



**Defining Football: Brand Confusion or a Matter of Semantics?
An Exploratory Study**

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Abstract

The development of professional sport leagues, including football, also referred to as 'soccer' in some environments and in the media, is an occurring phenomenon in different nations, where interest and consumption of sport appear to be growing. Football's establishment in the form of a professional league may however pose a dilemma to professional club marketers in the form of misunderstandings or confusion among consumers, particularly where there are more professional sports that have been traditionally known as "football". This study investigates both the level of association with and consumption of professional football among residents in a large Australian city. An online questionnaire gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from 695 respondents. The findings illustrate the potential for 'brand confusion' when new leagues and teams enter the domestic and international sport marketplace. For instance, almost 30% of respondents associated football with at least one more sport, with no one sport positioning its form of football as exclusive and different from the others. The overall findings underline the need for sport marketers to increase their educational efforts to differentiate their product, their brand, and ultimately their form of football among professional sport consumers.

Keywords: football; professional football league; brand confusion; consumers; Australia

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Introduction

The environment surrounding the sport of football has experienced major changes in Australia in recent years. A professional league, the Australian League or 'A-League' was established in the 2005-2006 season (A-League 2011; McDonald, Karg and Lock 2010); in the 2010-2011 season, 10 Australian and one New Zealand franchises were part of this league. This new development suggests opportunities for professional football organizations, and an alternative form of entertainment for many professional sport *consumers*. However, with so many existing professional sport leagues, some of which have failed in the past (McDonald et al. 2010), it remains to be seen whether and to what extent the A-League will financially prosper and become established in such competitive environment.

A number of studies that explore cultural aspects as well as attendance and game experience have been conducted in Australian football. For example, Lock, Taylor and Darcy (2008) and Mosley (1995) discuss the evolution of "soccer" or "football" in Australia throughout different generations, and earlier its links with social capital, particularly as being a tool of integration among minority group. McDonald and Shaw (2005) examine members of Australian Football League clubs. These authors conclude that the most important elements in influencing respondents' future club membership and satisfaction are intangible aspects such as feelings of personal involvement and connection with their chosen club, and tangible aspects in the form of ticketing arrangements, include seating provided.

In spite of these efforts, it is argued that overall there is a limited understanding of fans (Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw 1999, p. 439). Few studies, for instance have researched levels of football *consumption* among fans and other professional sport groups of followers in a relatively 'new' football league as is the case of the A-League competition. McDonald et al. (2010) were among the few who researched this area; they found that football fans shared their allegiance and passion with other, international football teams. Moreover, McDonald et al.'s (2010) finding demonstrates that many fans in Australia

follow international teams and leagues as an alternative way to progressively 'convert' to domestic teams while the new league is becoming established.

McDonald et al. (2010) further addressed the strategies that new leagues or teams can initiate in order to better manage the interest in international teams. The authors also cited the resultant need to work towards fulfilling the growing expectations among these new fans. The significance of this leveraging process is also associated with the degree and speed at which consumers become identified with the team and or league. Indeed, in spite of their relatively recent history, new professional leagues and teams can develop brand awareness and in turn count on fans' psychological and financial involvement relatively quickly (Lock et al. 2009).

Fewer studies have investigated those individuals that may not necessarily have a strong allegiance for a particular football club or a professional league, and yet could be potential consumers or influence other sport enthusiasts to become consumers. To address some of these existing knowledge gaps, this study investigates the extent to which groups that are not clearly identified with a team perceive and associate themselves with professional football. The study was conducted in a large Australian city with an existing professional football franchise. Specifically, the following research questions were investigated:

What specific sport name comes to mind when consumers hear the word "football"?

Similarly: What specific sport name comes to mind when consumers read the word "football"?

Further: What images come to their mind when they think of the words professional football?

As is discussed in the next section, four sports in Australia carry the name "football". Several 'identities' of the word football as opposed to the recognition of one main sport could lead to 'brand confusion' or even misunderstanding of a sport's brand among some consumer groups. The study therefore seeks to establish whether consumers of a new professional "football" league identify or recognize football as "soccer", or whether they refer to other sports equally named "football" when they think of, read, or hear the word "football". In doing so, the study examines participants' level of

association with the word “football”, and therefore with the new Australian professional football league.

Thus, eliciting responses and information that address these questions is central to the context of the study, providing sport marketers and professional sport organizations with valuable information concerning sport consumer interpretations and understandings of sport brands.

Further, a greater knowledge and understanding of the market place can assist sport organizations with the development of a spectator and fan base through the planning and implementation of branding, marketing, and promotions strategies. Fundamental to the development of new leagues and teams is the organization's ability to generate awareness in the sport, the league, and subsequently the team, clearly distinguishing the “football” brand from other competing football brands. In addition, understanding the images that professional football evokes may provide useful insights to marketers and sport organizations about the expectations, needs and wants that consumers or potential consumers may have.

Review of Related Literature: Football: The ‘Undefined’ Sport?

The professional sports environment has grown into an industry of notable proportions, where many opportunities are available for sport marketers to benefit from (Kaynak, Salman and Tatoglu 2008, p. 336). These opportunities also arise through the multi-billion broadcasting sector (Gelles and Edgecliffe-Johnston 2011). This sector has evolved as regardless of geographic location, nowadays fans have unprecedented access to their favorite players and teams (Kerr and Gladden 2008). At the same time, traditional boundaries have been eroded away with the development of a global sport marketplace. Alone in the United States (US), professional and college sports generate large revenues from different sources, including television rights negotiations (Kessler 2004) and hosting games (Watkins 2010). Recent news (Ortiz 2011) also illustrates that demographic changes in the US are facilitating the slow but continuous rise in popularity of professional sports such as Major League Soccer or MLS that traditionally have lived in the shadows of American football, baseball, basketball, and ice hockey.

Interestingly, in the US the term “football” has typically been associated with the National Football League (NFL), whereas the word “soccer” has been used for many decades to identify what football is referred to elsewhere. Indeed, soccer (from here onwards called “football”) is referred to as football in Europe, South America and other

parts of the world. Football is the most popular spectator sport worldwide (Vincent and Glamser 2006), as well as a major revenue earner. For instance, at Champions League and World Cup level, generating billion-dollar revenues (FIFA 2010), including millions of dollars in television (Vella 2011; Yang and Sonmez 2005) and sponsorship deals (Reuters 2008).

Similar to the US, in Australia and New Zealand “football” is also the name of not one but four different sport leagues, most notably Rugby Union in the case of New Zealand, or National Rugby League (NRL) and Australian Rules football in Australia, the sport that adheres to the Australian Football League (AFL). In New Zealand, the word “football” was associated with the national union (NZRU 2007), or formerly called New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU). This organization, however, shortened its title to NZRU in 2006 (NZRU 2007), leaving out the word “football”. In the academic literature, football has also been interchangeably associated with several sports. For example, McDonald et al. (2010) use the term ‘football codes’ to refer to Australian Rules Football (AFL), Rugby League (NRL), and Rugby Union as major types of football. These authors explain that each of these sports appears to dominate in certain geographic areas of Australia’s metropolitan areas (p. 73).

Professional Sport Organizations and Brand Confusion

New professional leagues could provide opportunities for consumers to experience alternative forms of sport entertainment and sport ‘atmosphere’, such as fans’ involvement, and for professional clubs to grow, benefit from different revenue streams, and potentially have a positive impact within their communities. During the establishment of a new professional competition, one among many decisions managers must face “is the extent to which pre-existing interest in the sport will be leveraged when building brand awareness and associations for the new league” (McDonald et al. 2010, p. 67). Such leveraging strategies may take different forms, including the extent to which the professional league and its participating organizations, that is: the sport clubs, can promote and identify themselves to their potential consumers. Branding like other organizational activities is not an exact science; however, in order to develop and leverage a recognizable and indeed unique brand, sport like other entertainment organizations needs to address issues as they relate to name, term, sign, symbol, and design (Fevons 2005). Thus, much of what is included in a name and associated brands and trademarks is more than simple semantics.

In this process of 'building' and 'selling' a brand, one of sport organizations' fundamental objectives is to achieve long-term brand loyalty that within a professional sport context is defined as the capacity to draw and retain consumers (Kaynak et al. 2008). However, marketers of professional sport organizations face different problems in their quest for on and off-field success. For instance, some researchers have referred to the term 'brand confusion' to explain different phenomena related to the (inefficient) marketing of sport brands, especially during the launch of new competitions. In discussing the case of professional South African rugby, Gerber-Nel (2004, 2007) mentioned the apparent failure of its management to plan for the expansion of those teams participating in the Super 12 rugby competition, though today this tournament is called 'Super 15'.

Part of management's failure stemmed from inconsistencies in the changes of brands, team colors, and names (Gerber-Nel 2004, 2007). The images, colors, and emblems associated with teams and leagues are a powerful way to build and differentiate brand. Inefficiently acknowledging these brand metaphorical markers and poor marketing not only led to brand confusion, but also to a form of 'cannibalizing' the value from well-established- and known- brands of South Africa's provincial rugby competition (Gerber-Nel 2007). Brand confusion occurs when "brands are indistinguishable... and the stimulation of one brand may evoke thoughts of another" (Kapferer 1995, in Henderson, Iacobucci and Calcer 2002, p. 399), whereas cannibalization can occur "when one of a firm's brands steals share away from another" (p. 399). Thus, brand confusion can lead to notable challenges in a variety of industries, with various resulting consequences.

For example, in referring to manufacturing and retailing, Mitchell and Papavassiliou (1997) recognized that "the confused consumer is inefficient not only when choosing, but also when giving advice to friends. He or she may engage in negative word-of-mouth or confuse other consumers with inaccurate or misleading information" (p. 164). Arguably, consumers' involvement with a product (Zaichkowsky 1985; Bloch and Richins 1983) can be a mitigating factor in brand confusion (Foxman, Muehling and Berger 1990), especially because these consumers "are expected to possess a more fully developed knowledge structure with respect to brands in the product class" (Foxman et al. 1990, p. 175). However, in situations where the brand is still becoming established, the responsibility in ensuring brand clarity as opposed to brand confusion lies on the side, in the case of the present research, of sport managers and marketers. In studying

Australia's NRL competition, Kerr and Gladen (2008) cautioned that "Clubs that lack a distinct brand image will find it difficult to break through the clutter and establish their own unique brand equity" (p. 68). Professional sport marketers can therefore influence or control consumer confusion when they are developing marketing mix strategies (Foxman et al. 1990). An ability to reduce brand confusion and develop strong brand presence is particularly relevant to the activities of start-up leagues and professional sport team franchises.

In an additional effort to mitigate the problems of brand confusion, some researchers have suggested frameworks that hold promising marketing value. For instance, Aaker (1996) and Peter and Olson (1993, in Henderson et al., 1998) for instance designed 'associative networks,' with the first using the fast-food and the second the running shoe sector, respectively. Henderson et al. (1998) recognize the value of these models, as these serve the purpose "of detecting branding effects" (p. 309) that the authors suggested conforming to three stages: "Data elicitation, representation of data as graph-theoretical or spatial structures, and network analytic techniques" (p. 309). In the fast-food associative network, Aaker (1996) assimilated tangible elements such as meals, and intangible elements, such as family, social involvement, quality, and brands to illustrate how these variables inter-relate and are either directly or indirectly associated with the (fast-food) brand. Similarly, Peter and Olson (1993) associate aspects related to running and comfort, such as balance, cushioning, avoid sore knees with that of the shoe brand.

Together, all these contemporary studies have extensively discussed aspects of brand confusion in various sectors, and ways to mitigate its negative impacts. In contrast, few studies have addressed brand confusion within the professional sport environment, especially with regards to those groups of consumers that may display little or no allegiance for a particular sports organization. This study will explore the extent to which the word "football" is associated among individuals that do not have a high level of allegiance to a professional football club. The study will also investigate the images that the words "professional football" evoke among those respondents. In doing so, several aspects of brand identity will be addressed.

Methodology

Sample

The scope of the present investigation was broad and included studying fans and members of professional sport organizations. An initial decision was made to approach and study professional sport organizations as a point of departure and foundation of the study. This approach was believed to help establish collaborative relationships with those organizations willing to participate in the study. In turn, the establishment of those relationships was believed to allow the research team to gather information from organizations' fans and members at a subsequent stage. In August of 2010, contact was established with all eleven (11) A-League teams. The letter sent to these organizations explained the purposes of the study and invited the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), and other members of their management to partake in the study. One organization expressed interest to participate in the study. A first face-to-face meeting was followed by semi-structured, in-depth telephone interviews with the team's CEO and marketing team. Throughout the meeting and interviews, the club's management also agreed that the research team to study its fans, members, as well as other groups. These groups included members of the general public that both the organization's management and the researchers perceived as not necessarily purchasing club membership or being club fans.

A total of 695 usable responses were obtained: 382 (55.0%) from the general public and 313 (45%) from the university student group. In agreement with the management of the sport organization, this number was considered sufficient for the scope of the study. The number of responses allowed for gathering perceptions and other forms of information from respondents. Moreover, the data gathered provided a foundation to explore an area that to date has been largely under-researched and to support future investigations extending from the current research. However, given the overall number of participants, particularly as compared to the city's entire population, and the anonymous nature of the online questionnaire, no generalizations can be made about the general public population or that of university students.

The responses were first managed using Microsoft Excel. Subsequently, the numerical data were exported to the Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS), whereas the comments and other typed feedback from respondents were managed using NVivo 8.0. In this process, content analysis was used consistent with previous research (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Krippendorff 2004; Weber 1990), especially in

grouping the different themes that emerged from respondents' comments. The use of NVivo then helped manage the different comments and threads identified, allowing the researchers to create different files that referred to these threads, as opposed to using other, more laborious ways (e.g., Word processing).

In addition, given the numerous brief responses using one or two words, word association and word frequency were used in accordance with Roininen, Arvola and Lähteenmäki (2006) and Benthin, Slvoic, Moran, Severson, Mertz and Gerrard (1995). Whenever applicable and consistent with sport marketing and other studies (James and Ross 2004; White and Korotayev 2003; Bristow and Sebastian 2001; Sekaran 2000; Milne and McDonald 1999), Pearson Chi-square (χ^2), and Cramer's V statistics were used. In the following sections, respondents' verbatim comments will be labeled as follows: Respondent 1 (R1), Respondent 2 (R2), and so forth.

Questionnaire

In order to study these groups, while at the same time having a wider exposure, an online questionnaire was designed for this study. The questionnaire was tailored for two specific groups: general public and university students; several studies were consulted in the process of designing its content (Sotiriadou, Shilbury and Quick 2008; Roy and Graeff 2003; Irwin, Lachowetz, Cornwell and Clark 1999; Milne and McDonald 1999). One section of the questionnaire sought to elicit demographic information about the respondents; a second section studied different forms of involvement with professional sports such as frequency of attendance, membership, and physical participation in the sport. A third section first explored respondents' images of the word "football", followed by the images that came to mind regarding professional football and game attendance. Other sections studied respondents' reasons for attendance or non-attendance, as well as their views on sport organizations' involvement with their community. While many of the questions gathered numerical data, including via Likert-type scales, space was provided at the end of most questions to elicit comments.

The club agreed to disseminate the link of the two questionnaires via a local newspaper, and also at a local university. In addition, the researchers disseminated the link to the questionnaire among several undergraduate and graduate university classes. The online questionnaire was active between September and November of 2010, and was set internally through online properties to allow only one use per Internet Protocol

(IP) address. While this technical procedure may not completely avoid misuse or repeated completions, it was believed that it would help minimize these issues.

Results

Table 1 illustrates several differences in the demographic characteristics of the two respondent groups. First, while males were predominant in the general public group, an almost equal percentage was noticed among university students. Not surprisingly, Australian-born participants were clearly the majority, more so among those from the general public group. Also unsurprising were the age differences between the two groups with the university students for the most part falling in the 18-24 age brackets. Given the very few respondents of the university student group that are aged 35 and above, in the next sections comparisons and tests using the age variable are limited to only the following three groups: 18-24, 25-34, and 35 above.

One of the questions asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with several items as reasons for attending the professional club games. If respondents had not attended the club's games before, they were asked to skip the section in the questionnaire and move on to the next. Of those who completed the question, it became clear that their levels of allegiance are rather weak, especially concerning their level of fandom. In this context of identity with a club, Hunt et al. (1997) presented five types of sport fans: temporary, local, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional.

Regarding the fanatical fans, Hunt et al. (1997) contended that when these closely associate with their team, they would be expected to be more loyal. However, the modest mean scores for either 'die-hard' fandom or support suggest the very weak levels of allegiance among participants; given this outcome, the two measurements were not further considered for subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Demographic characteristics	General public		University students	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Males	249	65.2	156	49.8
Females	132	34.6	155	49.5
Missing	1	0.3	2	0.6
Age groups	n	%	n	%
18-24	56	14.7	221	70.6

25-34	107	28.0	60	19.2		
35-44	108	28.3	14	4.5		
45-44	62	16.2	15	4.8		
55-64	37	9.7	2	0.6		
65+	11	2.9	0	0.0		
Missing	1	0.3	1	0.3		
Nationality	n	%	n	%		
Australian	313	81.9	222	70.9		
Other	68	17.8	90	28.8		
Missing	1	0.3	1	0.3		
Other characteristics of respondents *	General public			University students		
	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Extent to which respondents consider themselves 'die-hard' club fans of the club.	240	3.02	1.162	202	2.38	1.145
Extent to which respondents like to support the club.	237	3.57	1.058	200	3.36	1.216

* Only those who attended the club's games in the past were asked to indicate their level of agreement. The Likert scale provided ranked from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree.

Asked to indicate which specific sport they associated with the word "football" almost 30% of each group chose more than one sport (Table 2), as compared to previous research (Gerber-Nel 2007). Differences were however significant concerning the different sports versus the two different groups of participants. For example, while 62.0% of the general public associated first with the A-League, only 40.3% of the university student group did so. In contrast, a much higher percentage of university students (25.2%) associated football with the AFL, compared to only 14.9% of the general public.

Table 2 also shows that much higher percentages of members of the general public had attended NRL and AFL games than those of the university student group, while a slightly higher percentage of members of this group had attended games of other professional sports in Australia.

Possibly because of the higher representation of non-Australian citizens in the university student group, a much higher percentage (21.1%) of this group indicated never attending any professional sport games in Australia. From a marketing perspective, and despite the more modest number (66) as opposed to those who

attended games before, the group of university students may provide opportunities as potential consumers of professional sports. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, future research conducted among members of the university student, particularly among members of the international student and faculty group may provide a clearer picture as the extent of those opportunities.

Table 2. Specific sports respondents associate with the word “football”.

Sports	General public		University students	
	n	%	n	%
Australian A-League (football league)	239	62.6	126	40.3
National Rugby League (NRL)	193	50.5	172	55.0
More than one sport chosen	111	29.1	87	27.8
Australian Football League (AFL)	57	14.9	79	25.2
Rugby Union	43	11.3	43	13.7
Other sports (NFL or American Football)	1	0.3	4	1.3
Attendance of sports in Australia	n	%	n	%
National Rugby League (NRL)	305	79.8	178	56.9
Australian Football League (AFL)	238	62.3	100	31.9
Australian A-League (football league)	162	42.4	128	40.9
Attendance to games of other professional sports in Australia	133	34.8	119	38.0
Have never attended any professional sport games in Australia	18	4.7	66	21.1

Further analysis (Table 3) included further separating the results into those who identified football with one particular sport only (labeled 1) versus those who identified football with one or more than one sport (labeled 2). The similar percentages associating the NRL with the word football (Table 2) indicated word associations that also included other sports. However, when those who associated football with NRL only were compared with those associating football with a different or more than one sport, a statistically significant difference was noticed between both groups of respondents ($\chi^2_{(1, n=655)} = 5.286, (p < 0.05)$). A higher percentage of university students (32.5%) associated more the word “football” with NRL than did the general public group (24.4%).

Table 3. First summary of Chi-square (χ^2) tests using Pearson Chi-Square.

Comparisons regarding the specific sport that comes to mind when hearing/reading "football"	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Genders versus associating "football" with the A-League only. (Males 42.1%) versus females (25.9%).	18.273	1	p<0.001
Age groups versus associating "football" with the A-League only. (Group of 35 and above: 43.6% versus 25-34 group: 36.2%, and 18-24 group: 27.2%).	14.754	1	p<0.001
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and associating "football" with the NRL only. (Australians: 30.3% versus non-Australians: 18.7%).	10.897	1	p<0.001
General public versus university students and associating "football" with the A-League only. (General public group: 39.9% versus university student group: 29.3%).	8.052	1	p<0.01
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and associating "football" with the A-League only. (Non-Australians: 47.1% versus Australians: 32.1%).	7.316	1	p<0.01
Genders versus associating "football" with the NRL only. (Females: 32.8% versus males: 24.5%).	6.655	1	p<0.01
Genders versus associating "football" with the AFL only. (Females: 9.6% versus males: 4.5%).	5.539	1	p<0.05
General public versus university students and associating "football" with the NRL only. (University student group: 32.5% versus general public group: 24.4%).	5.286	1	p<0.05
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and associating "football" with the AFL only. (Non-Australians: 10.9% versus Australians: 5.4%).	5.192	1	p<0.05
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and 'confusion' (associating "football" with more than one sport). Non-Australians (77.0%) versus Australians (68.3%).	3.895	1	p<0.05

In contrast, and in line with the 'raw' findings of Table 1, the general public respondents associated the A-League more (39.9%) than did university students (29.3%); this difference was also statistically significant: ($\chi^2_{(1, n=655)} = 8.052, (p < 0.01)$). Table 3 shows that differences were also noticeable between genders and the association of football with the NRL and the A-League. Females (32.8%) associated more with the NRL than did males (24.5%), while a higher percentage of males (42.1%) than females (25.9%) associated more with the A-League. Overall, it is unknown why some of these groups differ in their level of 'confusion' regarding the football 'brand'. For example, asking additional questions that elicit answers about which sports respondents grew up watching, or in which environments (e.g., at home or school) they became familiar with the different sports may provide a clearer picture as to where and when this form of brand confusion originated.

Analysis and separations of the numerical results was also carried out concerning attendance to professional sport games (Table 4). For instance, those respondents indicating attendance to NRL games (labeled 1) and those who did not indicate attendance to NRL games but indicated attendance to other games (labeled 2) were compared. Similarly, those who had never attended any professional games (labeled 1) were compared to those who indicated attending games of at least one other professional sport (labeled 2). Despite their alleged fewer financial resources, particularly given their full-time status, university students (22.1%) suggest much more potential for sport marketers as opposed to respondents from the general public (4.3%). As expected, a statistically significant difference between these two groups was noticed ($\chi^2_{(1, n=668)} = 48.256, (p < 0.001)$).

Differences were established between males and females and whether they had ever attended any professional sport games ($\chi^2_{(1, n=666)} = 27.444, (p < 0.001)$). For sport marketers, the female group suggests more potential than males, also concerning attendance to NRL and A-League games. Similarly, the group of non-Australians could provide opportunities to professional sport club marketers. This potential may not be with regards to their significant lower attendance to any professional sports as compared to Australian citizens ($\chi^2_{(1, n=667)} = 64.801, (p < 0.001)$), but also as it concerns particular sports such as the NRL.

An additional area of potential sport marketing opportunities is suggested in different age groups, especially the 'younger' respondents. For example, a statistically significant difference can be inferred between the group of respondents aged between 18-24 years of age (16.7%), the 25-34 (13.1%) and that aged 35 (7.0%) and above and whether they have never attended a professional sport game ($\chi^2_{(1, n=667)} = 11.110, (p < 0.01)$). Concerning attendance to A-League games, a difference was also noticed ($\chi^2_{(1, n=583)} = 10.856, (p < 0.01)$). Once again, those aged between 18-24 years (54.5%) represent the group with more potential for sport marketers, as compared to those aged between 25 and 34 (70.3%) and those aged 35 and above (66.2%).

How Respondents Perceive the term Professional Football in their own Words

A total of 336 respondents from the general public (88.0%) and 268 from the university student group (85.6%) provided typed words and phrases that they used to define professional football. The qualitative comments further highlighted the confusion and disparity in the way that participants viewed and interpreted the words "professional

football". Of particular note were the comments linking professional football with the World Cup, English Premier League or European football league competitions more generally, "*my immediate thoughts are of overseas leagues*" (R1, general public).

Table 4. Second summary of Chi-square (χ^2) tests (using Pearson Chi-Square).

Comparisons regarding game attendance to different sports	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
General public versus university students and whether they never attended any professional games. (University students: 22.1% versus general public: 4.3%).	48.256	1	p<0.001
Males versus females and whether they never attended any professional games. (Males: 6.7% versus females: 20.2%).	27.444	1	p<0.001
Males versus females and attendance to NRL games as opposed to other sports/games. (Males: 89.0% versus females: 70.7%).	31.01	1	p<0.001
Males versus females and attendance to A-League games as opposed to other sports/games. (Males: 69.2% versus females: 52.9%).	15.465	1	p<0.001
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and whether they never attended any professional games. (Australian respondents: 6.7% versus non-Australian respondents: 31.3%).	64.801	1	p<0.001
Australian versus non-Australian respondents and attendance to NRL games as opposed to other sports/games. (Australian respondents: 84.6% versus non-Australian respondents: 70.0%).	11.967	1	p<0.01
General public versus university students and attendance to A-League games as opposed to other sports/games. (General public: 67.6% versus university students: 55.4%).	8.887	1	p<0.01
Different age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35 and above) and whether they never attended any professional games. (18-24 group: 16.7%, 25-34 group: 13.1%, and 35+ group: 7.0%).	11.110	1	p<0.01
Different age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35 and above) and attendance to A-League games as opposed to other sports/games. (18-24 group: 54.5%, 25-34 group: 70.3%, and 35+ group: 66.2%).	10.856	1	p<0.01
General public versus university students and attendance to NRL games as opposed to other sports/games. (General public: 85.4% versus university students: 77.1%).	6.548	1	p<0.01
Males versus females and attendance to AFL games as opposed to other sports/games. (Males: 48.5% versus females: 38.9%).	5.068	1	p<0.05

Further, respondents also linked European based teams with the phrase professional football. Liverpool, Barcelona, Real Madrid and Manchester United as well as several other European teams featured throughout the qualitative comments. For example, one participant commented: "*I think of Europe, big clubs, famous footballers like Beckham, Ronaldo*" (R2, general public.)

The above mentioned and further comments reflect issues relating to the branding and market presence of the domestic football competition in Australia. The following participant's comments are further illustrative of the challenges associated with building, branding, and selling professional Australian based football in this country, *"when I think of professional football I think of a "made up" league (A league) with no history, no passion, and no fans. A league that I barely hear about, and if it weren't for my Fox Sports subscription I wouldn't even know that soccer [football] existed in this country, let alone as a professional sport. Stop trying to buy fans, buy passion, and buy history, no one cares when men in suits try to force their product on everyone, especially in sport"* (R3, university student).

As a consequence, the international leagues appear to be more readily followed by the Australian public. Moreover, the qualitative comments are in some way illustrative of the successful branding strategy being employed by these leagues to market to non traditional international fans. Of further note was the fact that participants identified with particular athletes as distinct from teams or leagues, as was found to be the case for both the university student and general public group. That participants appeared to more readily identify with athletes and players further supports previous research by Bolsmann and Parker (2007) who concluded that sporting celebrities not only can attract attention locally and nationally, but sometimes also globally. This attraction can also occur among certain segments of sport consumers that perceive some athletes as heroes. Indeed, Perry (2009) identified football (soccer) as "the most common source of sport heroes" (p. 212) and also found that a personal trait as opposed to skill was a more common reason as a 'hero' selection criterion.

Again, European players featured heavily in the qualitative comments; athletes including Beckham, Messi, and Ronaldo were found to be associated with professional football. In contrast, there was limited reference to Australian players, with the Australian Football team [the 'Socceroos'] and the A league featuring in some comments: *"Socceroos [Australian national football/soccer team], Sydney FC and Tim Cahill, Harry Kewell, Mark Schwarzer, Lucas Neill"* (R4, university student).

The following respondent's comments typify the conclusion that Australian team and domestic football competition were foreshadowed by international athletes, teams, and leagues: *"I think of the European soccer [football] leagues more so than the A League"* (R5, general public). *"FIFA champions league, English premier League"* (university students). A further participant reflects on enjoying watching the Australian

team but laments at the lack of professionalism and standard of play when compared to the European based leagues, *"I love Australia, I've loved watching the Socceroos both here and in the UK, but it's just nowhere near a professional game compared to Europe (R6, university student)* as does a general public participant *'I don't think Australian football, at this moment in time, can cater for this 'professional soccer' [football]" (R7)*. In particular, the standard of play or lack thereof was a recurrent theme on which participants reflected: *"The standard of play is below the rest of the world. We need to retain our own talent" (R8)*.

In spite of the mentioned difficulties and challenges, participants also reflected positively on the way that professional football in Australia was progressing. A recurrent theme related to time. In the context of time, participants were of the view that it will be a generational change. This finding is consistent with those of O'Shea and Alonso (2012). These authors recently discussed the efforts of professional sport organizations in the Australian context to build fan and consumer interest in their teams and leagues by 'rusting on', or turning initial interest into ongoing support, a new generation of sport consumers. Moreover, respondents' comments suggested that as the sport's history grows and its junior player contingent builds the market will increasingly 'think' of a domestic league not European football. Participant comments reflect this view:

"It's football - not soccer. Professional soccer [football] is played by supposedly the best players in the country who make a living from playing the game. Professional soccer [football] in Australia has come a long way in 5 years, but is struggling nonetheless. The game needed a revamp in Australia and it may take a while to reap the rewards but I hope it does" (R9, general public)."

"Australia's A-league has quality players and can produce some great football but some games can lack substance" (R10, university student)."

A further respondent reflects on the game's development from a semi professional to a professional sport; this respondent identifies with and is proud of, *"Football, something that has come a long way since the NSL [National Soccer League] and I am proud to call it (football) the A league" (R11, university student)*.

Discussion and Conclusion

The establishment of a new sports league could represent financial and other opportunities for a sports organization, especially in current times when sports "have become a major global activity" (Richelieu and Desbordes 2009, p. 10). Establishing a

new league could also pose numerous challenges that the 'modern' sports marketer needs to attend to, including the element of branding that continues to become more complex (Jevons 2005). Previous research has identified the difficulties that brand confusion can create for the modern professional sports marketer (Kerr and Gladden 2008; Gerber-Nel 2004 2007). Henderson et al. (1998) therefore emphasize the need to understand consumer associations and perceptions as a critical first step to understand their brand choices and preferences (p. 306).

While different from the issues of brand confusion regarding counterfeiting or copy-cat branding of goods and logos that some researchers have discussed (Mitchell and Papavassiliou 1997; Foxman et al. 1990), as well as different from brand confusion that Gerber-Nel (2004, 2007) presents, the case of football in Australia provides an illustration of the risk of a different form of brand confusion. Football in Australia shares its brand name with three other existing forms of the same sport name. The fact that a new football league has been established for less than a decade further aggravates the potential for brand confusion. For example, while the risk for confusing football with rugby or Australian Rules Football sports may not be such, the similarity in brand names can nevertheless pose some obstacles in professional clubs' quest to develop a clearly defined sport and ultimately the brand of the sport (i.e. Football Australia).

Investigating different groups of consumers, including those that do not share strong allegiance with a particular local football club, is significant to professional football clubs and their marketers. This study explored this dimension among members of general public and university student groups. The overall findings illustrate that brand confusion exists, particularly as respondents do not clearly associate football with one single sport but with more than one. Differences between groups in terms of their gender, origin (Australian versus non-Australian), age also demonstrate that some groups are more likely than others to associate football with different or more than one sport. These differences, together with those concerning attendance to different professional sports at the same time suggest the potential of some of these groups, including the group aged between 18-24 years, to become professional sport consumers. The fact that more than half of some groups had already attended professional football games further emphasizes the opportunities that sport marketers may be able to tap into, particularly by further studying these groups more closely, or even contributing to their sport education.

In doing so, sport marketers could also work towards preventing that football becomes the synonym for yet another sport carrying the same name, but instead provide a clear-cut image and brand to the sport of football. The case of the United States' MLS illustrates the establishment of a "football" league and a sport known through the word 'soccer' instead of football; this word has been used in the United States instead of football for generations. Lack of a clear identification of the sport "football" in the case of Australia, while not necessarily negative could nevertheless have implications for organizations and consumers. These implications include impacts on game promotion and merchandise marketing, as well as in aligning with regional leagues and world federation (Football International Federation Association, FIFA) where the word football is standardized to refer to only one sport.

According to Roedder, Loken, Kim and Basu Monga (2006), consumers are able to associate brands with particular features, attributes, logos, usage situations, or product spokespersons. This notion is also in agreement with Henderson et al. (1998) who underline physical product attributes and perceptions of places, occasions and people (p. 307). In this study, the comments many respondents provided concerning the value of the experiential aspect of football, such as the entertainment component, or the skills and speed that are part of the game demonstrate links to the particular attributes or features these authors refer to. In addition, that many comments, particularly brief statements of one or a few words related to different 'product spokespersons' in the form of the image of known players further reinforce the assertion of Roedder et al. (2006) and Henderson et al. (1998). These comments also emphasize the importance for sport marketers to undertake efforts to enhance the image and experience of those consumers that have already been exposed to the entertainment and game experience, but that perhaps have only done so sporadically.

The findings of this exploratory study also provide a platform for future investigations concerning brand confusion, or the dilemmas faced by professional sport organizations in being able to create a 'straightforward' product brand. Future research could undertake a broader investigation of consumers in different parts of Australia where other football franchises have been established. Research could also focus on fans, members and supporters of professional football clubs to gather their views on how their clubs- and the Football Federation of Australia (FFA) are leveraging the interest of the sport that McDonald et al. (2010) referred to. The findings of the present study could also be useful in investigating newly established, or about-to-be-established professional

sport leagues in other parts of the world. New and added information addressing these areas could be very valuable for the future well-being of football clubs, the league and also in the future provision to consumers of high quality entertainment, skills and overall value-for-money of the competition.

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