Fans for Life: A Qualitative Analysis of Child Consumer Perceptions of a New Sport Brand

Katherine Reifurth, University of South Carolina
Henry Wear, Deakin University
Bob Heere (Advisor), University of South Carolina

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Professional sport teams are known to be history-laden organizations with intensely loyal fan bases. These organizations are regularly recognized as being some of the most valuable in the industry, and have strong brands with wide exposure and awareness (Heere, Walker, Yoshida, Ko, Jordan, & James, 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 home have existing allegiances to other teams. Within Minor League Baseball in particular, this change is ever present, with many teams changing their Major League Baseball affiliations every four years. 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 are still deciding on which team to support. Yet, the process of how they become consumers, in particular of new sport teams to which their own family and peers have no strong loyalties towards is unclear. Thus the purpose of the study is to extend the literature in this area, and examine brand perceptions of new sport teams among child consumers.

New sport organizations have received some attention in the sport management literature (Grant, et al., 2011; Katz & Heere, 2013) with the focus of these studies being on both brand perspectives of sport managers, as well as brand community formation of new fans respectively. However, very little is known about the way child consumers perceive a new sport over the course of its first season. With new teams, it is easy to find individuals in a community who are still unaware of the team or who have little interaction with the brand community. 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 community. 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”. Thus we propose the following research question: what brand associations resonate among child consumers and do these associations differ based on experience with the brand?

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 in the case of this study qualitative drawing will be used to investigate child consumers’ ability to recall their brand perceptions of and experience with the minor league baseball team. Schools from the immediate area surrounding the team will be asked to participate in the drawing contest associated with the local minor league baseball team where winners will receive prizes ranging from memorabilia to public recognition at future minor league games. Children will be given sheets of paper with directions that encourage them to create a drawing that represents the baseball team. These completed drawings will then be collected by the team and delivered to the researchers for analysis. Collection will be done before the start of the new baseball season in order to avoid influence of the team’s increased presence in the surrounding community.

These drawings will then be coded for emergent themes utilizing the coding framework presented by Barlow, Jolley, and Hallam (2011), and then coded again using brand associations themes from the sport management literature
(Kunkel, Doyle, & Funk, 2014; Ross, 2006). The use of qualitative data analysis could provide insight into the deep and meaningful information concerning what aspects of a team’s brand are most meaningful to child consumers.