

TITLE: The downside of being irrelevant and aloof: Exploring why individuals do not attend  
sport

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### **Abstract**

Understanding what influences an individual to transition from awareness that a sport team exists to attraction to that team is of critical importance in the management and development of consumer bases. Determining the factors that prevent individuals at a stage of awareness from becoming attracted is of equal importance. In this paper we use a social identity approach to explore reasons for non-attendance. Qualitative data was gathered from a mixed-method online survey administered to registered participants in a large football (soccer) association in New South Wales. The questionnaire included an open-ended question allowing individuals who had not attended a match during the previous 12 months to elaborate on the reasons they did not attend. The seventy-five individuals who responded to this open-ended question comprise the sample for this research. Data highlighted that cognitive apathy and disidentification were both salient cognitive responses associated with individuals that did not attend. Furthermore, club values and characteristics were shown to be barriers to attendance. The findings present implications for sport teams to overcome cognitive apathy and disidentification through organisation-initiated efforts to disseminate information and promote the team, as well as efforts to align team characteristics and values with consumer perceptions.

**Keywords:** Disidentification, Cognitive apathy, Awareness spectrum

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## **1. Introduction**

The positive influences that attract consumers to engage with sport offerings have been extensively researched. Existing literature outlines how the influence of: association with successful others (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Tajfel & Turner, 1979); socialisation agents (Kenyon, 1969); acculturation in a new community (Funk & James, 2001); and curiosity (Park, Mahony, & Kim, 2011) facilitate the transition from awareness that a sport offering exists to an attraction to attend or identify. While there is abundant theorisation exploring the development of strong attitudes (Funk & James, 2001) and identities in relation to sporting teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), there is limited understanding of why negative perceptions form in the sport context. Recent advancements reflect researchers exploring factors that inhibit attendance at sport matches. This agenda has been guided by the rationale that the thoughts and behaviours of non-attendees are critically important in developing a broader understanding of consumer markets (McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stavros, 2007; Trail, Robinson, & Kim, 2008).

To develop understanding of reasons that people do not attend sport matches, the research team explores cognitive responses associated with non-attendance. Researchers have previously concentrated on switching tendencies (McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stavros, 2007), or constraints (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008) as inhibiting sport attendance. To extend this literature we adopt a social identity approach (Tajfel, 1972, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982) to explore non-attendance. To conceptualise the transition from awareness that a sport team exists to attraction to attend, we utilise the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) (Funk & James, 2001, 2006) as a basis for the development of a broader consideration of the spectrum of perceptions that may exist at the awareness stage and which may influence the likelihood of attendance. By developing an understanding of non-attendance, the

researchers aim to contribute a conceptualisation to provide sport organisations with relevant information to develop grounded marketing initiatives to successfully negotiate barriers to attraction, leverage positive awareness and increase the likelihood of attendance.

## **2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review**

This section theoretically frames reasons that individuals may choose not to attend sport matches. To explore reasons that people do not attend sport we adopt a social identity approach (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). While predominantly utilised to explain reasons that people identify with social groups – such as sport teams – we use social identity theory as a lens to explore non-attendance in congruence with previous work in marketing (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Social identity theory posits that individuals are motivated to view themselves positively (self-concept) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, to achieve a positive self-concept, individuals will seek to associate themselves with groups (such as sporting teams) that they perceive to be relevant to their personal interests and values (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Because of the congruence between group memberships and personal values, social identities have been shown to “create and define an individual’s place in society” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 293). This statement has been extended to show that people will also “define who they are by what they are not” in terms of group membership (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 391).

The decision to identify or disidentify occurs through an individual’s cognitive response to a perception of what a specific social group is viewed as standing for, or against. Hogg and Terry (2000, p. 123) outlined that the “context-dependent features” of a group provide a projection of group characteristics, which influence whether an individual will deem a social group as relevant and worthy of identification, or not (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). For example, a sporting team may be perceived as

unsuccessful, arrogant and disengaged from its local community, which all represent external perceptions that could feasibly influence attendance decisions.

For the purposes of this research we also consider team 'values' (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001), which define what an organisation is perceived to stand for, or against. We use the term 'perceived' before characteristics and values throughout this manuscript as our purpose is to explore the views of potential consumers. Consumer perceptions may not be accurate reflections of the actual values and characteristics of an organisation; however, these perceptions underpin the individual level decision to identify, non-identify or disidentify. Additionally, the degree that an individual perceives him or herself as having the same or different values as an organisation, (as well as their favourable or unfavourable perceptions of the characteristics of the organisation), will dictate the likelihood of identification, non-identification or disidentification (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Research into non-identification and disidentification in social psychology, management and marketing is sparse. Sport management is no different. To date, the seminal work of Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) and Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002) provides the most insightful perspective into non-identification and disidentification. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001; 2002) explored identification and disidentification with the National Rifle Association (NRA) in the U.S. Their exploration was framed within social identity theory (Tajfel, 1972, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and research into organisational identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Within this exploration, Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001, p. 397) defined disidentification as: "(1) a cognitive separation between a person's identity and his or her perception of the identity of an organisation; and (2) a negative relational categorisation of the self and the organisation." In this paper, we use this definition to frame how perceptions of the

characteristics and values of sport teams may lead to non-attendance (cf. Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002).

To build upon this definition of disidentification, clarification is required to position when disidentification may become a salient cognitive response for individuals. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) noted that an individual need not have been formally connected to a social group to disidentify, or necessarily have been connected to an opposing organisation. Therefore, disidentification may occur in three situations. First, an individual may become disidentified after categorising with an ingroup that through experience is shown to have values or characteristics that are inconsistent with that person's self-definition. Second, a person that identifies with a rival group will seek to achieve positive distinctness thus disidentifying with relevant or rival outgroups (Tajfel, 1972, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Third, the individual may not have had contact with either the ingroup with whom they disidentify or an opposing organisation; however group values are perceived to be sufficiently incompatible with their self-definition (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Research has shown this option to occur through limited direct experience of the ingroup (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001)

Disidentification is not the sole cognitive response potentially contributing to our understanding of reasons individuals may not attend. Theoretically, disidentification can only occur when an individual sees value in actively separating themselves from a social group (Manchester United's failures are my successes). If an individual sees no value in identifying, or disidentifying a third response is possible. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) termed this response non-identification, or cognitive apathy. Cognitive apathy occurs when an individual sees no value in identifying or disidentifying with a social group. This may occur when values are not perceived as incongruent enough to disidentify or because the group is seen as being outside of the realm of an individual's interests (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Apathy

represents another feasible cognitive response underpinning non-attendance; however, as this group is apathetic toward the team – not disidentified – there may be opportunity to convert this group of individuals into consumers through targeted marketing initiatives. Despite the paucity of literature currently investigating non-identification and disidentification, we continue this review to explore literature canvassing other reasons that individuals may not attend.

## **2.2 Constraints and switching**

Research in sport management has only recently started to consider consumers that exhibit non-behaviours, or potentially negative behaviours toward sporting teams, such as non-attendance (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008) or switching (McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stavros, 2007). We utilise two specific research directions within sport management literature that inform reasons that individuals do not attend, or stop attending. First, work on constraints to further understand reasons for non-attendance (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008). Second, the literature exploring why members of sporting clubs lapse, or switch to other products (McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stavros, 2007).

Trail et al (2008) explored which external constraints led to non-attendance for a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) team in the US. The external constraints tested by Trail (2008) included: entertainment, leisure activities, financial cost, weather, social commitments and other factors relating to venue performance. Conceptually, this study utilised an exploration of constraints theory (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991) to increase understanding of external constraints that prevented individuals from attending matches. Trail et al (2008) found that venue constraints – while significant constraints in other research – did not significantly influence attendance in their study. Furthermore, this study showed that work and time were both salient constraints. Finally, Trail et al (2008) made the argument that sport organisations need to be cognisant that they are in

competition with other sport offerings and should consider individuals using rival services as a constraint.

Further work has sought to expand Trail et al's (2008) work by exploring internal and external constraints inhibiting attendance, as well as internal and external motivations driving attendance (Kim & Trail, 2010). Internal constraints explored psychological processes including: lack of knowledge of technical aspects and strategy of the sport; lack of team success, lack of someone to attend with and a lack of interest from others (Kim & Trail, 2010). Additional psychological constraints including lack of interest in activity (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford et al., 1991) were not tested and beyond the scope of this study. External constraints included market alternatives, other commitments and convenience of location and parking as structural barriers to attendance.

Additional research conducted on non-attendees explored the switching and lapsing tendencies of club members in the Australian Football League (AFL) (McDonald, 2010; McDonald & Stavros, 2007). Initially, McDonald and Stavros (2007) tested AFL members to investigate why they did not renew (lapsed). McDonald and Stavros found that 70% of members who allowed their membership to lapse were actually satisfied customers who had experienced a change in their life circumstances (change of job, moved house, etc.) (McDonald & Stavros, 2007). In a follow-up study, McDonald (2010) tested factors influencing membership lapsing rates among AFL members. Notably, McDonald found that the length of membership was the most significant predictor of members lapsing. Those that had been members for less than 3 years were the most likely to lapse, while 33% of 1<sup>st</sup> year members were reported to cease membership at the end of their first season (McDonald, 2010).

The studies reviewed in this section have broken new ground in understanding reasons sport consumers do not attend and also why existing members switch, or allow their membership to lapse. However, there is an opportunity to extend existing research and further

develop understanding of what leads to non-attendance. To position the potential contributions of this paper further, we review the PCM to conceptualise the factors that may lead individuals to progress from awareness of a sporting team to an attraction to attend. The adoption of the PCM to conceptually frame the awareness stage seeks to avoid further diversification of the “potpourri of instruments and concepts” already published in relation to sport consumers (Funk & James, 2001, p. 120). The current research seeks to broaden current conceptualisations of the awareness level of the PCM to develop our understanding of what inhibits attraction. This unison aims to provide a logical progression of theory stemming from this paper.

### **2.3 Positioning this research**

The PCM provides a vertical continuum modelling consumer relationships with sport offerings (Beaton, Funk, Ridinger, & Jordan, 2010; Funk & James, 2001, 2006) and physically active leisure (Beaton & Funk, 2008; Filo, Funk, & O'Brien, 2008). The PCM advances processes that operate within and among awareness, attraction, attachment, and allegiance outcomes. The current research focuses exclusively on movement from awareness to attraction. Please refer to Funk and James (2006) for a comprehensive review of each of the stages, processes and outcomes within the framework.

The awareness process involves various socialising agents providing a positive influence on an individual, such as media and peers introducing a sport club to a consumer, thus leading to the realisation that the sport club exists. Next, the consumer assesses the perceived hedonic motives and dispositional needs that can be satisfied through spectatorship as part of the attraction process. Hedonic motives are pleasure-based interests such as the need to socialise and escape from one's daily routine, while dispositional needs reflect psychological requirements such as the need for stimulation (Funk & James, 2001). The interaction among these perceived needs and motives, along with the knowledge of the sport club's existence,

evolve into attraction outcomes. Attraction outcomes include the formation of team preference (Funk & James, 2006).

While preference for a team has conventionally been developed through attendance and fanship, recent research has also highlighted the role of media-dominant fans, who consume 'their' team without attending (Pritchard & Funk, 2006). These two means towards developing attraction should also be linked to the level of sport under consideration. For example, professional elite sport has a myriad of consumption methods including television, web, social media, mobile phone and print media, which all conceivably act as mechanisms leading to the formation of team preference. Conversely, at lower levels of sport where media coverage is absent or minimal, it is likely that attendance remains a critical pathway to the formation of team preference. Therefore, we define awareness as a cognition that a team exists without a specific formed preference for that team. Meanwhile, attraction can be defined as preference for a team demonstrated through consumption of that team through available mediums.

The PCM was developed to "provide researchers with a platform for the systematic study of sport spectators and sport fans" (Funk & James, 2001, p. 120). The framework has been deemed theoretically sound for understanding the connection between a consumer and a sport team (Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003). Meanwhile, the PCM has been cited as a viable mechanism for tracking sport fans' movement both upward and downward (Shilbury, Quick, & Westerbeek, 2003). As noted above, this research focuses on individuals' that are aware of a sport team but choose not to attend (please see context and procedure sections for additional information regarding the context studied here). The consumers examined within the current research have been introduced to the sport club, but have not progressed beyond the awareness stage to attraction. These individuals do not attend matches, thus a preference for the team through spectatorship has not developed. To expand upon existing literature exploring constraints to support a sport team (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008), we seek to contribute

initial qualitative understanding of whether perceptions of team values and characteristics lead to non-attendance. In making this examination we explore one central research objective, which is explored through two specific research questions (RQ):

**Objective: To explore perceptions associated with non-attendance**

*RQ1:* What contributes to cognitive apathy toward a sport team?

*RQ2:* What leads to disidentification from a sport team?

The methodology employed to address these two research questions, including a description of the community-based semi-professional context in which the sport team examined exists, is set out below.

### **3. Method**

The research design for this study involved the distribution of a mixed-method questionnaire (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009) to explore reasons that respondents did not attend matches. While the questionnaire included quantitative items, we adopt a qualitative approach, utilising an open-ended essay style question to induct a qualitative understanding of why individuals did not attend. The purpose of this qualitative approach was twofold: First this approach allowed participants to respond without any manipulation (other than the question posed) or interference from the research team, to reasons they did not attend, while still addressing the research objective. Second, because of the lack of understanding of what underpins non-attendance, we adopted an interpretive approach to allow research participants to guide the development of the primary conceptual outcomes of this study (Siggelkow, 2007). The research context is outlined in the following section.

#### **3.1 Sport Context**

Due to ethical constraints, the organisation providing the sampling frame is referred to as “Association A”. Within the locality of Association A, elite football (soccer) development is organised and administered by a separate elite development organisation referred to herein

as “Team A”. The names of both sport organisations referred to in this study (Association A and Team A) have been removed from this document and participant responses, due to the negativity of some comments and the consequent negative reflection this would have on Team A. Association A sits under the Football Federation of Australia (FFA) and Football New South Wales (FNSW) as the official body for the management and delivery of football to a broader population of approximately 250,000 people.

Currently, Association A is one of the largest football associations in Australia with responsibility for over 10,000 registered players, coaches and volunteers and the management of the local recreational competitions. These local recreational competitions include 17 clubs (with multiple teams) playing in men’s, women’s and youth leagues from March-September annually. Registered participants at each of the 17 Association A clubs pay an annual levy to cover grounds, referees and associated costs. The cost of registration varies from club to club within Association A. Registration monies are paid to Association A, who pay a levy to the State Sport Organisation, FNSW and the National governing body, FFA. Despite the recommendations of The Crawford Report (2003) to the contrary, grass-roots football participants in Australia continue to financially feed higher levels of the sport through an upward flow of funds.

Within Association A’s region, Team A provides the pathway between recreational and elite level participation. Association A and Team A are separate organisations, but both operate closely to develop football in the region. Team A’s elite senior side plays in the New South Wales Premier League. Team A is a community based sport organisation; however, Team A’s players are paid to play football as an additional form of employment above and beyond their daily job, hence we supplement Team A’s community sport club status with a semi-professional tag. The community sport team tag would be misleading as each of Association A’s 17 clubs would fit this classification. Despite being separate organisations, Team A’s

primary sponsor is Association A. Therefore, registration fees paid by members to Association A are partially used to fund Team A's elite senior squad in the form of player wages, equipment and facilities.

To position this research, clarification is required to outline how Team A may be consumed. We acknowledge that attendance at matches is not a prerequisite for attraction, or team preference (Pritchard & Funk, 2006). However, Team A's matches are not broadcast on television, radio or over the internet and media coverage was confined to a weekly match-report (at the time of study). Because of this community sport context, attendance at matches remains the only means to demonstrate a preference for Team A (attraction). In contexts where a team has a higher profile and greater media exposure we acknowledge that attendance would be a more tenuous method of distinguishing between awareness and attraction.

### **3.2 Participants**

Football participants (n=9000) (players, coaches, volunteers, administrators, parents and officials) in a large football association in Sydney were contacted to determine reasons that they chose not to attend matches of the locality's elite football team (Team A). Association A was utilised as the sampling frame to access individuals who participated in football in some capacity (indicating a broader interest in the sport) but chose not to attend.

### **3.3 Procedures**

An online questionnaire was developed in conjunction with Team A and distributed to football participants that lived within Team A's catchment area (via Association A's mailing list). The questionnaire sought to explore reasons that registered participants in Association A's region did not attend Team A's matches, as well as determine their form of participation and elicit basic demographic variables.

A hyperlink was attached to the Association's weekly e-newsletter and distributed by email to all registered participants in Association A in May 2010. Webstatistics gathered from

Association A's web provider indicated only a small proportion of participants opened the initial email (n=2000). Following the tactics of Dillman (2000) for online questionnaires, reminder emails were sent with the weekly e-newsletter twice more following the initial email to maximise response rates.

At survey completion a total of 805 responses were collated for analysis. To explicitly respond to the research objective defined, one initial screening question was employed: "Have you attended a Team A game in the past 12 months?" On completion of this question, participants indicating that they did not attend games were redirected to a page specific to non-attendance. The 506 (62.9%) respondents not attending games were then asked one additional screening question: "Are you aware of Team A?" (n=506). This second screening question confirmed that participants had not attended a game, but were aware of Team A. Following completion of these two screening questions, an optional open-ended essay style question: "Please outline why you are not attracted to attend Team A matches" was displayed to non-attendees. This question allowed participants to respond freely to provide initial illustrations of why they chose not to attend the team's matches. In total 75 participants completed this essay-style question and following the interpretive qualitative approach to respond to the research objective, these 75 responses were collated to form the basis for conceptual development in this paper.

### **3.4 Analysis**

Data was downloaded from Qualtrics into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and respondents completing the open-ended essay-style question were selected to run demographic analysis in SPSS. In addition, each respondent completing the open-ended essay-style question was assigned a respondent number (1 thru 75) and exported

into Microsoft Word. The qualitative data was imported into NVIVO 8 from Microsoft Word and independently coded by both researchers prior to a meeting to discuss key themes, potential sub-themes, and reflections on the conceptual implications of the data. Themes were defined as being groups of words or phrases which represented a common participant response (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Sample characteristics**

Table 1 displays a demographic breakdown of respondent characteristics across the sample. The respondent group comprised 63 males and 12 females, a concentration of subjects between the ages of 35-54 (n=51) and a variety of playing, coaching, officiating or parenting roles in Association A.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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The analysis of the reasons that individuals were not attracted to attend Team A's matches provided a key insight into team-based perceptions of non-attendees. Responses to the open-ended question ranged in length from 1-419 words and covered a range of topics. Following initial analysis by both researchers, two primary theme groups became evident in the data, which encapsulated perceptions of Team A. Following this initial analysis, participant responses were coded into two primary theme categories representing either cognitive apathy or disidentification. Each participant's response was coded to one primary theme group, as previous research highlights that individuals cannot be apathetic and disidentified (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). Additional analysis then explored narratives to assess whether each perception group explained reasons that underpinned their thoughts and feelings on Team A. Question responses covered: reasons for non-attendance; perceptions of Team As' practices

and values; and situational characteristics that had influenced respondent perceptions of Team A. Both primary themes were explained by three sub-themes respectively, and these are outlined during the more detailed analysis which follows.

#### **4.2 Cognitive apathy**

The narrative in this section focuses on the analysis of quotations that highlighted apathy toward Team A i.e. not identified or disidentified. Coding for cognitive apathy was explained by three sub-themes, which underpinned non-attendance. The three sub-themes explained in relation to cognitive apathy are listed along with a brief definition below:

1. Irrelevance: Team A was not related to respondent interests.
2. External constraints: Time, family or distance made attendance impossible.
3. Lacking information: Individuals reported lacking socialisation agents such as scheduling information and knowledge of player and team activities.

A broader analysis of responses outlining cognitive apathy within each of the sub-themes outlined above is presented now.

##### *Irrelevance*

The first sub-theme explaining irrelevance was underpinned by a cognition that Team A was beyond the scope of some respondents' interests. Explaining why he did not attend games, Respondent 62, simply stated that Team A was "Irrelevant". Respondent 26 did not attend as "the team does not really have any relevance for me and my family." Both comments outlined that the characteristics of Team A did not resonate with either respondent, leading to cognitive apathy in relation to Team A. Specifically, these respondents saw no potential benefits from either associating or disassociating themselves with Team A.

For other respondents, their background led to their apathy in relation to Team A. As Respondent 1, noted: "I can't get excited about regional football, it holds no interest as I wasn't brought up on the game". Respondent 1's lack of familiarity with football impacted on the way

he viewed Team A. However, he did note that 'regional football' was something he could not get excited about, indicating that he may identify with higher levels of the sport. In addition to a lack of involvement with football, additional respondents explained the influence of other existing market alternatives: "I have no alliance to Team A and am not particularly interested in how they perform. There are far too many other teams and sports playing at a much higher level to take my interest" (Respondent 45). This comment alluded to the impact of other higher level market alternatives that were more relevant to Respondent 45 than Team A, which led to his cognitive apathy. The second sub-theme explaining non-identification with Team A concerned external constraints and these are discussed now.

#### *External constraints*

Respondents outlining external constraints as the impediment to attendance explained a primarily neutral perception of Team A, which did not represent identification or disidentification. For some respondents, attending games was not possible due to geographic location: "The [sic. Home Ground] is too far for us to travel and the games mean too much travel - so we can't be more involved" (Respondent 14). External constraints did stop individuals from attending games, but data also highlighted that non-attendance was not necessarily accompanied by cognitive disassociation. This notion was outlined by Respondent 61 who outlined her apathy: "I don't have any problem with Team A - when football season is on it is a matter of finding the time to get to other matches other than those my children are involved in." Two external constraints – time and family –impeded Respondent 61 from attending. Time and family were recurring processes inhibiting progression to the attraction stage. Respondent 56 outlined how time and family processes acted in addition to market alternatives to prevent him from attending:

Whilst I follow results the time impost in addition to all other family commitments make attendance at any games problematic. Our weekends are already filled with team sport and to allow for other family time and also competing sport attendance (Australian

Football League, National Rugby League, Super 14 (Rugby Union)) at a higher level makes it unlikely that we would attend.

The presence of existing market alternatives was an additional external factor, which impeded progression to attraction. Although the comments in this section articulate non-attendance, there are clear indications that structural barriers to attraction are not necessarily accompanied by disidentification. Respondent 56 highlighted some interest in game results, but remained mainly apathetic toward Team A. This was influenced by existing market alternatives that played at a higher level than Team A and were more applicable to the respondent's interests. The presence of external constraints and their relationship with cognitive apathy is extended by exploring how a lack of socialisation agents inhibited attraction.

#### *Lacking information*

The third sub-theme explaining cognitive apathy in relation to Team A outlined how the absence of processes shown to drive attraction inhibited progression from awareness. This sub-theme was explained by respondents articulating an absence of scheduling information, brand presence and knowledge of players as the reason they were not attracted. Each of these facets of lacking information is described now.

The first facet of lacking information concerned an absence of scheduling information on Team A. While respondents were aware of Team A as an entity, more specific information on their game times was lacking: "without checking the website, I have no idea when games are on" (Respondent 38). The lack of information was elaborated on by Respondent 28: "Create a buzz and people will come, but at the moment there is nothing." The lack of information on Team A made planning to attend games difficult: "Promotion of games is always last minute and with a young family the logistics of attending are unknown" (Respondent 19). Conceptually, the responses in this section indicate an apathetic cognitive response to Team A. However, responses also indicated that with the utilisation of socialisation agents, apathy was potentially changeable:

As a family we have been interested in attending, [but we] can never find the times. It would be particularly helpful if there was a draw so attending the matches can be planned ahead. Post match reports are available so it is even more frustrating when you cannot find details of up-coming matches (Respondent 4)

This comment outlines an 'interest' in attending matches, but the absence of scheduling information surrounding Team A prevented Respondent 4 and his family from reaching the attraction stage. This sentiment was reinforced by Respondent 72, who stated: "Information on Team A seems hard to find but we would like to support them more so my children can see how the higher grades play". The absence of mechanisms to provide information to potential attendees was a barrier impeding attraction; however this absence of socialisation processes was not accompanied with cognitive disassociation.

The second facet of lacking information defined how the lack of information translated into Team A lacking a brand presence within the local community: "you need to make Team A the team of the area - the brand has not yet been built in my view. We know the local rugby team, we know the local Cricket team even, but I don't think Team A resonates with people yet" (Respondent 13). Building a brand presence was outlined as a means to make the club more 'attractive' to potential consumers. One respondent went further, suggesting utilising local media to leverage Team A's presence in the local community "Get the 'Local newspaper' to showcase them more, not just a weekly match report. The 'Local newspaper' can play a big role in giving the Team A high profile in the local area" (Respondent 3).

The third facet of lacking information transitioned from the role of the media to focus more specifically on how Team A's players should contribute to developing a presence for the club in the local community, as Respondent 46 stated: "There are 1000s of kids that play in the local [sic] district [and while] they all know the rugby league players, very few know the football players.... They have to spend time with the kids." Responses articulating that players were unknown in the community explained the barrier this provided to attraction, especially for children in the locality.

I think community interest increases with a better knowledge of the people involved. I wouldn't know any of the player's names, who they are, nor do my kids. Involvement by some of the players at a sub junior level would force me to go as I would be pestered by my son if he wanted to see Joe Bloggs who came to our training (Respondent 5).

This quote outlined the potential impact that introducing players to young participants in the locality could have on changing their currently apathetic cognitive state in relation to Team A to a situation whereby parents would be 'pestered to attend' due to the impact of players as socialisation agents. The narrative now shifts focus onto respondents describing a cognitive separation from Team A.

### **4.3 Disidentification**

Following from the analysis of cognitive apathy as a response impeding progression to attraction, this section explores disidentification and the key sub-themes leading to cognitive disassociation. Disidentification was explained by three sub-themes, which all related back to club values and characteristics as defined in the literature review. The three sub-themes explaining disidentification included:

1. Perceived club characteristics: A negative perception of Team A's practices.
2. Taking away: Team A perceived as not servicing the community that supports the team.
3. Elite focus: A perceived funding concentration on Team A, not grassroots participants.

Quotes outlining the three sub-themes outlined above are presented in the following paragraphs. The analysis of disidentification begins with respondents outlining issues with Team A's perceived characteristics.

#### *Perception of club characteristics*

The analysis of club characteristics revealed how individual's perceptions of club actions, such as nepotistic trialling processes and the club's approach to development, led to disidentification. One youth football participant refused to support as he perceived Team A's recruitment process to be unfair and nepotistic: "They don't always pick the better players it's who you know not what you know and I am not talking about myself I have never tried out and

never will” (Respondent 25). Fundamentally, perceptions of Team A’s processes at the junior level impacted on respondents’ views of club characteristics on a broader level. Respondent 68 aligned perceived nepotism with alienation from the local community: “I think the thing that still alienates some folks from Team A is the way that reps football is run. It’s a shame that rumours have persisted over the last few years, such as favouritism shown to kids of people working close to Team A”.

While some respondents disidentified with Team A because of perceived issues with the fairness of trialling procedures, respondent 41 described how the actual implementation of club trials and the anguish this caused their children led to a negative perception of the club:

Have a 5 minute chat with the kids [after trials] and explain that not being selected is not the end of world and that they should try out again the following year. Last year the kids were treated like cattle and sent home feeling like crap. This doesn’t cost anything and only takes 5 minutes.

This quote outlined how the operational implementation of trials led to some respondents developing a negative perception of club processes. For one respondent, her experience of club development processes led her to disidentify: “Team A was my club of choice but now I can no longer support it due to its poor development policy in the younger years. This is something that the club should look at if it wishes to have the support of the local community” (Respondent 31). This quote highlights that Respondent 31 developed a perception of Team A’s development procedures – through experience – that was incompatible with what she thought the club should provide, which led from identification to disidentification. The notion of giving back to the community is investigated in detail within the following section.

### *Taking away*

The perception of club characteristics theme explored the idea that perceptions of fairness and poor implementation of development policies led to disidentification from Team A. Taking away explores how disidentification became a salient cognitive response due to Team A being perceived as taking from the community – rather than giving back. Two

perceptions of club values underpinned this sub-theme. First, Team A was perceived as recruiting first team players from outside the community at the expense of local talent. Second, Team A was perceived as making insufficient efforts to engage with the community in which the team was situated.

Players being recruited from outside of the local district led to specific issues, which included “little perceived connection between the 1st grade players and the local district” (Respondent 12). In addition, Respondent 6 argued that Team A “needs to support and keep younger local players, instead of bringing in outsiders”. Respondents that identified with the community perceived Team A as having an obligation to develop players from within the locality. Respondent 32 noted that “it has taken too long for a few local juniors to appear in the first grade squad. This could be a major reason for poor crowds and lack off any real local support.” While acknowledging that Team A now included locally developed players, Respondent 32 had developed a persistent disidentification due to the previous lack of local talent that had been featured in Team A.

To this point, the narrative has outlined the value system that abounded in respondent comments in relation to giving local players opportunities. Respondent 19 clearly explained why playing footballers from the district was an important value for locals:

Team A selects players from a broad geographical area. This is despite the fact it is supported by Association A (which receives the majority of its funds from player registrations [from local clubs]). Many wonder how Association A justifies this support when a high proportion of it goes to benefit players who are not from and have no affinity with the area.

This quote complemented the words of Respondents 6 and 32, outlining that as a community-based club funded by local registration money, Team A had a perceived responsibility to give back to the community by playing local talent. However, the concept of taking away was not confined to overlooking local players.

To other respondents, Team A was perceived as fundamentally disconnected from the community in which they operated on multiple levels as Respondent 54 stated:

Team A's support base is there, you are simply unable to capture their interest. To the club footballer you appear to show no interest in them so why should they show interest in you. You are aloof. You have alienated your support base, the average teenage footballers have the 'power' you are after. You are known to favour players from outside the area and chose them over local talent. You're on the back foot from the start.

This quote clearly highlighted disidentification from Team A due to the 'lack of interest' shown in the community and the perceived 'aloofness' of the club. Additionally, the notion of alienation was critical to respondent descriptions of how Team A was perceived to take from the community. This lack of interest and inability to tap into the 'community dynamic' was expanded upon by Respondent 16:

If Team A want support [interpretation of receiving a survey investigating why people did not attend Team A's games], they need to give out a LOT more to win hearts and minds of local supporters. Given the amount of registered players who live within 5km of [the home ground], the fact that the ground isn't completely full every week, speaks volumes about the lack of effort that Team A put into the game/junior players .

Respondent 16 articulated the lack of work Team A did in the local community as a determinant of her disidentification, furthermore, she alluded to the potential market existing in the proximity of Team A's home ground.

### *Elite focus*

The final sub-theme explaining disidentification concentrated on Association A funding being perceived as flowing to Team A. This theme was differentiated from Taking Away as it focused on the financial value system of participants in Association A, while Taking Away concentrated on the belief that Team A should serve its community in practice. Respondent 60 described how his disidentification stemmed from the perception that "Team A seem to be focused on top down rather than bottom up development. It's not that appealing if you are at the bottom like most of us." Discontentment about the flow of funding up and away from the grassroots was a recurring theme: "at local level too much of registration money goes

to Team A” (Respondent 37). Additionally, Respondent 70 inquired: “why do my rego fees have to support and pay for Team A”? The perception of Association A’s funding (mainly accrued from player registrations at local clubs) being focused on Team A contrasted with respondents beliefs on where funding should be directed, as Respondent 2 continued:

Football is about \*participation\*, not elitism.... Concentrating on elite players is soul-destroying for everyone else. Concentrate on the average and poor players - they're the ones who need your support, and they're the ones who have the money. Participation in sport is so much more important than who you "follow" or who you watch. So concentrate on the lower divisions - no-one cares about The Premier League.

Respondent 2 valued the grassroots levels of football above Team A and disidentified as he valued participatory funding as being more important than funding Team A.

The elite funding focus served to alienate Association members that did not identify with Team A, or value the success of Team A as important to their self-definition. This sentiment was reinforced by Respondent 9, who outlined how the upward flow of funds led to his own disidentification:

The funding of local football should flow down the hierarchy, not up. I resent having to subsidise Team A. If Team A wants good facilities they should find ways of generating income to build them through support from FFA or other sponsorship, rather than taxing the rest of the Association A players who just want a bit of fun on the weekend

This comment outlined his resentment at the ‘taxation’ of recreational players as a tool to fund Team A. However, other responses highlighted that the upward flow of funds was broader than just the situation reported here: “[football] must be the only sport in the country where the amateur and grass roots junior competitions continue to fund mediocre semi & professional leagues.” Irrespective of the broader funding issues inherent to football in Australia, the elite focus of funding in Association A was incongruent with the value-based perceptions of local participants and led to disidentification from Team A.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored what led to non-attendance at community sport matches. In doing so, we utilised a social identity approach to expand the current scope of the awareness stage of the PCM. Apathy and disidentification were both salient cognitive responses underpinning non-attendance at Team A's games. Furthermore, the analysis highlighted six sub-themes, which provided initial illustrations of perceptions that accompanied non-attendance, as well as what may act as a barrier to attraction. With regard to the central research objective, the results revealed six sub-themes that impeded attendance. RQ1 explored what contributed to cognitive apathy. We found three sub-themes explaining cognitive apathy, which included: irrelevance, external constraints and lacking information. RQ2 explored what led to disidentification from a sport team. The findings revealed three factors leading to disidentification from a sport team: perceived club characteristics, taking away, and elite focus.

The spectrum of perceptions observed during data analysis is depicted in Figure 1, below. While we did not explore positive processes leading to attendance during this study, we include this positive side of the spectrum as a multitude of researchers have conceptually (Funk & James, 2001), and empirically explored this outcome in the PCM (Beaton et al., 2010; Filo et al., 2008). Additionally the decision to identify has been overwhelmingly shown to result from individuals seeking to attach themselves to groups that are relevant and will reflect positively on how they view themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We use the term attraction at the positive extreme of the awareness spectrum for terminological consistency with the awareness stage of the PCM.

In cases that the values and characteristics of Team A were shown to be irrelevant respondents ascribed no value to identifying or disidentifying – thus leading to the apathy outcome. When the values and characteristics of Team A were incongruent with what

individuals' deemed important negative awareness processes led to disidentification outcomes (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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The broader discussion of the themes and sub-themes presented forms the focus of this section.

### **5.1 Cognitive Apathy**

Previous work investigating constraints to sport attendance has developed understanding of what stands in the way of people attending (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008). Via the social identity approach adopted, we have complemented and developed existing understanding of constraints by exploring how non-attendees' perceived a community based semi-professional sport team. The adoption of a social identity approach invoked significant understanding of why individuals sought to not associate or disassociate with Team A (Tajfel, 1972, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982). The notion of irrelevance was mentioned by Crawford and Godbey (1987) in their initial study of constraints, but this existed beyond the scope of the two consumer based sport studies to date (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008). Here, irrelevance was shown to underpin non-attendance because Team A was outside of respondents' interests (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). As Team A was irrelevant to some respondents, cognitively there was no need to disidentify as the group was unrelated to the values or characteristics that this group of respondents deemed to be important (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

While external constraints have been shown to inhibit attendance in relation to sport teams, this study contributes understanding of the perceptions which may accompany external constraints. The primary external constraints observed were structural and included time, distance from home ground, family commitments and existing market alternatives, all of which have been unearthed previously (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008). However, here we extend existing conceptualisations to show that while externally constrained from attending,

this group of respondents was mainly apathetic towards Team A, and in some cases - keen to attend in the future. This finding provided a tangential endorsement of McDonald and Stavros' (2007) work, showing that non-attendance was not necessarily accompanied with a negative perception. Consequently, through providing certain facilities at games (childcare and coaching clinics), apathy at the awareness level is potentially changeable, which tallies closely with the assertion that constraints are not insurmountable (Crawford & Godbey, 1987), instead they should be viewed as areas for marketing and product development in a sport consumer context (Trail et al, 2008).

In addition to external constraints stopping individuals from attending, we also observed a lack of external forces driving progression to the attraction stage. In their initial development of the PCM, Funk and James (2001) utilised previous conceptualisations of the role played by socialisation agents (cf. Kenyon, 1969; Sloan, 1979) to explain the role of friends, family and media as critical processes which drive progression to the attraction stage. The lack of information in relation to Team A led to non-attendance because respondents did not know when games were on, felt the brand of Team A lacked credibility and players were unknown. Therefore, while socialisation agents are broadly shown to drive progression to attraction, this study contributes by showing that for individuals who are apathetic, a lack of socialisation agents may lead to non-attendance. We also argue for a broader conceptualisation of socialisation agents to consider that they may be a positive process that drives progression to attraction (de Groot & Robinson, 2008) or an absent process underlying non-attendance as shown here.

The lack of information on game times and players contributed to the constraints tested previously (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008); however we feel that the higher standard of sport investigated by Trail and colleagues is the primary reason for this finding. This previous work explored collegiate sport in the US, which attracts far more media coverage and support

than Team A. In the community based semi-professional context explored, a lack of information on game times and players was shown to lead to non-attendance and this was a key contribution of this study. A lack of information did not link with negative perceptions of Team A. Therefore, this group of respondents are potentially convertible from non-attendee to attendee. However, to achieve this transition, organisation-based efforts such as the provision of game time information, as well as brand development through local media and/or grassroots marketing initiatives are fundamental in the progression to attraction. Given the lower revenue of Team A, new media technologies could provide a cost-efficient means to disseminate information and initiate promotions.

## **5.2 Disidentification**

Now, the discussion moves to consider the broader connotations of the data relating to disidentification. Individuals exhibiting disidentification outlined a contradiction between the values and/or characteristics of Team A and their personal value system. This group of respondents illustrated perceptions of Team A existing toward the negative extreme of the Awareness Spectrum displayed in Figure 1. Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) focused intently on the role of organisational values as antecedents to disidentification, while Bhattacharya and Elsbach (2002) included values and characteristics in their conceptualisation of identification and disidentification. In relation to sport, the characteristics of teams are a vital consideration.

Through the exploration of disidentification we expanded the scope of existing research investigating reasons that sport consumers do not attend (Kim & Trail, 2010; Trail et al., 2008) by providing initial understanding of what leads to disidentification in a community sport context. Respondent perceptions of club processes and characteristics provided initial understanding of how negative processes led to non-attendance. The perception that Team A had: unfair and nepotistic trialling processes; and treated children like 'cattle' after trials; as well as the perception that their junior development processes were inadequate led some

respondents to disidentify. Therefore, perceptions at the awareness stage can be influenced not only by team-based characteristics and values, but by perceptions, or experiences garnered from direct interaction with the organisation.

The other two sub-themes explaining disidentification were strongly related to incongruence between individual's values and the perceived values of Team A (Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Team A was perceived as not giving back to their home community, in practice and financially. The concept of taking away was value-based, as was Team A's elite focus. For Team A, the success of their flagship side was valued above recruiting local players and engaging with the community, thus they recruited what they perceived to be better players from outside of the local catchment and concentrated on first team success. Respondents outlining these two themes clearly articulated that their values in relation to what was critical for the delivery of football in the community were fundamentally different to the elitist approach to recruitment and funding provision Team A was perceived to adopt. Therefore, while acknowledging that a broader consideration of organisational characteristics and processes is necessary in the sporting domain, we also strongly support the role of understanding how organisational values lead to disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) argued that the degree to which an individual disidentifies is directly related to the extent that the values of the organisation contradict their own. The purpose of this study was not to gather metrics on the degree of disidentification. Instead we sought to contribute initial illustrations of the negative factors, which may lead to disidentification in a community sport context. By doing this, we developed an understanding that negative awareness states may be persistent. Here, disidentification was outlined as a potentially persistent cognitive response for some respondents, which added to existing understanding of the construct. Additionally, it contributed understanding that changing

disidentification toward more positive forms of awareness may be challenging and involve modifying how people perceive the organisation – if that is possible. However, through understanding how organisational values and characteristics contribute to disidentification, sporting entities should be able to improve understanding of the key values they need to portray to leverage more positive awareness states.

## **6. Conclusion**

The contributions stemming from this paper require dichotomisation. First, the awareness spectrum provides a conceptual framework, which outlines how positive, neutral and negative perceptions of a team (based on perceived values and characteristics) underpin the likelihood of attendance. We see this conceptualisation as broadly applicable to a variety of cases, contexts and levels of sport as positive, neutral and negative perceptions are likely to occur across cases and contexts. The perceived values and characteristics of sport clubs are likely to influence the likelihood of attraction, apathy, or disidentification regardless of the level of sport explored. Second, the illustrations of sub-themes which drive cognitive apathy and disidentification provided in this paper are highly contextual and specific to individuals with some level of involvement in football. Therefore, the values, characteristics and club practices outlined here require retesting to assess the transferability of the exploratory data presented to other cases and contexts and to non-football participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The specific values and characteristics, which lead to apathy and disidentification in other cases and contexts should be explored to expand upon this exploratory study.

Informed by the dichotomisation above, this study has made four contributions to current understanding of reasons people choose not to attend sport. Firstly, we have broadened the conceptualisation of awareness to include a spectrum of value and characteristic based perceptions ranging from positive through to negative, with potential outcomes attributable to each. By considering varying team perceptions at the awareness level, sport managers and

marketers can address existing values and characteristics, which are shown to lead potential consumers toward a state of neutral or negative awareness.

Second, this study has contributed initial understanding of the perceptions that accompany constraints. Respondents that were constrained explained mainly apathetic perceptions of Team A. Therefore this group represents a key area for managerial action as they do not disidentify with organisational values or characteristics and were shown to be interested in attending in some cases.

Thirdly, we observed that an absence of socialisation agents was a key theme underpinning non-attendance, which had not been explored in previous studies of constraints. This contribution endorsed the role of socialisation agents defined as key in the progression of consumers from awareness to attraction within the PCM. Our finding illustrates that while socialisation agents may be positive (leading to attraction) they may also be absent. For managers and marketers of sport teams, understanding the effectiveness of socialisation agents is of key importance, especially for developing consumer support in the community based sport sector.

Finally, this paper has extended previous literature in relation to the reasons that individuals do not attend sport by providing an initial elaboration of disidentification. While corroborating earlier findings in relation to organisational values, we extended this conceptualisation to include the influence of perceptions of club characteristics and experiences with sport teams. Both values and characteristics acted to form negative perceptions of Team A when they were incongruent with the value system of respondents.

Practically, this study demonstrated that people view sport teams as having distinct responsibilities. In this case, Team A was perceived as having a duty to service its community, develop local talent and provide a concentration of funding to grassroots participants. Understanding factors which lead to value incongruence in other cases and contexts provides

a useful area for empirical and conceptual development to improve understanding of the spectrum of awareness perceptions that may influence the likelihood of attraction and attendance. This can then assist in developing products and services to attract the largest possible proportion of potential consumers inhabiting the awareness stage.

### **7. Limitations and future research**

This paper presented an exploratory, qualitative study into perceptions associated with non-attendance. Due to the exploratory and interpretive approach adopted, this paper was limited. We acknowledge three primary limitations of this study. First, the sample of non-attendees was small when compared with the sampling frame of 9000 emails sent. While this was affected by the low proportion of respondents that opened the initial email (n=2000) the total of 75 responses represented a small cross-section of the broader sampling frame. This limitation is further extended by the fact that the researchers were unable to conduct any follow up with individuals that did not respond. However, through the implementation of a questionnaire, we were able to garner a broader qualitative perspective than would have been possible from an in-depth interview approach.

Second, the open-ended response format included for the question exploring reasons for non-attendance required extra effort from a participant perspective as response was optional, thus introducing potential response bias. We acknowledge that the 75 respondents providing qualitative responses may have answered these questions as they were the most passionate about their feelings. We sought to temper this limitation by looking at non-identification, in addition to disidentification. Additionally, we also acknowledge that due to the use of a questionnaire instrument, the research team was unable to probe deeper into participant responses, which would have been possible with an interview.

Third, due to the exploration taking place in a community based semi-professional sport context and considering the sample of 75, the broader transferability of these findings to other

contexts requires consideration and retesting. Future research should seek to test other cases and contexts to better assess the transferability of the findings presented. However, future research should extend beyond concentration on community based, semi-professional teams. Future research should explore which organisational values and characteristics influence the formation of positive, neutral and negative team-based perceptions at varying levels of sport. There is also an important agenda to study the extent to which the values organisations define themselves by (not those that they are perceived to hold) influence attraction. This should be coupled with qualitative research with organisational personnel to explore their approach toward defining core values and characteristics, as well as assess their ability to communicate these to their market.

Methodologically, there is an agenda for future mixed-method research to provide a deeper qualitative insight into specifically why organisational values and characteristics lead to apathy, or disidentification. This agenda should be implemented alongside quantitative research to model the strength and dimensionality of identity processes across the Awareness Spectrum. This mixed-method methodology could utilise a similar questionnaire distribution approach complemented by the use of interviews or focus groups with individuals who did not respond to the questionnaire to address the issue of non-respondents.

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Table 1  
Demographic characteristics and association involvement

<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b><i>Gender</i></b>	
Male	63
Female	12
Total	75
<b><i>Age</i></b>	
18-24	2
25-29	3
30-34	1
35-39	7
40-44	18
45-49	16
50-54	10
55-59	6
60-64	1
Over 65	2
Total	66
Missing	9
<b><i>Form of participation in Association A</i></b>	
Player	23
Referee	4
Administrator	5
Coach	13
My Children or family members play	23
Spectator	6
No current involvement	1
Total	75
<b><i>Age-group involved with in Association A</i></b>	
6-9 years	10
10-18 years	28
Senior	23
Over 35's	13
Total	74
Missing	1

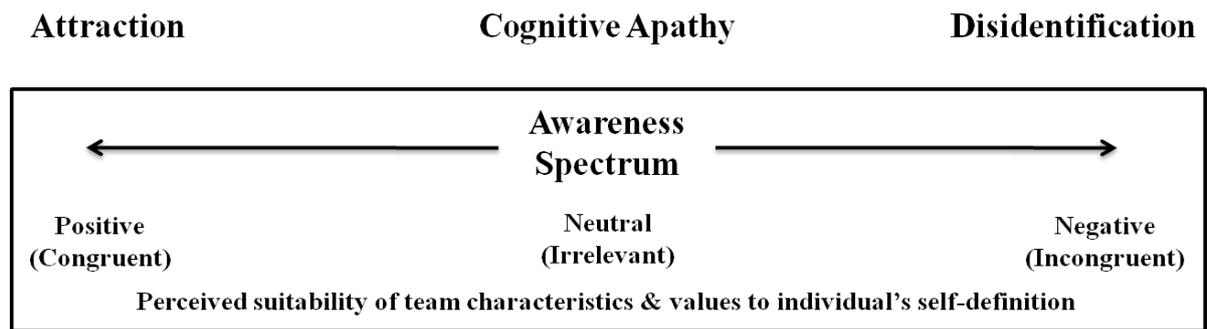


Figure 1. Awareness Spectrum