An understanding of brand equity, the value a brand adds to a product can provide valuable information to sport managers, as price elasticity, competitive strength, and brand loyalty are consequences of brand equity (Keller, 2001). The degree to which fans identify with teams has been found to predict brand equity in major professional sport (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007) and major college sport (Watkins, 2014) contexts. However, much less is known about this relationship in minor league sports whose consumers are typically less identified and teams have less brand awareness. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to assess whether fan identification is predictive of brand equity in a Minor League Baseball (MiLB) context. A better understanding of these relationships should help minor league teams build fan identification and brand equity.

Tajfel (1981, p. 255) defined social identity as “that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership.” Fan identification is a sport specific term for social identification with a sport team, player, league, or domain. Underwood, Bond, & Baer (2001) proposed social identity predicts brand equity in the Social Identity-Brand Equity (SIBE) Model. In the SIBE model, they suggest venue, history, and group experience serve as antecedents to fan identification which then predicts brand equity. The model has subsequently been tested in major professional sport (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007) and major college sport (Watkins, 2014) contexts. However, it has not been tested in a MiLB context. Therefore, this study evaluates the relationship between social identity and brand equity in a MiLB context.

Four hypotheses were tested utilizing structural equation modeling (SEM). These hypotheses were:

H1: Community group experience has a direct positive influence on fan identification.

H2: Venue has a direct positive influence on fan identification.

H3: History has a direct positive influence on fan identification.

H4: Fan identification has a direct positive influence on brand equity.

A total of 458 questionnaires were collected from consumers living within 20 miles of minor league baseball teams. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) assumptions were met. In addition to CFA assumptions, Suhr (2006) indicated model fit indexes must be checked. Hu and Bentler (1998) suggested a minimum of two fit indexes should be utilized in order to assess the model fit. In this study, four fit indexes were utilized—TLI, CFI, NFI, and RMSEA—as well as chi-square analysis. The model’s TLI value of .944 and the .952 CFI value qualify as a good fit according to the Hu and Bentler (1998) standard of being close to .95 (Hu & Bentler, 1998). The .933 NFI value exceeded the standard of .9 (Bentler, 1992) established for model fit. The RMSEA value of .073 was below the standard of less than .8 described as an adequate (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004) or a fair (Browne & Cudeck, 1993) fit. The relative/normed chi-square for this model was an acceptable 3.197. These model fit index values indicated an acceptable fit.

The results indicated fan identification is predictive of brand equity in a MiLB context. The results of the structural equation model indicate fan identification (social identity) is a statistically significant predictor of brand equity with \( \beta = .87, p<.001 \). Venue and community group experience were statistically significant predictors of fan identification, with \( \beta = .84, p<.001 \) and \( \beta = .2, p<.01 \) respectively. History did not prove to be a statistically significant predictor of fan identification with \( \beta = -.11 \). Therefore, H1, H2, and H4 were confirmed. H3 was rejected. These findings align well with those from Watkins (2014) who found history was not a statistically significant predictor of fan identification (social identity) while confirming the other three hypotheses.
Therefore, fan identification, with venue and history serving as antecedents in this study, is a predictor of brand equity. This result is in line with the findings of Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014). This means people with high fan identification are likely to assign a high level of brand equity to the team. According to Keller (2001), brand equity generates brand loyalty, competitive strength, and price elasticity among other benefits. Therefore, a highly identified fan is more likely to remain loyal to the team and accept more flexible pricing.

The team would do better to maximize loyal attendance and revenue from its consumers that demonstrate high identification. By providing these fans a great venue and emphasizing the community, the team is more likely to see these more highly identified consumers return to the ballpark to spend more money which will increase team revenue. Ideally, keeping these fans happy and loyal will lead to word of mouth benefits that help to grow interest in the team—including the team’s social image which was tested in the next research question.

Community group experience is a statistically significant antecedent to MiLB fan identification. This finding is consistent with the SIBE studies of Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014). This means the role a MiLB team plays in connecting the community is important to consumers choosing to identify as fans. MiLB teams should also emphasize their role in community service projects, parades, and other community events. They should also emphasize the entertainment they provide the community at prices that are family friendly.

MiLB venue is a statistically significant antecedent to MiLB fan identification. This finding aligns with the SIBE study results from Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014). This indicates that when MiLB fans connect with the MiLB venue, then they will also feel identified with the team. Therefore, the team venue plays an important role in generating the connection between the MiLB and the fans. MiLB teams should invest in their venues. Before building new venues, they should ensure the venue will match well with fan interests by conducting surveys with current customers (if applicable) as well as the community at large (with the intention of growing the fan base). In addition, they should ensure existing facilities fit the needs and expectations of current and potential customers. Again, surveys will provide valuable insights into how the venue is perceived, which aspects are valued, and what additions or changes may enhance the venue’s ability to grow fan identification.

Major League Baseball fans often value the history of baseball—the sport domain. However, history does not appear to be a statistically significant antecedent to fan identification in a MiLB context. Watkins (2014) had a similar finding. This is based on an assessment of MiLB history rather than an assessment of the importance of the history of the domain (baseball). The findings do not suggest history is unimportant to baseball. MiLB fans have been found to have an interest in the roots of baseball (Gifis & Sommers, 2006; Gitter & Rhoads, 2010). However, their interest in the history of baseball—the domain—does not necessitate an interest in history tied to MiLB—a specific level of baseball. Therefore, MiLB teams should not emphasize their own history if the end goal is stronger brand equity.