by children when focusing on new sport brands by showcasing the different brand associations found in this study compared to those identified by prior researchers focusing on adults as well as the lack of branded imagery and associations below the age of 7, this research merely touches the surface of the various differences between adult sport fans and child sport fans. What is clear is that there is much more work to be done to fully understand connections children make to sport teams. More research is needed to comprehend how these bonds can be strengthened or manipulated in order to form the strongest and longest-lasting bonds at young ages. The current study shows us that children form slightly different brand associations from the average adult sport fan, emphasizing success, logos, and the fan community over other established brand associations. It also highlights the importance of attendance on branding and the formation of brand associations for the youngest fans of

teams. Future research will be able to utilize these findings to further child fan research

regarding these associations and maybe will help the field develop a deeper

understanding of how these brand associations form and affect child fans' team

connections later in life.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY 3: EXPERIMENTATION WITH A CHILD FAN'S ABILITY TO

EXHIBIT LOYALTY IN THE FACE OF ALTERNATIVES

Children love unconditionally. They attach themselves to the people and things closest to them with a ferocity that serves as a deterrent from separating from those entities later in their lives (Ji, 2002; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). While we know children develop an attachment to their principal caregiver at birth (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969), we merely assume children develop a similar attachment to certain entities without fully understanding the processes behind the development of that entity-centered love. It is this psychological commitment that creates desires for and loyalty to products that can influence the behaviors of children throughout the rest of their lives (Guest, 1955, 1964; Ji, 2002), and it is this loyalty that brand managers wish to develop in every consumer of their products. However, particularly in the context of sport fandom, we know very little about *how* this psychological commitment is formed or how to cultivate it so that it strengthens and lasts over time, even when the child is exposed to changes affecting his or her fandom.

The psychological commitment of consumers to specific brands has been widely studied and has been shown to have many positive outcomes (Brakus et al., 2009; Cova & Pace, 2006; Jacoby et al., 1971; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Park et al., 2010).

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Formation of a psychological connectedness to a sport brand leads to the development of

identification both to the team and the community surrounding the team (Heere & James,

2007a; Wann, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). This psychological connection to a sport brand has

been shown to lead to increased brand equity for sport teams (Aaker, 1991; Boyle &

Magnusson, 2007), continued support of the brand through hardships (Kerr & Emery,

2011, 2016; Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2011), and an increase in perceived value of the

team (Kunkel, Doyle, & Berlin, 2017). Developing a relationship with a sport team also

results in behaviors such as increased purchases of brand products such as memorabilia

and increased attendance or viewership of brand-related content and events (Baimbridge,

Cameron, & Dawson, 1995; Parry, Jones, & Wann, 2014; Tong & Hawley, 2009; Trail,

Fink, & Anderson, 2003; Tufte, 2007).

These outcomes are all extremely desirable to sport teams, and they continuously

attempt to understand how to increase these desired outcomes in their fan bases and how

to maintain these outcomes over time. Scholars who are interested in this attachment

consumers form to brands have focused on two main areas of an individual's

psychological commitment to teams: team identity and team loyalty. To understand

consumers' identification and loyalty to sports brands, researchers must understand the

initial formation of these connections and what affected consumers' relationships to these

brands over time. Previous research has shown that this connection is first formed in

childhood (Kolbe & James, 2000; James, 2001), which makes this young population of

extreme importance to researchers' and practitioners' understanding of sport fans.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand at what point in their lives,

children develop a psychological connection to their favorite sport teams. Specifically,

the author aimed to test the abilities of young sport fans to develop both team identity and loyalty to teams.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

The Importance of Studying the Connection Children Build to Sport Brands

It is commonly thought that most people first form their team identities in childhood or adolescence (Funk & James, 2004; James, 2001), and that these early life social identities tend to hold a special sway over individuals that social identities formed later in life do not hold. Research on brand identification and the formation of brand relationships shows that relationships formed later in life are less stable than those formed at early ages (Holbrook & Schindler, 1991). Guest (1964) conducted a 20 year-long study of brand loyalty and found that a significantly higher percentage of brands from one's childhood were used in adulthood than brands not introduced until later in an individual's life. In a sports context, this shows that exposure at a young age may be necessary (or at least extremely beneficial) to building a strong and lasting relationship to a sport team. Those not exposed to the sport team in childhood may be at a disadvantage, unless other motivators cause the salience of the team identification to become extremely important to the individual in adulthood (Adler & Adler, 1987; Andrijiw & Hyatt, 2009). What may be most at risk to the psychological connection children form to teams is the strength and steadfastness of their identification, or loyalty, to sports teams.

Longitudinal research on brand loyalty has provided evidence that brand relationships made in childhood tend to last longer than brand relationships made later in life (Guest, 1964; Ji, 2002). This could be due to the fact that personal norms developed over time make it difficult for an individual to change certain preferences or behaviors

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later in life (Chandon, Smith, Morwitz, Spangenberg, & Sprott, 2011), which makes it less likely one will switch a preference that has already been established as a personal norm (i.e., being loyal to or identifying with a particular brand). This provides reasoning for practitioners to focus more heavily on developing team loyalty at young ages, as young fans are less likely to distance themselves from the team over the course of their lives than individuals who developed their fandom when they were older.

Although previous research shows that childhood team identification and loyalty is beneficial, the specific subpopulation of child sport fans has been given little attention by researchers for various reasons. Instead, many researchers have chosen to study adult fans' motives for team identification or the strength of team identification in adult populations (Funk & James, 2004; Heere & James, 2007b). While there are great strengths in the work that has previously been conducted in the field of social identity formation as well as in team identity and loyalty, researchers have shied away from directly studying children and have relied heavily on recalled memories of adults in the study of team identity formation (Funk & James, 2004). However, past researchers have found this method of inquiry is not as reliable as observing and testing team identity formation as it is actually occurring. Memory is not always accurate (Goodman, Hirschman, Hepps, & Rudy, 1991; LeBlanc et al., 2015; Ready et al., 2007), which makes it unclear if adult recall of events from decades' prior is reliable. This makes it even more important to utilize child participants and to focus on their unique ways of forming an identity or loyalty to a team.

Measuring Social Identity Among Child Fans

In order to study young fans' relationships with sport teams, it is important to first understand the theory behind the connections they form. The theoretical basis for the psychological connection to a sport team is social identity theory, which posits that individuals use group membership to support their personal and collective identities (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Personal identities are derived from self-classifications of the self in relation to members of certain groups, and that self-categorization as a member of a group creates a collective identity between the individual and the other group members where individuals act collectively (Blumer, 1969). This identification with a group is associated with self-categorization theory, which posits that individuals go through depersonalization where they learn to see themselves and other group members less as individuals and more as parts of a whole (Turner, Hoff, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). This depersonalization aids in creation and enhancement of group cohesion, influence, and conformity, making an individual's membership in the group increase in importance to that individual (Hornsey, 2008).

Many scholars have attempted measurement of social identification of adult fans, but social identification measurement has never been attempted with a child sample (see Heere & James, 2007b). While studying child fans directly is needed in the field of sport management to better understand the formation of team identification at young ages, children have cognitive limitations that make studying their identification to sport teams more difficult than when studying adults. Children tend to lack control over their own lives and are much more dependent on others (both for information and for facilitation of behaviors such as game attendance) than adults, which changes the ways in which they

are able to interact with brands (Alderson & Goodey, 1996). This makes agency a unique

concern in a child sample when measuring aspects of team identification such as

behavioral patterns, which play a large role in the measurement of group identity

(Ashmore et al., 2004; Heere, Walker et al., 2011). Heere and James (2007b) identified

the unique construct of public evaluation as one's perception of how others view the

group identity in question (i.e., the effects of the opinions of others on one's group

membership). Children and adolescents are much more sensitive than adults to the

opinions of others (Brown, 2004), which make children more susceptible to group think

and social pressures when making choices (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Kalmus & Keller,

2009; Lachance et al., 2003). It is possible that their hypersensitivity to the opinions of

others causes public evaluation to be weighted more heavily for children than for adults

and can change their reported identification drastically. This can affect children's

expressed identification to a team because they will be more likely to choose the same

team as their socializing agents. Similarly, children have less agency over their

behavioral involvement with the team than adults, as it is not always their choice to

decide what is on television, and/or have no direct control over the decision to attend a

game in person. It is therefore necessary to identify relevant components of team

identification for children based on previous child development and team identification

literature.

Research with preschoolers has shown that children as young as four are able to

comprehend differences between objects and groups consistently (Hischfeld & Gelman,

1997; Sobel, Toachim, Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Blumenthal, 2007), which makes it possible

for most children to be aware of the differences between sports teams. Children have

also been shown to possess the ability to show a preference for one team over others (James, 2001), which supports the idea that children are able to see themselves as members of their team's fan base. While the literature in marketing suggests that brand distinctions can be made as young as three years-old (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; McAlister & Peterson, 2006) and brand preferences can also be made around this age (Bahn, 1986), a study conducted on the formation of sport team identification show that recall of the age at which an individual became a fan of a sport team was between six and ten, and becoming a true fan did not occur until an average of about age 15 (Kolbe & James, 2000). This shows a significant difference in the age at which marketing and child development researchers have found children capable of identifying with a brand and the age at which sport management researchers claim brand (team) identification truly forms.

According to the self-categorization theory popularized by Turner and his colleagues (1987), identity operates at different levels of psychological inclusivity of the individual to an object. The lowest level of identity is formed when the individual recognizes herself as a human being and develops a human identity. The intermediate level of identity is formed when the individual can see herself as a member of a social ingroup, which marks the development of a social identity. This simple division between "us" and "them" made by an individual's acceptance of the self as a member of a group is the fundamental basis for self-categorization (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Snow & Oliver, 1995; Tajfel, 1978). The distinction between the in-group and out-group is tested regularly in sports, where two groups are pitted against one another each week, highlighting the divide between supporters of each team. If one cannot self-categorize as

a member of a group, such as self-categorizing as a fan of a sport team, that individual does not identify with that team.

While self-categorization may be the most basic form of team identification, there are levels to team identification that can become stable over time (Funk & James, 2004). The problem with this is the stability in the child, due to the fact that children are still in the process of developing a sense of self, and a solid sense of self may not develop until well into their adolescence (Guardo & Bohan, 1971). If the sense of self were to change, the relationship of the team to that sense of self would also be forced to change. For example, if a child becomes interested in a professional baseball team because he plays baseball and that sport is enjoyable for him, his personal connection to the sport of baseball aides in the creation and strengthening of his love for that professional baseball team. However, if he later decides he no longer enjoys playing baseball and decides he likes football instead, his relationship to the professional baseball team may weaken. The fact that children are still developing their likes and dislikes and defining who they are as an individual makes the identity of the child with the team a varying dimension over the course of childhood instead of a solid construct that researchers can use to compare children to each other.

The possible lack of stability of identification for child fans of sport teams makes it necessary to better understand team identification at young ages and children's abilities at different ages to identify with a team. James' (2001) work highlighted the fact that younger children lack certain cognitive abilities that could influence their team identification, but older children and adolescents who have further cognitive development showed stronger abilities to connect to sport teams. Because self-categorization is a

simple identification measurement, it can be used to determine the existence of social

identity in an uncomplex and basic form.   Due to the lack of understanding of how

children would be able to identify, distinguish between, or comprehend the more-

complex cognitive thoughts associated with adult-focused identification scales (Heere &

James, 2007b), the author determined this simple form of identification (i.e., self-

categorization as a fan) through a test of the difference between the in-group and out-

group would be a more appropriate measure for children's team identification.

Therefore, the researcher poses the following hypothesis:

H_1: Age will have a direct effect on a child's ability to self-categorize as a fan.

Challenges to Measuring Team Loyalty

Loyalty has been defined as a steadfast allegiance to a person or a cause

(Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). When applied in a sport setting, that loyalty most

often refers to the allegiance one has to a sport team. This team loyalty is a commitment

made to a specific team that is persistent, resistant to change, and influences cognitive

thoughts and behavior (Funk & Pastore, 2000). While team identity typically measures

cognitive thoughts and behaviors, team loyalty encourages longevity of the relationship

between the consumer and the brand and is much more important to practitioners looking

to create repeat purchases.

It is commonplace in the literature on loyalty to utilize surveys to gather data and

to test scales attempting to uncover components that influence loyalty strength. Mahony,

Madrigal, and Howard (2000) were the first to attempt this with the creation of the

Psychological Commitment to Team (PCT) scale, which measured loyalty through a six-

item scale focusing on the individual's attitudes and personal commitment to a team.

Funk and Pastore (2000) added in behavioral intention items along with similar loyalty questions incorporated in the PCT scale. Gladden and Funk (2002) focused on many different aspects of loyalty (team attributes, benefits, and attitudes), giving depth to the concept previous measurements had not accomplished. Heere and Dickson (2008) created the Attitudinal Loyalty to Team Scale (ALTS) specifically looking at attitudinal loyalty using only four items, all of which focused on the behavioral intention component of loyalty.

While all of these scales have proven statistically reliable, there are many issues in their application. The most significant methodological concern is that scales predict and report intended behaviors which are unreliable determinants of actual future behaviors. Research on the relationship between behavioral intentions and actual behaviors shows a moderate relationship between the two concepts, but that actual behaviors cannot always be accurately predicted (Odin, Odin, & Valette-Florence, 2001; Sheeran, 2002; Webb & Sheeran, 2006; Zaharia, Biscaia, Gray, & Stotlar, 2016). When researchers utilize survey methodologies, it is typical that questioning revolves around behavioral intentions and does not provide a way to measure the actual behavior of the survey-taker beyond the survey itself. The inability to measure actual behaviors makes it difficult to witness resistance to change within the sample, which is a key component of loyalty. The only way to truly measure this is to give individuals an actual change to resist, which surveys are incapable of providing.

Resisting change provides evidence that an individual can behave loyally in the face of alternative scenarios or options, which is an extremely relevant loyalty measurement for many practitioners. The most common way to test resistance to change

is by observing the behaviors of consumers such as actual purchases and purchase frequencies over time (Dawes, 2014; Murray & Kline, 2015; Quester & Lim, 2003). In a sport context, behavioral loyalty is commonly measured through media consumption, game attendance, and merchandise purchases (Baimbridge et al., 1995; Stevens & Rosenberger, 2012; Melnick & Wann, 2011).

While there have been a number of previous studies focusing on behavioral loyalty, many of these, particularly in sport management literature, have neglected the key component needed to test resistance to change: a negative situation or association with the product or team with which one identifies. Stevens and Rosenberger (2012), for example, asked individuals already in the act of the desired behavior (i.e., attending a live sporting event) about their team identification and loyalty, but these study participants were never presented with a viable alternative to test their resistance to change. Yoshida and colleagues (2015) looked at reported behavior over a period of time, a key component to testing for loyalty, but they also did not test for a resistance to change element. Without providing individuals with a negative catalyst to produce change, the continuity of behaviors over time could be linked to other aspects of one's team identification. For example, continued game attendance could be a sign of loyalty to a socializing agent, and if that source of attendance motivation is gone, the individual in question may stop attending games. If not given a reason to discontinue attendance, however, it would be difficult to say if the attendance was a sign of loyalty to the team or to the socializing agent with whom the individual regularly attended games. The current study will incorporate resistance to change into the examination of loyalty in child fans through the measurement and observation of participants' actual behavioral choices after

being presented with a negative catalyst to provide a reason for behavioral changes in the sample.

One factor that has been found to produce significant changes in fan attitudes and behaviors is a team's performance. Cialdini et al. (1976) noted that more individuals tend to associate themselves with success and distance themselves from failure. Terms like basking in reflective glory (i.e., BIRGing) and cutting off reflective failure (i.e., CORFing) originated from this concept, and this tendency to be closer to winners than losers has been linked to ego-enhancement and protection, respectively (Hirt, Zillman, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992; Wann & Branscombe, 1990).

However, there are many individuals who defy this ego-protection and continue to associate (and many who maintain a very close association) with losing teams. The Cleveland Browns (an NFL team) finished their 2017 football season with a 0-16 record (which follows a 1-15 record in 2016 and no winning record since 2007), and even though attendance was low in comparison to other teams and historic home game attendance data, more than 55,000 people still attended the Browns' last home game of 2017 (Steer, 2017). Team performance seems to affect many fans' behaviors, but others seem to resist the CORFing concept and remain psychologically connected and close to their team in the face of ego deterioration. The fact some fans resist ego protection in order to remain committed to their team is a sign of team loyalty due to the fans' resistance to change in the face of negative consequences.

In order to truly test if one is loyal, one must be presented with a negative situation where the negative association with the brand would cause one's ego preservation to kick in, forcing the individual to show resistance to changing their

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behaviors (i.e., showing loyalty to the team although there may be negative consequences). It is this resistance to change when faced with alternatives that this study will focus on, and it is this combination of behavioral loyalty and resistance to change that will better represent true loyalty and further loyalty literature.

Measuring Loyalty Among Children

James' (2001) article on the effects of cognitive development on team loyalty of child fans was the first prominent article that focused on the ways children form lasting connections to sports properties. Utilizing qualitative interviews to assess cognitive development and resistance to changes in team preferences resulted in findings of children as young as five years-old exemplifying the ability to psychologically commit to a sports team but not the demonstration of behavioral consistency usually found in a loyal fan. This article not only provided evidence of the fact children are truly identifying with sports teams at very young ages as they have been shown to do with non-sports brands and products (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010; Srivastava & Prakash, 2012), it also provided a basis on which to develop future research revolving child fan loyalty.

While James' (2001) work was groundbreaking to the field of sport management and child fan literature, there were a multitude of areas on which future researchers can improve. The first challenge to his work was the limited sample breadth. Fifty-seven children (7 in the pilot study and 50 in the main study) participated in the study, but the ages only ranged from 5 to 9. This may have been the cause of the insignificant loyal behavior findings in the study, particularly since other research showed support for loyal behavior to be inconsistent before the age of 15 (Kolbe & James, 2000). However, it was evident from these two studies that young fans were more likely to self-identify as a fan

of a team before showing evidence of behavioral loyalty towards that same brand. Funk and James (2001; 2006) also posited that identification with the team came multiple steps before loyalty when considering one's psychological connection as a continuum, which supports the idea that identification would occur before loyalty. Therefore, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

> H_2: Child fans who express behavioral loyalty are more likely to self-categorize as a fan of a sport team.

Also problematic is the fact that James (2001) did not measure resistance to change through the examination of actual behaviors, but rather relied solely on his child participants' predictions of their own future behaviors. While James attempted to measure resistance to change through questioning the child subjects about their intentions to switch under various conditions, it is difficult for a child to comprehend abstract thoughts such as future behavior, a cognitive limitation James acknowledged as a limitation to his study. Not only is future behavior difficult for a child to comprehend (Alvarez et al., 2001), it is also difficult for an individual to predict with complete accuracy his future behaviors (Odin et al., 2001; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). With little reliability found in predictions of future behaviors, it is necessary to use actual behavioral data to measuring loyalty when possible.

Specifically, in regards to child fans, the research of James (2001) again posited that younger fans have fewer cognitive abilities to form complex and lasting connections to sport teams but that older children who have further developed cognitively may be able to better form these lasting connections. While James was unable to test actual behaviors in his study, it is likely the lack of cognitive development of young fans may prevent

them from forming a loyal bond that can withstand tests to that bond. Therefore, the

researcher to hypothesize the following:

> H₃: Age will have a direct effect on a child's ability to show behavioral loyalty to
> a sport team.

Testing for Player-Driven Differences in Team Loyalty

It is no secret that many professional sport leagues, particularly the National

Basketball Association (NBA), have become player-driven within a team format.

Previous research has identified players as a very salient point of attachment for many

sports fans (Funk, Mahony, Nakazawa, & Hirakawa, 2001; Murrell & Dietz, 1992;

Spinda, Wann, & Hardin, 2016), with Robinson and Trail (2005) even finding basketball

fans were more likely to attach to players than fans of other sports. Wann, Tucker, and

Schrader (1996) found that players were one of the most salient attachment points for

fans, and Hong, McDonald, Yoon, and Fujimoto (2005) found team identification was

positively influenced by fans' identification with players on the team. Management

literature has shown attachment to specific individuals within an organization produces

other positive outcomes such as prevention of consumer defections (Liljander &

Strandvik, 1995) and willingness to pay for the product (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park,

2005). In a sport context, the identification of a fan to a player may result in greater

likelihood of behavioral loyalty in the future as long as that player is still associated with

the team in some way (e.g., Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls).

While players clearly allow sport fans an opportunity to attach to a team, they also

provide sport fans an opportunity to demonstrate disloyalty to a team and loyalty to the

player's brand instead. The individual branding of NBA players in particular sometimes

overshadows the importance of the teams for whom they play, as many fans have stated

that they sometimes attend games just to see specific players on the opposing team rather than to support either team as a whole (Clark, 2014). However, this phenomenon has not been studied directly, and the effects of player identification on team identification have yet to be tested. Due to the close relationship between team identification and team loyalty (Funk & James, 2001), it is rational to presume the attachment of fans to specific players can consequently affect the behavioral loyalty of these fans to a team.

The majority of studies to date discussing factors affecting team loyalty have viewed the team as a singular entity instead of a whole made up of distinctive parts (Funk et al., 2002; Mahony et al., 2002; Wann & Branscombe, 1993), assuming the relationship a fan has to the team is the same relationship they have with each of the related elements making up the team (e.g., players, coaches, sales staff). Mahony et al. (2002) stated certain team elements such as players may influence fan behavior but did not directly examine these effects. Wu et al. (2012) directly examined the effect of players on basketball fans' team identification and found that identification with a player on a sport team indirectly affected re-patronage intentions, but did not directly affect these behavioral intentions for fans. As stated earlier, however, behavioral intentions are not an accurate measure of actual behaviors, which can only be directly measured through actual behaviors and behavioral loyalty. Seeing as behavioral loyalty is a more direct measure for practitioners of desired fan outcomes, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

> H_4: Children will be less likely to exhibit loyalty to a team when presented with player-driven behavioral outcomes as opposed to personal-driven behavioral outcomes.

Methodology

Research Design

  A significant concern related to child subjects is the fact many children have difficulties accurately completing surveys due to some children being too young to comprehend written language or even advanced verbal communication, making even the act of reading a survey to a child sometimes problematic (Borgers de Leeuw, & Hox, 2000; Borgers & Hox, 2001; Scott, 1997). Even the number of response options, ordering of options, and wording of instructions or questions can confuse a child responding to a survey (Borgers, Hox, & Sikkel, 2004).

  To address this concern, all child participants in this study were orally administered a survey with generic questions about the league as a whole (used to avoid priming the subjects), basic demographic information, and questions about the participants' connection to specific teams which were used to determine identification. While the author was aware that utilizing scaled survey responses, even when orally administered, is not ideal for child subjects (Borgers et al., 2004), the author utilized the oral survey more as an interview outline with specific questioning asked of each participant. This allowed the researcher to collect the same data from all participants while also allowing the researcher to ensure all participants comprehended the questions being asked.

  To determine participants' team identification, the researcher asked each participant two open-ended questions in the oral survey relating to the team with which the participant self-identified. Self-categorization will be used in this study to determine the existence of social identity in participants, which will hopefully eliminate the issues

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of measuring the intricacies of identity strength (Cialdini et al.,1976) that may be difficult to measure with a child sample (James, 2001).

Instead of focusing on the correctness of breadth of the answers given by the participants, the author focused on the use of particular pronouns. Lesgold (1974) found that personal pronouns like "we" were used correctly almost 92% of the time by children in 3rd and 4th grade, and that percentage increases when a child is able to create an image in their mind of the object in question through increased exposure to the object itself (Lutz & Lutz, 1978; van der Veur, 1975). Cialdini and colleagues (1976) noted that the use of "we" constituted a closer psychological relationship to the team than the use of "they", and it is this pronoun distinction that will be used to determine the self-categorization of the child participants to specific sport teams (Swann, Gomez, Seyle, Morales, & Huici, 2009). Participants who utilized "we" in at least one of the two questions were considered Identified, and participants who only used "they" were classified as Not Identified for the purposes of this study.

While H_1, H_2, and H_3 were primarily tested through the oral survey, to test for the presence of behavioral loyalty, the researcher utilized a between-subjects 2x2 posttest-only quasi-experimental design for H_4 in which the sample was divided into two conditions (loyal versus non-loyal, and player condition versus 'personal' condition) and both presented with a choice relevant to their condition to test the loyalty of the child participants in the study. Participants were divided by a choice experimental condition assigned to the participant by the researcher (i.e., personal or player), which was utilized in H_4. The results of the behavioral loyalty choice experiment determined by the loyalty result for each participant (i.e., loyal or not loyal), the results of which were used in H_2,

H_3, and H_4. Due to the importance of age to the study, the researcher could not randomly assign all participants to each loyalty condition due to the need to compare children at similar ages. The researcher made sure to include about half of the participants from each age sampled in the personal experimental condition and about half from each age in the player experimental condition. This allowed the researcher to have samples with similar numbers of participants at each age for more accurate comparisons and analyses but did cause the classification of the study design to quasi-experimental.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of performance outcomes on psychological commitment made to a sport team (Cialdini et al., 1976; Park, MacInnis, & Priester, 2006). Losing causes fans to distance themselves psychologically from the team (Cialdini et al., 1976) as well as contributes to actual behaviors such as decreased attendance (DeSchriver & Jensen, 2002; Jones, 1984). Hansen and Gauthier (1989) divided their sample into three groups based on team performance: winning teams with a 0.500+ record, moderately winning teams with a record between 0.375 and 0.499, and losing teams with a record between 0.000-0.374. While their small sample prevented strong evidence for the distinction between these groups based on attendance data, it was hypothesized that with a larger sample the winning teams would see significantly higher attendance than losing teams. Given Hansen and Gauthier's (1989) hypothesis, team record was used as an indicator of a poor team.

Due to the importance of a losing record to behavioral outcomes, the researcher chose to collect data in the greater Chicago area, a metropolitan area home to an NBA team with a losing record during the data collection period and for the previous few seasons. This location was chosen to ensure the greatest possible difference in behaviors

due to the increased presence of a negative catalyst for resistance to change regarding the likely object of identification and loyalty. The losing record encourages a need to resist change due to the change in the participant's fan environment where they must now consider ego-protection in their decision to either break their loyalty to the team to protect their egos or resist their desire to change their behaviors and remain loyal to their team, with the consequence being possible ego deterioration.

Before testing for behavioral loyalty, one must test for the strength of the participants' identification to a sport team (H_1). To do this, the children were asked to identify their favorite NBA team. As self-categorization is the most basic form of team identification, those who could not self-categorize as a fan of an NBA team (i.e., the league of focus for this study), they were excluded from the study. To ensure participants in the study had ample reason to switch their loyalties (i.e., to test their behavioral loyalty to their self-identified team), those who self-categorized as a fan of an NBA team with a winning record (e.g., self-categorized fans of the Golden State Warriors) were also excluded from the study. Those who self-categorized as a fan of an NBA team with a losing record were then tested for their utilization of the pronoun "we" as opposed to "they" when asked questions about the team with which they self-identified.

To test for behavioral loyalty in H_2 and H_3, and also to test the differences in behavioral loyalty given varying conditions for H_4, the children were presented with a choice experiment. To ensure the participants saw value in the choice experiment, they were told they were being entered into a drawing for a free NBA jersey. A jersey was chosen as the desired object due to previous findings of the author from Study 1 that memorabilia is very important to child fans' legitimization of their membership in a fan

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community. Previous research has also shown that purchase behavior is one determinant

of loyalty toward an object or group (Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978), which makes the choice

of a jersey to receive an acceptable determinant of behavioral loyalty. Because the jersey

represents a specific team, the choice of jersey within the experiment represents the

participant's behavioral loyalty (or lack thereof) towards their sport team. The choice

experiment was meant to force the participants to choose the team their jersey would

represent. Those participants who chose a jersey from the team with which they

previously self-identified were considered behaviorally loyal for the purposes of this

study, and those who chose a jersey from a different team were considered to lack

behavioral loyalty towards their identified team.

Participant Age Range

It is unclear what happens between the ages of three and fifteen that cause a child

to advance from a mere brand preference to a self-categorized identification to a sport

brand. Therefore, the sample for this study consists of children ranging in age from three

to fifteen years old. This will encompass the ages at which consumer behavior literature

has shown children can differentiate and form preferences for brands, the age range in

which James (2001) found children had the cognitive abilities to become loyal to a team,

as well as the ages that have shown the ability to exhibit true loyalty to a sports team. By

encompassing this diverse age range, the researcher hoped to be able to see a distinct

difference in frequency of loyal behaviors as the age increases within the sample. For the

purposes of this study, the age range was determined to be 5 to 18 to span the age range

previously identified as crucial to identification and loyalty development.

When using schools to recruit participants, the researcher made sure to include all grades that may include the desired age range of 5 to 18, which was Kindergarten through 12th grade. Kindergarteners tend to range in age from 4-6 years old, which both includes the youngest age used by James (2001) who showed signs of team identification as well as children potentially younger. High school students in grades 9 through 12 tend to range in age from 13-18 years old, which includes the age at which Kolbe and James' (2000) sample reported being truly loyal to a sport team (i.e., 15) as well as older adolescents. These grades would therefore theoretically encompass both those who are loyal and not loyal to a sport team.

Choice Experiment

The choice experiment consisted of two choice conditions: a personal condition and a player condition. Where the personal and player conditions differed was in the condition of the experiment itself. In the personal condition, participants were informed that they would be entered to win an NBA jersey customized with their own name and the number of their choice, making this choice condition personal to the child participant. They were then asked what team's jersey they would like, and they were shown photos of each team's jersey with 00 in the place of the jersey number and the words "Any Name" in the place of the last name on the back of the jersey. Although the image showed "Any Name", the participants were told it will be their own name on the jersey. This enhanced the interconnection of the participant to the jersey choice, which represented enhanced personal identity fusion with the chosen team's jersey.

Participants given the player condition were shown the same 30 images (representing each of the 30 existing NBA teams) but were instead told that they would

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be entered to win any NBA player's jersey of their choice. Given the only difference in the conditions was the prompt provided either focusing on their name (personal condition) or a player's name (player condition), this experiment allowed for the direct comparison of effects of player identification to self-identification to a team.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to check that the design truly showed differences between the groups and that the intended experiment resulted in the desired effects (i.e., that there is variation by age relating to behavioral loyalty through jersey choice). According to Connelly (2008), a pilot study sample should be approximately 10% of the projected sample for the parent study. The intended sample size for the parent study was 30 participants per grade (which would approximate to 30 participants per year of age and 15 participants per cell), so this pilot study consisted of a minimum of 1-2 participants per cell (i.e. a minimum of 3 participants for each second-factor grouping of age with experimental grouping). In total, the pilot study consisted of 63 participants ranging in age from 5 to 18, which is the full range of ages considered in the parent study.

Pilot study participants were recruited through sports groups (N=23) and public schools (N=40) in the Chicagoland area. The researcher met with the teacher or coach in charge of the group of students before meeting with the individual child participants in order to explain the process and to give the teacher or coach a list of unique codes that would be used to identify each participant individually. The teacher would then assign any student who wished to meet with the researcher one of the unique codes, and that child would tell the researcher their code instead of their name to ensure personal information was not being collected from the participant. This code would also be used

to deliver the correct jersey to the proper class or sport team once data collection was complete and winners of the contest were selected. The researcher met with each participant individually either after school on their campuses or at their practice facility for their sport team. In all cases, the researcher brought a tablet or her phone to record each participant's answers and directly enter them into Qualtrics for later analysis.

To be included in the study, all participants were required to give oral assent representing their personal desire to participate. Once oral assent was given, the participant was required to self-identify as a fan of a specific NBA team with a losing record. If the participant could not do so, the individual was omitted from the study. Once three participants were recruited from one age group for each experimental group, that group was considered complete. This allowed the researcher to limit the number of participants in each group and generated fairly equal groups for each age. Experimental groupings by age had either 2 or 3 participants for a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 3 participants per cell, providing a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 6 participants at each age.

Each student who gave assent to participate in the pilot study and who was able to self-identify as a fan was then asked the remaining questions pertaining to the study. For the choice experiment, participants in the personal condition were instructed as follows: "Thank you for answering all of my questions. Now you will be entered into a contest where the winner will receive a customized NBA jersey with your name on it. If you could have your name on any team's jersey, which team's jersey would you want?" Participants were subsequently asked the name and number they would like on their jersey if they were to win. The participants in the player condition were instructed as

follows: "Thank you for answering all of my questions. Now you will be entered into a contest where the winner will receive an NBA player's jersey from any team. If you could have ANY player's jersey, whose jersey would you want?" The full survey used for the pilot study can be seen in Appendix C.

All students who participated in the pilot study was given a letter which was to be delivered to the student's parent or parents. This letter informed the parent(s) of their child's decision to participate in the study, and it also provided information to the parent(s) regarding how to remove their child's information from the study, if desired. They would have a week to contact the lead researcher with their child's specific study code. Once that code was provided, the researcher would take the child's information out of the collected data and not include that data in any analyses. The letter to parents can be found in Appendix D.

Pilot Study Results

The pilot study proved helpful in improving the questions used by the researcher to determine identification strength as well as the analysis for identification strength. Regarding identification strength questions, the pilot study revealed the questions were too vague to result in the use of pronouns. The researcher needed to adjust the questions to make it more likely the answers would include a pronoun to describe the team in question. The original questions of "What do you think about the team this year" and "How well did your team do last game" were edited to "Why do you like [your team]" and "How do you think [your team] will do this season and why do you think that". These new questions utilized the actual name of the favorite team the participant identified as his or her favorite in an earlier question, which was more neutral than saying

"your team" and more direct than saying "the team" as was utilized in the original identification questions. These changes were thought to make it more likely the participant would respond appropriately, and not be primed by the questions to respond in a certain way (e.g. 'your team' is more likely to entice a 'we' response).

Although the sample for the pilot study was fairly small, it was clear that all participants in both the personal and player conditions of the experiment were able to make unbiased and informed purchase decisions. One adjustment made by the researcher after the pilot study was the clarification in the player condition to only allow active players' jerseys to be chosen. A few participants in the pilot study who were given the player condition chose retired star players like Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant, which represent player loyalty that has lasted beyond their playing days and has positively affected their loyalty to those current franchises. However, the inclusion of such stars and retired players would have made it difficult to tell in this study whether the participant was loyal to a poorly-performing team today, as all NBA franchises had star players at one point or another. Therefore, the decision was made to focus only on current players on active rosters.

A final change made due to the pilot study was the researcher's method of collecting data. The researcher found it difficult to quickly get through the oral surveys with participants while using a phone or tablet. Instead of using a form of technology such as a tablet or a phone to directly input participant answers into Qualtrics, the researcher concluded the oral surveys would be administered more efficiently by printing out the questions and inputting answers by hand. Therefore, all data collected for the parent study was collected by hand and later input into Qualtrics to allow the researcher

to move through the interviews with participants at a faster pace and to ensure teachers

and administrators at the school did not feel the researcher was wasting the time of the

students.

The researcher decided that, after the edits made due to the pilot study, the survey

and questions were appropriate for the parent study. The oral script used with the child

participants for the parent study can be found in Appendix E in the same format used

when printing out the individual questionnaires for each participant.

Parent Study Participant Recruitment and Research Setting

While two local sport clubs and one afterschool program were used to recruit

some participants, public schools in the greater Chicago area were used to recruit most

participants for this study. In total, 20 participants were recruited from local sport clubs,

16 participants were recruited from an afterschool program at an elementary school, and

328 participants were recruited from one elementary school, one middle school, and one

high school in a school district from the greater Chicagoland area. This left the

researcher with a total sample size of 364 usable responses. A breakdown of participants

by self-categorized identification to specific teams can be found in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Breakdown of Participants by Self-Identified Team

NBA Teams with Which Participants Self-Identified	Number of Participants Who Self-Identified as a Fan of That NBA Team
Atlanta Hawks	1
Chicago Bulls	329
Cleveland Cavaliers	6
Dallas Mavericks	1
Detroit Pistons	1
Los Angeles Lakers	23
Minnesota Timberwolves	2
New York Knicks	1

The researcher worked with the principals and sometimes teachers at each individual school to schedule time to be on each campus to allow students the opportunity to participate in the study. The researcher checked in with the front office each time she visited a campus and was never on campus without the knowledge of the administrative staff.

Previous research shows that children are sensitive to the settings in which they are placed, and it is important for the subject to feel comfortable in order to garner truthful and accurate information. The researcher individually administered the oral survey to students who assented to participate in order to keep the participant from being overwhelmed, intimidated, or influenced by other participants' responses. The researcher also conducted the oral surveys on campus to maintain a comfortable setting for the participants, which can encourage children to be open and truthful in their response. In some cases, the researcher sat in a quiet section of the school and allowed students to participate during the period of time before school, during recess, or for a short period after school. In most cases, however, the researcher coordinated with specific teachers to come to their classes at certain times to interview their students individually.

As was the case for the pilot study, all students who expressed a desire to participate in the study were first asked for oral assent. If oral assent was not given, the child was excluded from participation. The researcher attempted to maintain a familiar yet professional relationship with the child participants in order to limit the effects of the researcher's connection built through rapport on the participants' results or the apprehension of speaking with a fairly unfamiliar adult. As was the case in the pilot study, any student who decided to participate in the study and who gave oral assent was

given a letter to be delivered to the student's parent discussing parental consent and the parent's or parents' ability to remove the child's responses from the study by a specified date. In total, 416 participants were included in the study with 217 included in the personal loyalty condition and 199 included in the player loyalty condition.

Data Analysis

To analyze H_1 (Age will have a direct effect on a child's ability to self-categorize as a fan), the researcher compared the averages of children who utilize the pronoun "we" versus "they" when describing the team and team events. The use of the pronoun "we" symbolizes a closer identification to the team (Cialdini et al., 1976), and the researcher used this pronoun as an indication of participants' identification to a sport team. For the identification categorization of participants based on their pronoun usage in the two identification questions, the researcher coded a participant as identified when a participant answered one or both questions using the pronoun "we", and a participant was only coded as a 2 (i.e., Not Identified) if he or she did not use "we" in either question. Due to the "we" pronoun being represented by a score of 1, we hypothesized the identification strength score would decrease as participants' ages increased. The researcher first performed a logistic regression to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between those who were considered identified and those were considered not identified in relation to their age. Age was used as a continuous independent variable, and identification strength was used as a binary dependent variable in a logistic regression.

To analyze H_2 (Child fans who express behavioral loyalty are more likely to self-categorize as a fan of a sport team), the researcher first determined the average age of the

participants who were classified as identified and the average age of the participants who were classified as behaviorally loyal. The researcher then ran a chi-square test to determine if there were more behaviorally loyal fans in the group found to be identified compared to the group found to not be identified in this study. If the chi-square test results were significant, it would suggest there were significant differences between frequencies of behavioral loyalty due to social identification and would support the idea that (as long as the averages were different) the average ages of the two groups of behaviorally loyal participants (i.e., those in the identified group and those in the not-identified group) were significantly different.

To analyze H_3 (Age will have a direct effect on a child's ability to show behavioral loyalty to a sport team), the researcher ran a logistic regression comparing the ages of those who were loyal in the choice experiment to those who were not loyal in the choice experiment. Loyalty was used as a dichotomous independent variable, and age was again utilized as a continuous dependent variable for the analysis.

To analyze H_4 (Children will be less likely to exhibit loyalty to a team when presented with player-driven behavioral outcomes as opposed to personal-driven behavioral outcomes), the researcher first created a frequency table to highlight the differences in loyal behavior frequencies between the personal condition and the player condition. The researcher then conducted a chi-square test comparing the personal loyalty condition to the player loyalty condition regarding frequencies of behavioral loyalty in each group.

Results

To test H1, the researcher conducted a logistic regression to determine the significance of the proposed relationship (i.e., that identity strengthens as age increases). The Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients resulted in significant differences in ages between the participants who were classified as not identified and those classified as identified participants at the p<0.001 level, and the logistic regression model was statistically significant as well X^2(1, N=364) = 27.89, p<0.001. The model explained 9.8% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in identity strength and correctly classified 64% of cases. The odds ratio was 1.17, which can be interpreted as meaning that with every year older a participant became, his or her likelihood of being socially identified with a specific (losing) NBA team increased. The results of the logistic regression analysis are found in Table 4.2 which shows support for H[1].

Table 4.2 Logistic Regression Results for Identity Strength and Age

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
Step 1[a]	Age	.157	.031	25.754	1	.000	1.170	1.101	1.243
	Constant	-1.531	.342	20.014	1	.000	.216		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Age.

To understand whether identity develops before behavioral loyalty, the researcher found the mean age of the participants who were categorized as strongly identified as well as the mean age of the participants who were categorized as behaviorally loyal through their choice experiment result. The average age of identified participants was 11.65 and the average age of behaviorally loyal participants was 11.49. A frequency

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table with the breakdown of loyal, not loyal, identified, and not identified participants included in this study can be found in Table 4.3.

        The results of the chi-square test on behavioral loyalty and social identity showed that there was no significant relationship between behavioral loyalty and identity, X^2(4, N=364) = 3.606, p=0.058. Therefore, H$_2$ was not supported by the data. The results of the chi-square test can be found in Table 4.4.

Table 4.3 Frequency Table of Loyal and Identified Participants

			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Loyalty	Valid	Loyal	216	59.3	59.3	59.3
		Not Loyal	148	40.7	40.7	100.0
		Total	364	100.0	100.0	
Identity	Valid	No Identity	170	46.7	46.7	46.7
		Identity	194	53.3	53.3	100.0
		Total	364	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.4 Chi-Square of Loyalty and Identity

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.606[a]	1	.058
Continuity Correction[b]	3.212	1	.073
Likelihood Ratio	3.607	1	.058
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.597	1	.058
N of Valid Cases	364		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 69.12.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

        Regarding H$_3$, the logistic regression model was statistically significant as well X^2(1, N=364) = 24.76, p<0.001. The model explained 8.9% (Nagelkerke R^2) of the variance in behavioral loyalty and correctly classified 62.4% of cases. The odds ratio

was 0.860, which can be interpreted as meaning that with every year older a participant became, his or her likelihood of being behaviorally loyal when presented with personal-driven stimuli increased (because disloyalty was designated as 2 and loyalty was designated as 1). The results of the logistic regression for H_3 can be found in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Logistic Regression Results for Loyalty and Age

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
Step 1[a]	Age	-.150	.031	22.871	1	.000	.860	.809	.915
	Constant	1.199	.341	12.343	1	.000	3.318		

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Age.

The frequency tables for frequencies of behavioral loyalty in both the Personal and Player Loyalty conditions shown in Table 4.6 below showed vast differences between the frequencies of behavioral loyalty for the two groups. Only 33.7% of the portion of the sample given the Player Loyalty condition remained behaviorally loyal to their favorite team in their merchandise choice, whereas 80.8% of the portion of the sample given the Personal Loyalty condition remained behaviorally loyal to their favorite team in their merchandise choice. The results of the chi-square test on the two loyalty conditions showed that the percentage of participants who were behaviorally loyal did differ by loyalty condition, $X^2(4, N=364) = 82.93$, $p<0.001$. With the knowledge that the frequency of behavioral loyalty in the Personal Loyalty condition was greater than in the Player Loyalty condition, the results show support for H_4. The results of this chi-square test are shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.6 Frequency Table for Player Loyalty and Personal Loyalty

Loyalty Group			Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Player Loyalty Group	Valid	Loyal	56	33.7	33.7	33.7
		Not Loyal	110	66.3	66.3	100.0
		Total	166	100.0	100.0	
Personal Loyalty Group	Valid	Loyal	160	80.8	80.8	80.8
		Not Loyal	38	19.2	19.2	100.0
		Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Table 4.7 Chi-Square of the Personal and Player Loyalty Conditions

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	82.929[a]	1	.000
Continuity Correction[b]	80.989	1	.000
Likelihood Ratio	85.956	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	82.701	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	364		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 67.49.
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Discussion

The results of this study highlight many important theoretical and practical implications for researchers and practitioners alike. The theoretical implications of this study will be presented first, and the practical implications will be discussed subsequently.

Theoretical Implications

H_1, H_2, and H_3 provide us with numerous implications that improve our understanding of how psychological commitment to a sport team functions over a number of years. With H_1, the researcher was able to show support for the idea that identification

capabilities (i.e., the ability of young children to form a psychological commitment to an entity) increase with age. This supports the findings and call for future research from James (2001), who found children as young as 5 were able to form a psychological connection but did not necessarily possess the cognitive capabilities to form complex connections at that young an age. The results of H_1 highlight the abilities, and lack thereof, of young fans to form this psychological connection.

While the results of our H_1 analysis expand our understanding of the development and progress of one's psychological connection to a sport team throughout childhood and adolescence, there is still much we can learn theoretically about this process. Future research regarding team identification should attempt to understand if there is a period of time during childhood or adolescence where forming an initial connection, or maybe experiencing an increase in centrality, can have a greater positive effect on the child's fandom than other periods. While these results show identification strengthens as children increase in age and therefore the timing of indoctrination or exposure to the team is irrelevant to the strength of identification, there may still be specific instances or experiences that affect one's ability to identify strongly with a team (Reifurth et al., 2018). This study was not able to determine the exact moment or the first contact a child had with a sport team and instead relied on memories and reported length of fandom. Understanding more about how and when this relationship started may allow future researchers to discover that certain types of contact from or with the sport team or its brand extensions (e.g., meeting the mascot, watching the games on television at home, or receiving memorabilia as a gift) have different effects on the frequency of a child forming a connection to the team or the strength of that connection.

The lack of support for H_2 was surprising and shows a lack of support for much of the work in the field of team loyalty and identification that has assumed for decades that identification tends to form earlier than loyalty (Funk & James, 2001; 2006; Heere & Dickson, 2008; Heere, Walker et al., 2011). The results from this study show that there is no significant difference in age between participants who were identified and those who exhibited behavioral loyalty in the choice experiment, and in some cases, participants were behaviorally loyal when they did not exhibit identification at all. Much of the prior work on identity or loyalty has assumed the order of manifestation, but that predicted order was not replicated in this study. This calls for future studies to specifically test the timing of the exhibition of identification and loyalty to see if the assumptions of previous researchers or the results of this study are replicated. If the results of this study are replicable, much of our understanding of loyalty formation in the sport management field may need to be reexamined. Specifically, the work of Funk and James (2001; 2006) regarding their Psychological Continuum Model, one of the most well-renowned studies on psychological connection and its development over time, should be revisited due to the separation of identification and allegiance (i.e., loyalty) by multiple developmental steps. What is important to note about the results of H_2 is not just that the hypothesis that identity manifests at an earlier age than loyalty was not supported, but also the (insignificant, but still) unexpected result of behavioral loyalty developing at a younger average age than identity. This not only shows a lack of support for previous assumptions in loyalty research that loyalty manifests after identification with a team has already been established, it also shows it may be possible these two concepts are not as reliant on one another as researchers once thought. If loyalty can manifest itself before

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identity in some cases, it is likely one does not need to exhibit identification to a team in order to be behaviorally loyal. This calls for both a closer examination of the definitions of identification and loyalty, but also a deeper look into the components that cause one to become loyal and engage in loyal behaviors.

There is a possibility that the way in which the researcher classified identification and non-identification affected the results here. Utilizing "we" is a symbol of a closer connection than when one utilizes "they" (Cialidini et al., 1976). In this study, individuals who used "we" in one of two oral survey questions were categorized as just as identified as those who used "we" in both oral survey questions. It is possible that these participants should have been categorized separately to show the differences in age of the participants who gave different responses. If the use of "we" does signify a closer feeling than when using "they", using "we" twice instead of once may symbolize a closer connection or identification to a team. Had the researcher classified the use of "we" into three distinct groups with one group including participants who used "we" for one of the two questions, one group including participants who used "we" for both of the questions, and one group including participants who did not use "we" for either of the two questions, there may have been a greater distinction between ages and behavioral loyalty frequencies between these groups. A longitudinal experimental approach where a researcher introduces children to a sport team for the first time at various ages and then following and testing the progression of their identification and their behavioral loyalty over time may shed much-needed light on this process and the differences in formation of identification and loyalty over time.

The results relating to H$_3$ continued James' (2001) work with children and the study of their abilities to exhibit behavioral loyalty to sport teams but also extended his work by utilizing a methodology that allowed for more depth of analysis and a more detailed look at actual behaviors and behavioral loyalty. While James (2001) was able to discuss with his child participants what they might do given a situation that may call for less loyalty, their answers were behavioral intentions, not actual behaviors. The current study utilized behavioral responses to determine loyalty, making our examination of this concept much more accurate. This study also showed that 5-year-olds do possess the ability to behave loyally toward a sport team, which contradicts the work of James (2001) who believed children that young did not possess the cognitive abilities to that lead to behavioral loyalty. While it was less likely a 5-year-old would exhibit behavioral loyalty, the fact some 5-year-olds were able to make an educated choice and remain behaviorally loyal to their team shows behavioral loyalty is not necessarily tied to cognitive developmental stages and can occur independently from advanced cognitive development.

From a theoretical perspective, finding in H$_4$ that Player Loyalty frequencies were significantly lower than Personal Loyalty frequencies supported previous research in the field of loyalty that shows the object to which one is loyal may change the behavioral patterns toward related properties (Delia, 2017; James, 2001; Wear, Heere, Clopton, 2016). While Delia (2017) focused on sponsorships and the ability for fans of a team to reflect positively on a team sponsor, her work highlighted, similarly to James (2001), that people act differently to the same situation depending on the way in which it is presented and when. In this study, the researcher extends this literature to show that this is also the

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case with merchandise choices when presented with player or personal information. This study compared player-driven behaviors to ego-driven behaviors and found that the playing to the ego results in greater desired behavioral loyalty toward a (bad) sport team. Future researchers should look to compare a player-driven behavioral choice with other motivational drivers or behaviors to test which motivational factors influence behaviors most significantly.

From a theoretical perspective, the support for H_4 calls for future loyalty researchers to consider the effects of the talent level of the players on the teams being studied as well as their star power. This study did not show that behavioral loyalty was impossible to obtain when presented with player-driven behavioral outcomes, even at extremely young ages. This aspect of the formation of loyalty capabilities must be investigated further to understand the extent of young fans' abilities, particularly at the outset of their connection to teams. Previous research has shown that different groups of fans are more likely to attach to players than others (Li, Dittmore, & Scott, 2017), which highlights a need to study how behavioral loyalty differs between these groups. It is likely that, due to the results of H_4, fans in locations such as China will have an easier time switching their commitment to a sport team than fans in America as Chinese fans tend to attach to and value star players more so than their American counterparts. This would take the findings of this study, which show players can affect one's ability to remain behaviorally loyal to a team and will further this line of questioning to allow us to better understand the implications of player loyalty on team loyalty.

Practical Implications

There are a number of significant practical implications to this study. First, H_2's lack of significance may help practitioners working with young fans because the results of this study provide evidence that children as young as 5 possess the capabilities to make informed purchase decisions due to their prior connection with a team or player and exhibit behavioral loyalty to an unsuccessful team. This informs practitioners by helping them understand even their youngest fans can exhibit behavioral loyalty even when they do not show signs of identification in certain contexts.

Practitioners can look to encourage specific behaviors without focusing on the closeness the consumer feels to the product or brand. While the closeness fans feel to the team is still an important component of overall allegiance and loyalty (Funk & James, 2001; 2006), it is unclear from this research if sport practitioners need to be concerned over their consumers' feelings toward their team in the process of obtaining loyal and desired behaviors toward that team. While identification and that sense of connection to the team may become more important as one's exposure to the team increases, this seems to have less of an effect on loyal behaviors for young fans than research previously assumed.

Practitioners can also use the findings to make more informed decisions about the resources used and effort given to trying to gain the loyalty of young fans. Knowing that 5-year-olds have the ability to show behavioral loyalty toward a team but may not yet be set in the longevity of their connection can help practitioners decide whether targeting young fans is in their best interest. While 5-year-olds have not decided the team to whom they will be loyal forever (as opposed to this year), it is also understood they lack certain

cognitive abilities to form complex reasoning behind their choices and are more easily convinced to change their minds (Alvarez et al., 2001; James, 2001). Targeting older children may remove the concerns over the child's ability to remain psychologically connected and loyal, but it is also much more likely for older children to have already formed that connection with a different team.

Since 18-year-olds have a greater likelihood of behavioral loyalty, a marketing campaign targeting this age group would likely result in greater merchandise sales than targeting a 5-year-old. However, for teams looking to capture young fans' loyalty, it is important to target the 5-year-old market because they can exhibit behavioral loyalty to the team, and it is best to encourage their loyal behaviors in the direction of one team. For example, if the Chicago Bulls create a campaign reaching out to elementary schools and high schools (i.e., reaching young children who may have fewer cognitive capabilities to form lasting loyal connections to teams than their older counterparts), it is likely they will have fewer elementary-school-aged children who exhibit loyal behaviors, but they will do so for many more years than many high-school-ached children who either are still not loyal at their age, who developed a loyalty to the Bulls at an older age than the elementary-school-aged children, or who developed their loyalties already but to the Cleveland Cavaliers.

Future research can focus on determining the most effective strategies for enticing these young fans to become loyal to a team, but the results of this study provide enough evidence for practitioners to at least know these age groups are viable sources of (potential) merchandise sales. Depending on the ultimate desires and goals of the

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organization, these findings can help the team understand their young fans better and will allow them to make more informed business decisions regarding this age group.

The results of H_4 provide practitioners with many implications that can affect their decisions regarding young fans and the ways in which leagues markets their overall teams. First, it should be noted that this study focused on the NBA, which has a reputation for highlighting individual players and allowing these players to be highlighted individually as opposed to highlighting the overall team more so than other professional leagues. What was found is that this emphasis on individual players significantly lowers children's abilities (or desires) to remain behaviorally loyal to an overall team. While children may still be psychologically committed to a favorite team, their merchandise decisions and financial support tend to follow players instead of franchises. It is also important to note that merchandise decisions in this study did not just follow any players but focused on the star players on successful teams (e.g., Kyrie Irving on the Boston Celtics) and unsuccessful teams (e.g., Lebron James on the Los Angeles Lakers), which only highlights the influence of individual NBA player brands and their relative power over NBA fans.

This may worry practitioners who value merchandise sales and financial loyalty of their fan bases because when a star player leaves a team (e.g., Lebron James leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Los Angeles Lakers before the 2018-2019 NBA season) or a team has no star players (e.g., the Chicago Bulls during the 2018-2019 season), the team that lost a star player or did not have a star player is less likely to be able to rely on player-focused merchandise purchases from young fans. Teams that find themselves in this situation should highlight customizable merchandise options to encourage team

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merchandise instead of player merchandise purchases while the team works to rebuild and garner better talent. Instead of marketing players without strong connections to the broader fan base and lacking star power, teams should focus on allowing the child to see themselves as part of the team through customizing team items to themselves and their individual desires. This will empower the child while also highlighting both the desired feeling of closeness to the team practitioners wish of their fans and the desired outcome of a merchandise or team sale. This advice can go beyond customizable merchandise to also include customizable experiences for young fans. Personalized time with up-and-coming players currently lacking star power but who the team feels will be an asset long-term may also enhance fans' feelings of closeness with their favorite teams and provide more reasoning through the personal player relationship to be disloyal or switch their loyalties later on.

An interesting caveat is that the movement of star players spurs increased merchandise sales for the teams that acquire the star players. In this study, many participants in the Player Loyalty condition requested jerseys of star players like Kyrie Irving who moved from the Cleveland Cavaliers to the Boston Celtics before the 2017-2018 NBA season, Kawhi Leonard who moved from the San Antonio Spurs to the Toronto Raptors before the 2018-2019 NBA season, and Lebron James who moved from the Cleveland Cavaliers to the Los Angeles Lakers before the 2018-2019 NBA season. These teams likely saw a boost in their merchandise sales. However, from a league perspective, it is unclear whether this increase makes up for the lost revenue from the teams that no longer have those players. Because the NBA shares revenue with all teams, the economic impact of a player moving would need to be studied from an overall league

perspective in order to understand if the constant movement of players (and their brands) is negatively impacting sales and revenue. Future research should investigate the economic impact of losing a star player versus gaining a star player to see if the net results are positive or negative for the league overall. This can inform the results of this study by providing data on how player loyalty and the increased movement and trading of major talent in leagues like the NBA affects the organizations' overall financial health.

Overall, the results of this study extend the research on loyalty as well as child fans and their abilities to be behaviorally loyal and committed to a sport brand. This study also highlights the significant effect players (at least in the NBA) can have on this behavioral loyalty. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will allow future researchers to begin focusing on child fans as an important market and a significant source of information on both the formation, and continuance, of a relationship between an individual and sport brand.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

There are very few studies to date focusing on child sports fans. James' (2001) study on the cognitive abilities of children to form attachments to sport brands is one of the only attempts to understand the complex nature of the development of psychological connections to brands in a sport setting. The three studies in this dissertation represent the expansion of knowledge on the initial formation, and continued development of the psychological connection made by children to sport through spectatorship. The studies look at some of the most common forms of socialization into sport fandom, the effects of team branding on child perceptions of a sports brand, and the abilities of young fans to show commitment to a sports brand given alternative brand options.

While the contributions of Study 1 were discussed in the completed manuscript contained in Chapter Two, it is important to note how those contributions affect the work of Study 2 and Study 3, respectively. The effects of the sport setting and group members on socialization into fandom lead to a better overall understanding of the ways in which children initially base their connections to sports teams. Knowing, for example, that attendance at sporting events can socialize a child into fandom through acceptance from the surrounding community as well as through an accepted setting in which to practice and express their fandom makes it possible to then focus on what parts of that experience are internalized by the child fan and associated with the sports brand itself (i.e., the focus of Study 2). Understanding that child fans are more often focused on learning and

developing their fandom at younger ages than at older ages of adolescence also allows us to then test their abilities over this age span for varying levels of behavioral loyalty (i.e., the focus of Study 3).

Study 2 contributes to the overall body of literature on child fans by showing support for the inability of young fans to make brand associations earlier than age 7. Without these brand associations, the connection to the sport property is potentially weaker than it would be had brand associations been made (Aaker, 1991; Jacoby et al., 1971). At the very least, the lack of brand associations makes the relationship young fans have to the sports property distinct from the relationship older fans have to the same sports property.

Study 2 also played a significant role in the development of Study 3. The conceptual contributions from Study 2 involving the support for limited formation of brand imagery before the age of 7 helps the researcher postulate loyalty will not be significant in children younger than this age. If a child is unable to comprehend the brand or recall the brand when prompted, it is likely the psychological connection is not very strong and is therefore vulnerable to alternatives. The knowledge that children developed different branded imagery in Study 2 than what was found to be influential to their game-day socialization in Study 1 also informed Study 3 in the sense that the researcher was conscious of the difference between expressed behaviors and internalized importance and meaning, highlighting the emphasis and need for more research on loyal behaviors to add to the research that has currently focused mainly on attitudinal loyalty.

Study 3 highlighted this difference between actual behaviors and attitudes and expanded the research on behavioral loyalty in a sport team context to show how actual

behaviors can be expressed by children as young as 5. Future research, however, should look to examine the longitudinal aspects of these young children's loyal behaviors to see if the loyal behaviors witnessed are maintained over a longer period of time.

The contributions of each of these pieces to the overall literature on child sports fans will also lead to many more future projects centered around the development of psychological connections of young fans to sports properties. Some such projects include the further study of how different factors, such as varying socialization agents (i.e., mothers, fathers, friends, coaches) each affect frequencies of behavioral loyalty towards a team and its brand, longitudinal work focusing on sport team loyalty development throughout childhood, and connections (or lack thereof) between team identity scores and behavioral loyalty. It is the goal of the researcher to attempt to address many of these future research streams in her future work and to continue emphasizing the importance to both research and practitioners of understanding child sports fans.

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APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

STUDY 2 MESSAGE SENT TO TEACHERS

Thank you for participating in the [Team] Drawing Contest! In order to be eligible for the contest, each student must draw an image of what comes to mind when they think about the [Team]. We are looking for the drawing to fill the entire space and to represent what the student thinks of when he/she thinks of the [Team]. If their drawings have nothing to do with the baseball team, that's okay! We are just looking for great drawings that show creativity, care, and what they see when they hear "[Minor League Team Name]". Please do not allow students to work with friends or family on their drawings, as we want the design and ideas to be only from the students.

We have provided a prompt you may read to the students to get them started on their drawings:

"Draw what comes to mind when you think of the [Team]."

Each entry should be drawn on one side of standard printing paper. On the back of the drawing we require the student's name, age, school, and grade in order to contact the student if the drawing wins. We will also require answers to two questions written underneath this information:
1. Who are the [Team Name]?
2. Have you been to a [Team] game?
These questions should be asked AFTER the student has finished the drawing. We recommend asking the students right before they turn their drawings in. If the students are unable to write in the answer themselves, please make sure to write it for them so their drawings can be included in the contest!
NOTE: If you have any notes on whether the child's answers may not be truthful or if they may have received input from others, please make a note on the back of the drawing.

Below is an example of all of the information to be included on the back of each drawing:
Kelly Smith, Age 8, Brockman Elementary, 2nd grade
1. I don't know
2. No
*May have asked her parents who the [Team] were when she took her drawing home

If you have any questions, please contact [the researchers].

APPENDIX C

STUDY 3 PILOT STUDY QUESTIONS (PLAYER CONDITION)

Hello! My name is Katie, and I am trying to learn about your favorite NBA team. If you agree to be in my study, I am going to ask you some questions about your favorite team. There are no right or wrong answers. You can ask questions at any time, and you can ask us to stop if you decide you do not want to answer more questions. In return for answering all our questions, you will be entered to win an NBA jersey of your choice. May I ask you some questions?

Where are you from?

Do you play any sports?

What sports do you play?

Do you like the NBA?

What is your favorite NBA team?

Why do you like that team?

What do you think about the team this year?

How well did your team do last game?

How long have you been a fan of your team?

How old are you?

Gender [observed by researcher]

How do you normally stay updated with what's going on in the NBA? [given options with pictures: television, social media, internet/websites, attending games, other (with write-in section)]

[Depending on what was mentioned/selected in the previous question, some or all of the following questions will be asked]

How often do you watch your team on television?

How often do you watch NBA games on television when your team isn't playing?

Which team's games do you watch on television most often?

How often do you use social media apps or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. to follow the your team or your team's players?

How often do you use social media apps or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. to follow other NBA teams or players?

What teams do you keep up with most often using social media apps or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.?

What players do you keep up with most often using social media apps or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.?

How often do you use these other ways (identified in the write-in section) to follow your team?

How often do you use these other ways (identified in the write-in section) to follow teams other than your team?

How often do you use websites like ESPN, Bleacher Report, Hoops Hype, etc. to follow your team?

How often do you use websites like ESPN, Bleacher Report Hoops Hype, etc. to follow other NBA teams?

What teams do you keep up with most often using websites like ESPN, Bleacher Report, Hoops Hype, etc.?

What players do you keep up with most often using websites like ESPN, Bleacher Report, Hoops Hype, etc.?

How often do you attend your team's games?

How often do you attend other NBA games?

Which team's games do you attend most often?

How many games have you been to (where your favorite team was playing)?

Thank you for answering all of my questions. Now you will be entered into a contest where the winner will receive an NBA player's jersey from any team. If you could have ANY player's jersey, whose jersey would you want?

What team does he play for?

Atlanta Hawks

Boston Celtics

Brooklyn Nets

Charlotte Hornets

Chicago Bulls

Cleveland Cavaliers

Dallas Mavericks

Denver Nuggets

Detroit Pistons

Golden State Warriors

Houston Rockets

Indiana Pacers

LA Clippers

Los Angeles Lakers

Memphis Grizzlies

Miami Heat

Milwaukee Bucks

Minnesota Timberwolves

New Orleans Pelicans

New York Knicks

Oklahoma City Thunder

Orlando Magic

Philadelphia 76ers

Phoenix Suns

Portland Trail Blazers

Sacramento Kings

San Antonio Spurs

Toronto Raptors

Utah Jazz

Washington Wizards

Why did you pick that jersey?

What size do you want your jersey?

        Youth S

        Youth M

        Youth L

        Youth XL

        Adult S

        Adult M

        Adult L

        Adult XL

        Adult XXL

        Adult XXXL

APPENDIX D

STUDY 3 LETTER TO PARENTS

Your child's class has been chosen to participate in a research study focusing on sports team loyalty and children's preferences for certain sports teams. Children who participate in, and complete, this study will be entered into a drawing for a free NBA team jersey of their choice. No identifying information will be collected in this study besides the personalized name to be put on the jersey should your child win.

Before your child is asked if he/she wishes to participate, we want to give you the opportunity to remove your child from participation. Please note that, while this study is used solely to learn more about the relationship your child already has to their favorite sport team, the data from this study may be used by others to manipulate a child's behavior in a commercial setting. If you wish to allow your child to participate in the study, no further action is required. If you wish to remove your child from this study along with any related data, you must inform the researcher of your desire to do so within one week of your child's participation by e-mail at reifurth@email.sc.edu.

In the email, please include your son or daughter's identification code, which your child's teacher has to keep your child's confidentiality in check. Please do not include your child's name in the email to maintain that confidentiality. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Katherine Reifurth

Instructor, Doctoral Candidate

University of South Carolina

APPENDIX E

STUDY 3 PARENT STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE (PLAYER CONDITION)

Gender Male Female

Where are you from? _____

Do you play any sports? Yes No

What sports do you play? _____

What is your favorite NBA team? _____

Why do you like that team? _____
_____

How do you think your team will do this season and why do you think that?
_____
_____

How many years have you been a fan of your favorite NBA team? _____

How old are you? _____

How do you normally keep up with what's going on in the NBA?
Television

How often do you watch your team's games on television?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
How often do you watch other teams' games on television?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
What team's games do you watch on television the most?					

Social Media

How often do you use social media to keep up with your team?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
How often do you use social media to keep up with other teams?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
What teams and players do you keep up with most often using social media apps or sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.?					

Internet/Websites

How often do you use the internet to keep up with your team?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
How often do you use the internet to keep up with other teams?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
What teams and players do you keep up with most using the internet?					

Attending Games

How often do you attend your team's games?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
How often do you attend other teams' games?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
What teams games do you attend most often?					

Other:_____

How often do you use these other methods to keep up with your team?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
How often do you use these other methods to keep up with other teams?	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	A good amount	Always
What teams (and/or players) do you keep up with most using these other ways?					

Thank you for answering all of the survey questions. Now you will be entered into a contest where the winner will receive a current NBA player's jersey of your choice delivered to your [teacher/coach]. If you could have ANY current player's jersey, whose jersey would you want? _____

Why that player's jersey? _____
_____

What size jersey would you like if you win?

> Youth S
>
> Youth M
>
> Youth L
>
> Youth XL
>
> Adult S
>
> Adult M
>
> Adult L
>
> Adult XL
>
> Adult XXL
>
> Adult XX