Many scholars have concluded that mid-level professional sports franchises possess strong growth potential but struggle to achieve the brand reputation and spectator support that is normally associated with a top-level franchise in the NBA or NFL (Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). The need for Arena mid-level franchises to establish fan identification in their core market is crucial for the team’s long-term success in selling season tickets (Fink, 2002; Jones, 1997; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann & Dolan, 1994; Wann & Schrader, 1997). The purpose of this research is to determine the methods used by the Los Angeles KISS arena football team to achieve fan identification through the brand extension of the legendary KISS rock band in order to ensure commercial viability in the coming years. This paper is an investigative case study of the LA KISS, an Arena Football League expansion franchise that joined the league in 2014 (AFL, 2014).

While factors such as geographic location and family influence affect fan identification with established sports teams, there has not been a great deal of research on fan development of a newly established team competing in a saturated market (Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). Instead of building a brand from scratch, the LA KISS co-owners Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley, members of the KISS rock n’ roll band, have been able to leverage their billion-dollar brand name and rebellious nature in the high-octane sport of Arena Football (Moore, 2013). The KISS Band merchandise sales have reached $500 million in the last 15 years while they have sold over 100 million records in that time frame (Canosa, 2015). With the combination of the valuable brand name located in the Los Angeles market, which currently does not have an NFL team, Simmons and Stanley expect the KISS to become the flagship team in the AFL, finally giving arena football credibility on the national sports scene (Moore, 2013).

This case study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that were geared toward evaluating fan identification and brand value (Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). Interviews were conducted with the top-ranking members of the KISS organization. Apart from organizational information, previous data from media publications and accredited business journals were used to supplement the content from the interviews. The AMC reality television show 4th and Loud provided an in-depth look of the football team practices and meetings between the team President and owners. The program served as a primary source for influential quotations from Stanley and Simmons, as well as the head coach and players who commented on the inaugural season. Quantitative data was collected as it pertained to league attendance figures, team revenue, target market demographics, player salaries under the single-entity model, and fixed expenses. After evaluating these sources, the case was constructed around five major sports management themes including: market pioneering, entertainment value related to fan engagement, brand extension/activation, business sustainability, and the importance of collective bargaining in the AFL’s survival. The different perspectives on creating brand value were reflected in previous research conducted on old school (OS) versus new school (NS) fans and their preference when it came to attending AFL games (Aiken, Campbell, & Sukhdial, 2010).

The LA KISS are attempting to target new school consumers that are closely associated with the 18-24 year old demographic that values in-game entertainment in sporting events (Aiken, Campbell, & Sukhdial, 2010). By utilizing flashy gimmicks such as pyrotechnic shows and cage dancers, all synonymous with a trademark KISS rock concert, the team was able to lead the AFL in total attendance for the 2014 season while posting a 3-15 record. By attracting old-school football fans that supported the band and appealing to new-school consumers, the LA KISS took full advantage of the Honeymoon effect that is typically associated with expansion franchises thriving in their first year (Foley & Smith, 2013). The Honeymoon effect occurs when a new stadium is built or a team is operating in an untapped market, such as the LA KISS in a football-starved Los Angeles market, and demand for tickets automatically rises out of initial excitement of the new franchise (Foley & Smith, 2014). In the following years, team attendance is expected to decrease over 10% in the AFL after the Honeymoon period is over (Foley & Smith, 2014).
This raises the valid question of sustainability and whether the success of the KISS could be attributed to the Honeymoon effect instead of their reliance on rock n' roll entertainment fused with football.

Specific studies focused on the fan identification themes in Arena Football found the two most important elements were association with players’ and/or coaches’ coupled with being a native or resident in the local area (Greenwood, Kanters, & Casper, 2006). The LA KISS management team certainly promoted their players and coaches with the AMC reality show, which gave the audience a chance to personally connect with the team personnel. On the other hand, it can be argued the radical promotion method took attention away from the players and prioritized in-game entertainment over skills on the field. This overshadowing of the professional football players’ efforts on the field with non-stop rock music and dance routines assumed a larger role over the course of the season in order to hide the team’s lackluster record. Simmons and Stanley have been able to establish a strong brand presence in the Los Angeles market, which is the second-largest media market in the country. This presents the LA KISS with the rare opportunity of marketing to a wide number of consumers who do not have a professional football team to watch in the local area (Moore, 2013). While the market is devoid of football, it possesses two prominent MLB franchises in the Angels and Dodgers, which directly compete with the LA KISS, as the seasons of the two sports overlap in the summer months (Foley & Smith, 2014). A few studies have found the presence of an MLB team to have a negative effect on ticket sales in the AFL, which does not bode well for the LA KISS, as they have to compete with two franchises in the same geographic region (Foley & Smith, 2014). This case-study closely examines the LA KISS ownership’s strategy of using brand extension as a means to ensure the long-term viability of the team and Arena Football as a whole.