
**What a Team Brand Means to Youth: An Examination of Team Brand Associations
Held by Youth Fans**

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Abstract

Understanding team brand associations is important as they can contribute to the team's awareness, image, ability to generate revenue, and a fan's overall loyalty. While previous conceptualizations of team brand associations have added considerably to the study of brand associations in sport, they do not take into account the associations that may exist for varying target segments. One market segment that has grown in consumer sophistication and thus is important for teams to understand is that of youth consumers. It has also been suggested that we should not be assume that research on adult buying behavior and branding is applicable to this market segment. Therefore, this study utilized a free-thought listing technique with children ranging from 4 to 14 years of age in order to examine the specific team brand associations held by youth fans. The results suggest that brand associations that children hold for sport teams are not as well-developed as those of their adult counterparts and children tend to focus on product related attributes as the most common associations mentioned were the team's star players, brand marks, the way the team plays, or simply that they mention the sport itself.

Keywords: brand associations, youth consumer socialization, youth fans, brand equity

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Introduction

Brand associations are typically defined as the thoughts or ideas that an individual holds in their memory for a particular brand (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993). They have also been operationalized as being the first thoughts that come to a person's mind when he or she is exposed to a brand (Ross, 2006). Understanding the brand associations that consumers hold for a particular brand is important as research has indicated that associations are a primary building block of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden & Milne, 1999; Keller, 1993, Ross, 2006). In sport, it has been suggested that brand associations also contribute to enhancing a team's image, brand awareness, fan loyalty, the overall experience fans have at sporting events, and the team's ability to generate revenue from both fans and sponsors (Ross, 2006).

Despite the importance of brand associations, scholars have only recently taken an interest in examining brand associations in sport. Specifically, research has focused on conceptualizing the types of associations that exist in team sport (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006) and testing the reliability of team brand association measurement (Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007). While these previous conceptualizations of brand associations in sport have provided a good starting point for examination of this topic, previous research has not taken into consideration that brand associations may be different for target segments. As the majority of research which has attempted to define brand associations in sport has been conducted utilizing college-aged students or older (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Ross et al., 2006), the associations that were determined from these studies may not apply to all market segments. One such segment that is important for teams to understand, and whose associations may differ from that of participants used in previous studies, is the youth consumer. This notion that not all branding concepts may be applied to this segment is supported by Ross and Harradine (2004) who stated that "although significant research into adult buying behavior and branding exists, it is not appropriate to assume that this can be applied to younger consumers" (p.12).

Research has suggested that youth consumers are growing in their ability to recognize specific products and brands (Chaplin & Roedder-John, 2005, Roedder-John

1999). It has even been suggested that recent generations of young consumers may be the most brand conscious in terms of their ability to recognize brands and develop brand preferences (Bachmann-Achenreiner & Roedder-John, 2003). Further, in sport it has been determined that children may begin to form preferences for sport teams when they are as young as five years of age (James, 2001). As this segment represents potential current and future fans, and a source of revenue for teams, it is important to understand what may impact the image children have for teams (i.e., their team brand associations). Doing so will allow teams to more effectively target and develop strategies to reach this important segment. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to provide an examination of the team brand associations held by youth fans.

Literature Review

Youth Consumer Socialization

While very little research has been conducted on youth fans as consumers of team sport, research from similar disciplines provides sufficient evidence in regards to the way in which youth become socialized as consumers of brands. Much of this research has focused on how children become aware of brands, how they make brand comparisons and determine what brands they would like to own or purchase, and what children think about brands from the perspective of what it means about them personally if they own or use a certain brand.

Through examining nearly 25 years of research, Roedder-John (1999) suggests that youth progress through a developmental process in a series of stages leading to becoming mature adult consumers. The *perceptual stage* occurs between the ages of 3 and 7. At this stage of consumer development children are generally familiar with concepts such as brands and can recognize brands by the time they are 3 or 4 years old (Chaplin & Roedder-John, 2005). However, their decision-making abilities regarding what brands they like, or would like to own are fairly simplistic. Decisions are often based on very limited information or a focus on one single brand attribute. For instance, youth consumers at this level may make a decision on what brand they would like to have based on a single attribute such as size or color.

The *analytical stage*, between the ages of 7 and 11, represents a significant period of growth in consumer knowledge and skills (Roedder-John, 1999). During this stage of consumer socialization children develop a more sophisticated approach to brands. They can name multiple brands, understand the differences in brands, and will begin to request certain products by brand name (Roedder-John, 1999). Children at this point

also understand the persuasive intent of advertising, and consumption decisions are often based on multiple product attributes and the previous experiences that children have had with particular brands. The final stage of development occurs between the ages of 11 and 16 and is known as the *reflective stage*. During this time period, children begin to become more focused on the social meaning of brands.

The stages of youth consumer socialization described by Roedder-John (1999) are well supported by subsequent research as well. For instance, in a study designed to understand what brands mean to children, Ross and Harradine (2004) determined that as children age they are able to recognize more brands. In addition, they found that by the age of 5 children began to display preferences for brands based on the look of the brand and also based on brands that may be considered to be stronger or more popular (Ross & Harradine, 2004). This continued to increase as the children got older. These findings support further research that indicated that children can recognize brands that are relevant in their lives (e.g., fast-food, toys, soda, etc.) by as young as 3 years of age as they have more incentive to store this brand information in their memory (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). McAlister and Cornwell (2010) also determined that pre-school aged children have an understanding of the popularity and quality of brands that are important to them.

In similar studies, Bachmann-Achenreiner and Roedder-John (2003) attempted to understand how children relate to brand names in regards to consumption decisions. They exposed children (ages 8, 12, and 16) to identical advertisements with an image of a product with the only difference in the advertisement being the brand name. The brands chosen were considered to be either popular (e.g., Nike) or unpopular (e.g., K-Mart). Their findings suggest that all ages studied are able to recognize the brands, but their product evaluations change as they age. Specifically, the 8 year olds in the study evaluated the popular/preferred and unpopular/non-preferred brands equally and at a very conceptual level focusing on product attributes. However, the 12 and 16 year olds took a more perceptual or symbolic approach and evaluated the popular/preferred brands at a significantly higher rate. Similarly, in a study on self-brand connections, Chaplin and Roedder-John (2005) determined that younger children tend to connect to brands on a concrete level based simply on their familiarity with the brand or that they own the brand, while older children tend to connect with brands on what it means to own the brand and the characteristics of the brands users.

While there are a number of examinations of youth consumer socialization outside of sport, the study of this topic as it relates sport teams is very limited. However, James (2001) did investigate how and when children develop loyalties towards teams. Utilizing interviews with children at different stages of cognitive development, specifically ages 5-6 and 8-9, the results suggest that children as young as five years old are capable of developing some levels of commitment to sport teams (James, 2001). However, consistency in their loyalty towards the team may not occur until they are at least 9 years old (James, 2001). While this provides a good initial examination in regards to loyalty towards a team, what has yet to be examined are the brand associations this important group of consumers holds for teams.

Conceptualizations of Brand Associations

As brand associations reflect the way consumers perceive brands, it is considered a prominent factor in fostering a long-term relationship between consumers and brands — most notably in the form of brand equity (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Ross et al., 2006). While the significance of brand associations have been examined in various contexts, the seminal works of Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) have been central to our understanding of brand associations.

Keller's (1993) brand associations

Keller (1993) proposed that brand associations are integral factors in the creation of brand equity and suggested that in order to attain brand equity, brand associations must be strong, unique, and favorable. He drew a distinction between the types of brand associations based on their level of abstraction. Consequently, Keller categorized brand associations as attribute-related, benefit-related, and attitude related associations.

Keller (1993) argued that attributes are the descriptive features that consumers associate with a product/service and can be either product related or non-product related. Product-related attributes are the necessary components of a product to perform the designed function. For example, an expected function of a sport team is winning the game, and the necessary components for teams to meet this expectation are players, coaches, management, etc. The positive/strong associations related to attributes of a team (e.g., star player) will increase the overall attractiveness of the team and will result in increased attendance (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In contrast, non-product related attributes are other features that are indirectly related to the product function, but directly related to consumption or purchase (e.g., ticket price, logo, stadium, history, fan imagery). For example, the quality of stadium a team plays in is not directly related to

team's function (i.e., winning), but it contributes to the perceived value of the team's brand and the influence on ticket sales as the result of a non-product related attribute association.

Keller (1993) defined benefit related brand associations as the value of a product that consumers perceive as the outcome of consumption. It is the consumer's expectation on what values the product can bring for them. Keller distinguished benefits into three categories based on differences in consumer motivations (i.e., functional, experiential, and symbolic). Functional benefits are goal directed, and usually correspond with attributes of the product. Becoming a fan of a team as to satisfy the need of socialization can be viewed as a functional benefit (Gladden & Funk, 2002).

Experiential benefits relate to how consumers feel when they use the product/service. These benefits refer to the desire to be experientially satisfied (e.g., pleasure, nostalgia, cognitive stimulation) and are also often related with product attributes. For instance, some individuals like a sport team because they had a good experience with the team and want to continue the relationship with the team. It should be noted here that since brand associations are not a mutually exclusive concept under three benefits (i.e., functional, experiential, and symbolic), one association can fit into multiple brand association categories (Gladden & Funk, 2002). In the previous example socialization was regarded as a functional benefit, but it also can be an experiential or symbolic benefit depending on the consumer.

The last category of Keller's (1993) benefits is symbolic benefits. BIRGing (basking in reflected glory), which is the publicized self-identity associated with team's success, is a good example of symbolic benefits. Affiliation with team due to the fans' image of team or its location (e.g., his/her hometown) transfers symbolic meanings to consumers beyond explicit value. These meanings in the consumers mind enhance fan loyalty and thus contribute to developing strong team brand equity.

Lastly, were attitude-related brand associations which refer to the "customers' overall evaluations of a brand" (Keller 1993, p. 4). Individual's judgement of a certain brand is based on the beliefs a consumer has of the attributes and benefits of the product, thus attitude-related associations is the function of attribute-related and benefit-related associations. How consumers either favorably or unfavorably evaluate the brand, how strongly they develop associations, and how much consumers see the associations as unique are critical to brand's success (Keller, 1993).

Aaker's (1996) brand associations

Aaker's (1996) conceptualization of brand associations is also well documented. According to Aaker (1996), brand associations help to build brand image and are anything linked in consumers' memory to a brand. He argued that brand associations have interrelationships with other dimensions of brand equity and thus a large part of brand equity is attributed to brand associations. Grounded on his brand equity model (Aaker, 1991), Aaker (1996) conceptualized brand associations into four categories based on different aspects of brand: brand as product, brand as organization, brand as person, and brand as symbol.

Similar to Keller's (1993) framework, Aaker (1996) also viewed product attributes as an important source of brand association. According to Aaker, although product-related attributes are just one type of association an individual may have, they are a vital component of brand image as brand choice is largely dependent on the nature of the product being considered. Aaker proposed six associations of the brand as product and those are product scope or the class/category of the product, the product attributes, perceived quality/value the product provides to the consumer, the occasions for product use, the typical type of individuals that use the product, and the product's country of origin.

Aaker's (1996) second broad perspective of brand associations is brand as organization. For this category of associations, he focused on the attributes of organization rather than product/service. Aaker argued that the characteristic of organization is the combined outcome of the people, values, culture, and programs of a company, which are distinguished from attributes of product/service. For example, the San Francisco Giants' community fund and service program transcends the attributes of the on the field product and conveys their value and mission as a community asset.

Aaker's (1996) brand as person perspective also focuses on the identity that a brand has beyond the product related attributes. According to Aaker, similar to a person, a brand may have a unique personality (e.g., fun, active, young, old, humorous, boring, etc.) For example, the Oakland Raiders have long had a brand personality of being tough or aggressive which has transcended their actual play on the field. Finally, Aaker (1996) indicated the important role of the brand as a symbol in developing brand associations. He argued that to develop strong brand associations, linking a brand to a symbol which involves three key ingredients (i.e., imagery, metaphors, and brand heritage) is important. Visual imagery enhances memorability; hence consumers can

more effectively recognize and recall the brand. Further, metaphor and brand heritage involved in a symbol reflect functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits of a brand (Aaker, 1996).

Brand Associations in Sport

While these previous two conceptualizations (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993) aid in our understanding of brand associations and the creation of strong brand equity, the application of concepts of brand associations in previous brand equity models to sport segments requires further consideration, as the attributes, benefits, and attitudes may differ from other industries.

Similar to Aaker (1996) and Keller (1993) there are two prominent conceptualizations of brand associations in sport, with the first attributed to Gladden and Funk (2002). Due to the lack of study that explored brand associations in sport, and the unique nature of the sport product and its consumption, Gladden and Funk investigated the unique types of sport brand associations in the team sport context. Based on Keller's framework and a review of existing literature, Gladden and Funk developed the Team Association Model (TAM).

The TAM (Gladden & Funk, 2002) consists of sixteen types of team brand associations within the three categories of brand associations (i.e., attribute, benefit, and attitude) proposed by Keller (1993). The attribute associations included team success, star player, head coach, management, logo design, product delivery, and tradition. The benefit associations were identification with the team, nostalgia, pride in place, escape, and peer group acceptance. Finally, the attitude related associations were importance, knowledge, and affect. By testing TAM through structural equation modelling, Gladden and Funk provided the first empirical evidence of distinct types of brand associations in sport and its structure.

Similarly, Ross et al. (2006) developed the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS) for professional sports by examining sport team brand associations under the lens of Berry's (2000) service based brand equity model. After extensive testing, the final TBAS included a total 11 brand association factors: nonplayer personnel, team success, team history, stadium community, team play characteristics, brand mark, commitment, organizational attributes, social interaction, concessions, and rivalry. Table 1 provides a detailed description of each of these brand association factors.

Table 1. Team Brand Association Scale Factors.

Factors	Description of Factor
Brand mark	Thoughts regarding the identifying mark such as the logo, symbol, and the colors.
Rivalry	Thoughts regarding the competitive nature of sport; pertains to the competition among teams that are known to be historically significant competitors.
Concessions	Thoughts regarding eating and consuming beverages at the stadium of the favorite team; actual concessions at the facility, and the act of consuming concessions at the facility.
Social interaction	The idea of associating with others is reflected in social interaction with friends and other fans of a particular professional team.
Team history	Historical thoughts regarding the team, the history of success, and the history of the team's personnel.
Commitment	Thoughts regarding individual's enduring affiliation to a particular professional sport team; regarding the length, continued regularity, and general notion of affiliation.
Organizational attributes	Thoughts regarding specific attributes that characterize the sport organization as a whole; organization's loyalty to fans, management actions, and brand personality.
Nonplayer personnel	Thoughts such individuals as coaches of the team, the team management, and the owners of the team.
Stadium community	Thoughts of the stadium in which their favorite professional team calls "home"; community and area surrounding the stadium or arena in which the team plays its games.
Team success	Thoughts such as a team's success in competition, the perceived quality of the players, and the perceived quality of the team itself.
Team play characteristics	Thoughts regarding specific characteristics that a team displays upon the field of play; how the team goes about scoring, and specific characteristics that may be ascribed to the team's play.

Note. Team Brand Association Scale factors. Adapted from "Development of a scale to measure team brand associations in professional sport," (Ross, James, & Vargas, 2006)

Purpose

Having an accurate understanding of the specific team brand associations held by youth fans is important for a variety of reasons. Understanding the associations held by this particular target market will assist teams in enhancing their image, awareness, and

revenues as their marketing activities can be more effectively developed in order to create or reinforce positive brand associations (Ross et al., 2006). While previous conceptualizations of brand associations provide a strong starting point for analysis, it is important to examine the specific associations held by certain target groups. As youth fans continue to grow in their roles as consumers, it becomes vital for sport organizations to understand the brand associations that these important consumers have for their team.

If sport organizations do not have a solid understanding of the associations that this particular segment has for their team, their understanding of youth consumer brand perceptions will be biased, communication and positioning strategies will be less effective, and opportunities to develop future brand extensions or alliances will be missed (Supphellen, 2000). In addition, as youth are forming brand preferences at younger ages it is important that teams are able to effectively reach this target at a young age in order to develop their fandom and potential as life-long consumers of the team. As very little academic research has focused on youth consumers, and it is not yet clear what types of team brand associations this market segment holds, research questions were deemed appropriate to provide an initial examination of this topic. Specifically, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: What types of team brand associations are held by youth consumers?

RQ2: Are there differences in the brand associations across the perceptual, analytical, and reflective stages of youth consumer socialization?

Methodology

Sample

The participants in this study included children, ranging from 4 to 14 years of age, who were participating in a youth soccer camp in the Midwest section of the United States. Employing a method similar to other studies which examined brand associations through free-thought listing techniques (Chen, 2001; Grace & O'Cass, 2002; Ross et al., 2006), the participants were asked to first write the name of their favorite sports team. To illicit the participant's brand associations they were then asked to write the first things they think of when they think about their favorite team. This is one of the most common means to obtaining cognitive responses in research, and the immediate free-thought listing is important as it measures initial response to a stimulus (Cacioppo & Cass, 1981). In addition, this method limits outside influences and minimizes the potential for

the subject to forget the stimulus (Cacioppo & Cass, 1981). No direction or assistance was provided to the participants in regards to what to write down, thus ensuring that their actual thoughts were what was captured. In addition, the participants responded to demographic questions regarding their age and gender.

Questionnaire

The TBAS was utilized as opposed to brand association items from other studies as the TBAS was also generated utilizing a free-thought listing technique as was conducted in the present study. In addition, the TBAS has been frequently utilized and tested in a variety of different settings (e.g., Ross & James, 2007; Ross, Bang, & Lee, 2007; Walsh & Ross, 2010). *Star player* was included as its own dimension, and not as a component of the team success dimension as suggested by Ross et al. (2006), as previous research has discussed the important role that athletes play in the lives of youth (Stevens, Lathrop, & Bradish, 2003), as an influencer in their consumer socialization process (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004), and the influence they have on their product preference and evaluations (Ross & Harradine, 2004). In addition, as the team brand associations of youth fans had yet to be examined, the category of *other* was included to capture any brand associations that may not fit within any of the pre-existing categories. Following the content analysis two tests of intercoder reliability were performed as suggested by Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005). Descriptive statistics were then utilized to examine the most frequently mentioned types of brand associations that were held by the participants.

Procedure

In order to examine the team brand associations a qualitative free-thought listing technique was utilized. Free-thought listing is an open-response method which allows for the collection and categorizing of mental constructs such as one's thoughts, feelings, ideas, and images (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). It is designed to measure the thoughts that pass through a person's mind as someone anticipates, receives, or reflects on some type of brand exposure (Cacioppo & Petty, 1981). This technique is considered appropriate to use when there are no predetermined ideas about the dimensions that a group may hold, or the dimensions may be untested with a certain group (Cacioppo, von Hippel, & Ernst, 1997). As the team brand associations for the youth market are relatively unknown, and have yet to be studied in academic literature, the free-thought listing technique was deemed to be an appropriate measure.

Following data collection a content analysis was conducted by the researcher and two trained coders on the individual thoughts provided by the participants. The coders were chosen based on their familiarity with brand association research and the free-thought listing technique. In addition, each coder was trained in order to ensure they would be able to consistently identify what categories of brand associations the participants responses may fall under. The analysis consisted of individually examining each of the thought listings and determining which of 13 pre-determined brand association dimension categories the thoughts belonged to. The categories included the 11 TBAS items (Ross et al., 2006) and two additional items categorized as star player and other.

Results

Of the 59 total forms distributed, 54 were deemed useable for an effective response rate of 91.5%. Of those participants who provided their age, the average age of the participants was 8.5 years old with 62.7% ($n = 32$) between the age of 7 and 11. 25.5% ($n = 13$) of the respondents were between the age of 4 and 6, and 11.8% ($n = 6$) were between the age of 12 and 14. In regards to the participants who indicated their gender, 78.4% ($n = 40$) were male and 21.6% ($n = 11$) were female. In addition, it is worth noting that all participants were able to recall their favorite sport team which indicates that youth hold high levels of brand awareness for sport teams.

Tests of intercoder reliability proved sufficient with an agreement level of 96.23% and a Cohen's Kappa of 92%, both meeting the 80% minimum level of agreement (Cohen, 1960; Riffe et al., 2005). A total of 87 brand associations were reported by the participants, and on average the participants mentioned 1.61 brand association dimensions. There was a range of 0 dimensions mentioned to a high of 7 dimensions. In addition, while not a purpose of the present study, a t-test indicated that there were no significant differences in the amount of brand association dimensions mentioned among male ($M = 1.63$, $SD = .90$) and female participants ($M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.79$), $t(49) = -.264$, $p = .793$.

To address RQ1 the percentage of participants that mentioned each brand association type was examined. The dimension that was mentioned most frequently was the *other* category (40.74%, $n = 22$) which included mentions of the sport itself or that the children play the sport that their favorite team plays. For instance, there were many instances in which the participants mentioned their favorite football team and in their

free-thought listing they would simply write the word 'football.' The second most mentioned type of brand association was that of that *star player* (29.63%, $n = 16$). In these instances the children would write down the name of one of the players on the team, and in the majority of the responses the players mentioned would have been classified as a premier player on the team. Another frequently mentioned brand association category was *brand mark* (24.07%, $n = 13$). Within these responses the participants generally wrote down the color of their favorite team, discussed the team's logo, and/or mentioned the team's mascot. The fourth category that was frequently mentioned was *team play characteristics* (24.07%, $n = 13$). In this category the participants made specific references to the style of the teams play (e.g., they score a lot of points, they hit hard, they are fun to watch).

Other dimensions that were not mentioned frequently included *team success* (7.40%, $n = 4$), *team history* (3.70%, $n = 2$), *social interaction* (1.85%, $n = 1$), *organizational attributes* (1.85%, $n = 1$), *non-player personnel* (1.85%, $n = 1$), and *stadium community* (1.85%, $n = 1$). The team brand association dimensions of *rivalry*, *concessions*, *commitment*, and *stadium community* were not mentioned by any of the participants.

In order to examine RQ2 the number and types of brand associations mentioned across the perceptual, analytical, and reflective stages of youth consumer development were examined. As statistical differences between the groups were not possible due the differences in cell sizes across the three stages of youth consumer development, descriptive statistics were utilized to provide an initial examination into this topic. Of the 51 participants who provided their age, on average those aged 4 to 6 mentioned 1.77 brand association dimensions, those between 7 and 11 mentioned 1.34 dimensions, and those between the ages of 12 and 14 mentioned 3.00 brand association dimensions on average. In addition, the most frequently mentioned associations for those aged 3 to 6 were *other* (38.46%, $n = 5$), *star player* (30.77%, $n = 4$), *team play characteristics* (30.77%, $n = 4$), and *brand mark* (23.08%, $n = 3$). For participants between the ages of 7 and 11 the most frequently mentioned associations were *other* (46.88%, $n = 15$), *star player* (28.13%, $n = 9$), *brand mark* (25.00%, $n = 8$), and *team play characteristics* (12.50%, $n = 4$). Finally, the one brand association dimension that the majority of 12 to 14 year olds mentioned was *team play characteristics* (66.66%, $n = 4$) followed by *brand mark* (33.33%, $n = 2$) and *star player* (33.33%, $n = 2$).

Table 2. Brand association types mentioned for participants who provided their age.

	Total Sample (n = 51)	Perceptual, ages 4-6 (n = 13)	Analytical, ages 7-11 (n = 32)	Reflective, ages 12-14 (n = 6)
Other	41.18% (n = 21)	38.46% (n = 5)	46.88% (n = 15)	16.67% (n = 1)
Star Player	29.41% (n = 15)	30.77% (n = 4)	28.13% (n = 9)	33.33% (n = 2)
Brand Mark	25.49% (n = 13)	23.08% (n = 3)	25.00% (n = 8)	33.33% (n = 2)
Team play characteristics	23.53% (n = 12)	30.77% (n = 4)	12.50% (n = 4)	66.67% (n = 4)
Team success	7.84% (n = 4)	15.38% (n = 2)	3.13% (n = 1)	16.67% (n = 1)
Team history	3.92% (n = 2)	N/A	3.13% (n = 1)	16.67% (n = 1)
Social interaction	1.96% (n = 1)	7.69% (n = 1)	N/A	N/A
Organizational attributes	1.96% (n = 1)	7.69% (n = 1)	N/A	N/A
Non-player personnel	1.96% (n = 1)	N/A	3.13% (n = 1)	N/A
Rivalry	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Concessions	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Commitment	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Stadium Community	1.96% (n = 1)	N/A	3.13% (n = 1)	N/A

Note. N/A indicates that the type of brand association was not mentioned.

Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

This study provides an initial examination of the cognitive structure of team brand associations held by youth fans. The results suggest that this structure is potentially not as well developed as adults. A total of 87 individual team brand association thoughts

were reported by the 54 participants in this study for an average of 1.61 associations mentioned per participant. Using a similar method with adult participants, Ross et al. (2006) reported a total of 218 individual thoughts about one's favorite professional sports team from just 37 participants, an average of 5.89 team brand associations mentioned per participant. Similar results have been found outside of sport. For instance, using a free-thought listing technique, Chen (2001) found that 212 associations were mentioned for a particular brand from a sample size of 68 individuals (an average of 3.11 associations per participant), 154 associations were mentioned for a brand from a sample size of 58 participants (an average of 2.65 associations per participant), and 231 associations were mentioned from a sample of 74 (an average of 3.12 brand associations per participant). Also, in a study conducted by Grace and O'Cass (2002) an average of 8.67 brand dimensions were mentioned when six interviewees were asked to discuss everything they knew or felt about a particular brand. In other words, they were asked to discuss their brand associations.

Comparing the results of the current study with past literature which has examined brand associations both in and outside of sport supports previous research which indicates that while youth are developing sophisticated consumer skills, this development occurs in stages and is not totally refined until they become young adults (Chaplin & Roedder-John, 2005; Roedder-John, 1999). In addition, while this study did not have a large number of participants over the age of twelve, those that were of this age mentioned more brand association dimensions than their younger counterparts. This further supports that as children age, and subsequently develop more cognitive skills, they are more likely to develop and be able to identify more team brand associations. Thus, it becomes important for teams to highlight key associations at a young age in order to allow those associations to become a part of the brand image of the team in the minds of young consumers.

In regards to specific types of brand associations, the results do suggest that certain brand association dimensions are being developed for the youth sport fan. The most common brand associations mentioned included specific identification of the team's star players, brand mark (i.e., logo, colors, mascot), the way the team plays (i.e., they are exciting to watch, they have a good defense, etc.), and simply that they mention the sport of their favorite team or that they play that particular sport. Each of these would be classified as attribute related associations. The identification of attribute related associations by the participants supports previous research which indicates that children

tend to develop brand associations by first gathering information related to product attributes (Chaplin & Roedder-John, 2005).

These product related attributes were also the prominent associations mentioned at each stage of youth consumer socialization (i.e., perceptual, analytical, and reflective) with one major difference being in that the *other* category. While this could not be tested statistically due to differences in cell sizes, it is worth noting that this brand association was highlighted at a higher rate (46.88%) for those between the ages of 7 and 11 than the other two stages of development (38.46% for ages 4 to 6, and 16.67% for ages 12 to 14). Since the *other* category included mentions of the team's sport or that the participants play the sport of the team, this higher level would make sense as this is the age that many children begin to compete in organized sport. In addition, as these associations were prominent, future research on this topic should include these as stand-alone associations with their own titles such as sport identification (i.e., mentioning of the sport the team plays) or sport participation (i.e., mentioning that they play the sport of their favorite team).

Practical Implications

Practically, the results suggest that when targeting youth fans teams may consider developing marketing activities that highlight these product related attribute associations. Focusing on these associations in their marketing efforts and programs will aid in the development of brand image and brand equity for this important target market. For instance, as the participants mentioned the sport itself or that they play the sport, it is important for teams to develop programs which connect youth fans to the sport. For teams that do not have youth leagues, camps, or clinics in place this would be a great opportunity to introduce youth to the sport and also to have the children be exposed to the brand in a fun and inviting environment. These experiences that the children have at these programs could aid in the development of positive brand associations for the team.

The results of this study also suggest that a strong association that youth fans have with teams is that of star players. Thus, it becomes important for the team to not only highlight their star players in marketing activities designed to reach youth, but to utilize the players as ambassadors for the team's brand. Having players present where youth can be targeted (e.g., school functions, camps, etc.) will provide another important touch point between the team's brand and this market segment. Similarly, many of the children in this study held brand associations related to the style of play of their favorite team. Further cultivation of these brand associations could come in the form of videos

highlighting the teams play or specific exciting portions of the team's games. For instance, many professional teams have a page on their website dedicated to their young fans and this could be an appropriate place to post such videos.

The last type of brand association that was commonly mentioned was brand mark. Specifically, in this instance many of the participants mentioned the colors of the team, the logo, or the team's mascot. This points to the importance of having youth specific team merchandise for both the team and merchandise related to the team's mascot. This merchandise provides another point of exposure to the team brand outside of the core product of the team itself, and it allows the children to display their affiliation for the team. In addition, as children begin to display preferences for products based on the appearance of the brand by the age of 5 (Ross & Harradine, 2004) it is important for teams to continue to expose children to the team's brand mark in this fashion.

The results also provide potential practical implications regarding how teams might market their brand towards children as they age and develop more cognitive consumer behavior abilities. While statistical differences in the perceptual, analytical, and reflective stages of development could not be examined, the descriptive statistics provide some meaningful findings. As discussed, the associations of *other*, *star player*, *brand mark*, and *team-play characteristics* were consistently mentioned across each of the stages of development. This finding may indicate that children are able to initially develop these types of attribute related associations at a young age during the perceptual stage and foster the associations in memory as they age and progress through the analytical and reflective stages of development. However, as teams develop marketing activities which highlight these types of associations, they should also identify other association types they feel are important to market towards children at a young age so they begin to develop these associations in their memory. For instance, the brand association dimensions of *team history* and *team success* were not highly rated despite being common image associations which teams utilize to market themselves. While young children very likely would not have been exposed to a team's past success, marketing activities could still be designed to introduce children to historical team moments or figures during the early stages of consumer socialization. This may not only increase the number and types of associations that youth fans develop at a young age, but could help in providing a potential point of attachment with the team.

In addition to examining brand associations, the results did suggest that there is a high level of brand awareness present for sport teams among children. While it was not

the purpose of this study to measure brand awareness, all participants were able to recall and write down the name of their favorite sports team. This suggests that sport teams are an important part of their lives as previous research indicates that children are more likely to recognize brands that are relevant in their lives (McAlister & Cornwell, 2010). This relevance likely is also due to key socializing agents such as parents who introduce teams to children at a young age (James, 2001). In addition, this provides evidence that it is important for teams to reach young consumers as children as young as 4 years old in this study were able to identify their favorite team.

Limitations and Future Research

As this study was unique in that it examined team brand associations for a specific target segment (youth fans), future research should build off the foundational information that has been provided. For instance, future research should focus on obtaining a sample with a greater number of children in each of the perceptual, analytical, and reflective stages of consumer development. Having a large number of children in each of the three stages will allow for more in-depth statistical analysis to further our understanding of any potential statistically significant differences in team brand associations across the three groups. In addition, a larger sample may provide the ability to develop and test a scale which may quantitatively measure the team brand associations for youth fans.

As research on the consumer socialization of youth continues to develop, future research could also examine how children at different ages respond to sport team related marketing activities. In particular, experiments could be conducted which expose children to various types of marketing tactics and brand messaging to see what impact the exposure has on brand associations, attitudes towards the team, future purchase intentions, etc.

Finally, the present study examined brand associations by age. While a long line of previous research on youth consumer socialization has focused on age and the cognitive developments that occur as children age, other demographic factors such as race, household income, and geographic location could be examined to see if differences exist. This study also examined associations for professional sport teams as a whole. Future research could be designed to examine if there are differences in the team brand associations that youth hold for different sports, leagues, and even athletes. For instance, research could determine if children have different associations for teams in the National Football League (NFL), Major League Baseball (MLB), etc.

Understanding this could allow these particular leagues, and the teams in the leagues, to focus their marketing efforts on strengthening associations specific to their team/league.

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