

**Winning the Loyalty Cup: Impact of Symbol-related Brand Elements on Brand Loyalty
of Sports Clubs**

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Abstract: Extant research in marketing has recognized the importance of branding in sports. Professional sports clubs are considered to be big brands, and fan loyalty is a crucial factor in determining their success. Brand elements are the building blocks of brands and are used by brand managers to create distinct associations in consumers' minds, resulting in brand recall and recognition. This study employs the context of football to explore the relationship between the symbol-related brand elements of a sports club and brand loyalty towards the club. We find that the brand elements, the history of the club, jersey and logo positively influence brand loyalty towards a sports club. The study sheds light on the importance of brand elements for a sports club brand and can help brand managers and sponsors to focus more on investments in brand elements that matter, as opposed to those which do not.

Keywords: brand awareness; brand associations; sponsorships; brand loyalty; sports brands; sports marketing.

1 Introduction

Extant research in sports management has recognized the importance of branding in sports clubs (Abosag, Roper, and Hind, 2012; Ross, James, and Vargas, 2006). Branding plays an important role in positively shaping fans' team perceptions and preferences of a sports club, and in differentiating the club from its rivals (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer and Exler, 2008). Consequently, developing a brand image has become one of professional sport clubs' primary objectives. Strong brands command customer loyalty (Aaker, 2012; Keller, 2001) and premium prices (Aaker, 2012), making them valuable assets for investors. As a result, brands have now become the cornerstone of many business transactions in sports, especially for clinching sponsorship deals and selling product merchandise. Further, the growing commercialization and professionalization of team-sport clubs and leagues have made brand management a central issue in the world of sports (Blumrodt, Bryson and Flanagan, 2012; Bauer et al., 2008).

Professional football clubs can be considered full-fledged brands, and past studies have indicated that brands are their most important assets, similar to any other business entity in the modern era (Blumrodt et al., 2012; Bodet and Chanavat, 2010). Kuper and Szymanski (2018) consider professional football clubs as well-known and enduring brands. These club brands appear more highly sustainable and stable than brands in other industries (Gillett, Tennent and Hutchinson, 2016; Kuper and Szymanski, 2018). The high level of fan loyalty that most brands command is a primary reason for their stability (Pick and Gillett, 2018). While firms in non-sports industries tend to go out of business or diversify to a greater extent than sports firms, club brands in football often get bailed out or 'pneonixed' of any financial difficulties by governments or businesspeople who spot the potential of fan loyalty with regard to selling or promoting club offerings (Gillett and Tennent, 2018; Gillett, Tennent and Hutchinson, 2016; Kuper and Szymanski, 2018). Three of the top five most valuable sports

teams in the world are from the sport of association football (Forbes rank list 2017). Manchester United, for example, is one of the biggest sporting brands in the world in terms of its revenue (753.74 million U.S. dollars in 2017).

A high level of brand awareness and clear brand associations are some of the hallmarks of a strong brand. At the same time, there is evidence that even when clubs succeed in achieving a high degree of brand awareness, many of them fail to create distinctive brand associations in the minds of the fans (Schilhaneck, 2008). One amongst the many reasons for this could be shortcomings in brand integration within heterogeneous target groups such as direct/indirect audiences (fans, stadium attendance/TV-audiences, VIPs), sponsors, marketers and media. Extant research in marketing suggests that the right mix of carefully crafted brand elements can be used to improve brand associations (Keller, 2013). Strong brand associations are shown to have a major impact on loyalty in the sports industry (Maderer, Holtbruegge, and Woodland, 2016). However, we find that past research has not given much attention to the importance of brand elements in the development of brand loyalty, especially in sports contexts. This assumes relevance given that fans identify with brand elements such as the jerseys, colours and mascots of sports clubs or national teams. Further, the design of effective marketing strategies to create, retain and expand fan bases is still in its infancy, though commercial goals such as media coverage and returns have clearly become more important (Bauer et al., 2008). The pivotal role of brand loyalty has been well-recognised by sports researchers for two primary reasons: first, loyalty guarantees a steady fan following even when the core product's performance weakens (e.g.: when the club is going through a losing patch); second, fans may patronize product extensions beyond the core product when they are loyal to a club (Bauer et al., 2008; Gladden and Funk, 2001). Consequently, this study explores the relationship between symbol-related brand elements and brand loyalty towards sports clubs. In addition, the study ranks brand elements in the order of their significance for

building brand loyalty. These objectives are examined within the context of association football or soccer, predominantly because of their huge popularity, and because sports followers around the world can easily relate to them.

There are many upcoming sports leagues around the world, which requires to invest heavily in the design and execution of strategies based on brand elements. Sports goods manufacturers such as Adidas and Nike initiate research and product development activities two to three years before a world cup (Sokolowski, 2018). Thus, the investments are not only in terms of money, but also in time and other resources. These resources are spent on the research and design of brand elements such as jerseys or mascots that stand out in terms of designs, materials, and graphics. Clubs and sports kit manufacturers also attempt to deter counterfeiting. The present study has implications for the brand management practices of sports leagues and clubs that aim to create unique brand associations and attract loyal followers.

In the subsequent section, we present a review of the ideas discussed in marketing literature about brand elements and brand loyalty, with a focus on sports. The hypotheses and research model are presented after this review of literature. Further, the methodology for measuring the relationships are explained, as are the processes used for the analysis and discussion of the findings. The results are then discussed, highlighting the managerial implications, and we conclude the paper by focusing on the limitations of the study and the scope of further research.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as “the biased behavioral response expressed over time, by some decision-making unit, with respect to one or more alternative brands out of a set of such

brands, and is a function of psychological processes” (Jacoby and Kyrner, 1973, p. 2). Loyal consumers have been observed to making multiple brand-related purchases, such as services and accessories, and to spread favorable brand messages by word of mouth. Such customers are not particularly price sensitive to their loyal brands’ offerings (Anisimova, 2007; Huber and Hermann, 2001). For these reasons, gaining new customers can cost a sport club five times as much as retaining existing customers (Keller, 2013; Reichheld, 2006).

Several researchers have argued that loyalty has both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions (Anisimova, 2007; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978). This essentially means that for brands, loyalty is not only important for basic repurchasing behaviors, but also important at the attitudinal level. Consumer attitudinal loyalty captures the cognitive and affective components of brand loyalty in terms of long-term commitment to the company or brand (Kumar and Shah, 2004), and signifies a propensity for positive word of mouth recommendations (Reichheld, 2003). Anisimova (2007) has suggested that consumer commitment at the cognitive and affective level becomes meaningful only if it is supported at the behavioral level through actual purchases. Interestingly, a stream of research has studied attitudinal loyalty as a prerequisite for behavioral loyalty (Bauer et al., 2005). The ‘diamond of loyalty’ model shows that loyalists typically are individuals who make actual brand purchases, thereby seeking to build/maintain a relationship with brands (Knox, 1998). This argument is highly relevant in sports, as research has found that loyal fans are highly involved in sports events (Bee and Havitz, 2010).

Fan loyalty is very important to sports clubs for a variety of reasons. For instance, season-ticket holders account for a significant share of total revenues (Desjardins et al., 2014). In addition, loyal consumers purchase products and services associated with their favored brands, irrespective of the actions of their competitor brands (Aaker, 2004). In a sports team context, loyal fans are important for ensuring consistent stadium attendance,

media viewership and the consumption of team merchandise (Neale and Funk, 2006). Such fans are also likely to stand with their team in the event of bad performance on the field, and they tend to transfer their allegiance to the offerings of their favorite club's corporate sponsors (Neale and Funk, 2006; Sebastian and Bristow, 2000). Bauer et al. (2005) have found that the non-product-related attributes of a sports brand are important to its fans' loyalty. These attributes include logos and club colors, histories and traditions. Past research has suggested that fans may sometimes rely on visual factors such as logo or jersey to make their initial decision to support a club (e.g.: Maderer et al. 2016; Shuttleworth, 2012). Shuttleworth (2012) note that the large fan following of Liverpool FC and Manchester United in Asia is often attributed to the clubs' red logos and jerseys, which stand for loyalty and success in several cultural settings. Also, by examining the attitudes of Chinese fans, Bodet and Chanavat (2010) have shown that history and traditions have an influence on loyalty. Thus, the symbol-related elements of a football club brand, which include its brand logo, jersey, and history, are crucial to brand associations and influence brand loyalty.

2.2 Brand elements

Brand elements are the different devices that can be trademarked and provide means for identifying a brand and differentiating it from its competitors (Keller, 2013). The most important of these elements include brand names, logos, characters, spokespeople, slogans, jingles, packages, and URLs. Color, graphics, typeface, celebrities, and music could also be considered brand elements (Gaillard, Sharp, and Romaniuk, 2006). Extant research in brand management has recognized the role of brand elements on building brand equity (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014; Farhana, 2012). Brand elements can be used as distinctive cues to improve brand awareness, facilitating the development of strong and unique brand associations (Keller, 2003). For example, Weszka (2011) highlights the use of posters, logos, and mascots related to hosting destinations of FIFA World Cups to project unique aspects of

the destination brand. Such associations with brand elements are shown to impact brand personality perceptions (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014).

As has been indicated, brand elements play a major role in helping to distinguish a brand from its competition and facilitate identification of the brand in multiple environments (Keller, 2013; Aaker, 1997). Brand identification not only has a positive effect on consumer loyalty, but also moderates the relationship between brand personality and loyalty (Chung and Park, 2017; Kim, Han, and Park, 2001). Seimiene and Kamarauskaite (2014) investigate how different brand features shape consumers' perceptions of brand personalities in the context of beer brands and find that designs of bottles and labels, design colors, and advertisements impact the brand personalities of beer brands. Thus, brand personality plays a key role in developing brand loyalty, which in turn forms favorable attitudes towards the brand.

Meffert and Burmann (1996) have proposed a model for classifying the wide variety of brand elements into four categories, each of which is further described through an extensive list of characterizing parameters. The first category of product-related brand elements consists of qualitative features, product design, point of sale presentation and price. The second category is symbol-related brand elements. The characterizing parameters of these elements include brand name, logo, brand history, and brand communication. Organization-related brand elements, such as affiliations with organizations, employees' behaviors and employees' concerns form the third category. The final category of person-related brand elements consists of the timing of the brand's market entry, cultural connections, and the perceptions of typical users. Ultimately, consumers' perceptions about the quality and quantity of the execution of these parameters shape a brand's identity.

Schilhaneck (2008) modified Meffert and Burmann's (1996) framework from the perspective of professional sports clubs. In his theoretical framework, the first category of product-related brand elements includes a club's style of play, player formations in team sports, ticket pricing, and club merchandising. The club's name, logo/crest/badge, landmark events or achievements and communication of the game results and news through various media constitute the second category of symbol-related brand elements. The category of organization-related elements is composed of the behavior of players and management on the field, the behavior of contact personnel (those employed by the club as well as those who are outsourced by service enterprises), and youth development programs. The personalities related to the club, including the players and the team's fan community comprise the person-related brand elements.

The symbol-related brand elements of a club are the primary reference points for its fans (Schilhaneck, 2008). Typically, this category is composed of the club's name, its logo and colors, its history/traditions, its anthem, and its mascot. Brand associations and awareness are usually formed around primary reference points such as logos or symbols (Keller, 2013), as the customers come into contact with them more frequently than with the elements of the other categories. Further, brand associations are built through customers' experiences while watching a game (Desjardins et al., 2014). Thus, as symbol-related brand elements are the primary contact points while watching a game, they shape brand associations more than any other category of brand elements. For example, in a study of the communicative effect of product packaging, Underwood (2003) maintains that a combination of the visual elements of the brand logo – colors, fonts, packaging materials, shapes, and pictorials – deliver rich brand associations. It has been established that brand awareness and brand associations play crucial roles in strengthening a brand (Aaker, 2012). Consequently, consumers' perceptions of these different identity elements define the image of the brand per se (Schilhaneck, 2008). The

distinctive approach of each brand element functions to portray an image of the brand in consumers' memories and acts as a clue for recall inducing brand loyalty (Farhana, 2012).

Likability may be described as a global positive response towards an entity and has underlying cognitive and affective dimensions (Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Walker and Dubitsky, 1994). Past research has shown that likability is a good marker of effectiveness (Brown and Stayman, 1992). When a consumer likes an advertisement, chances are high that he/she may transfer the resultant positive feelings towards the brand itself. Consequently, the likability of a brand positively impacts purchase behaviour and brand loyalty (Callcott and Phillips, 1996; Urde, 1994).

2.2.1 Logos

Logos are the visual icons that provide two basic, yet necessary, functions for brands: identification (a marker for finding a specific offering) and differentiation (how to distinguish an offering from others in the same category). Logo design has a major impact on brand awareness (Janiszewski and Meyvi, 2001; Henderson and Cote, 1998) and influences consumers' perceptions of brand personality (Grohmann, 2008). For example, consumers perceive a brand to be more sincere when its logo is natural and coherent with the brand's overall image. Brand awareness helps in identification by keeping the brand in the consumers' evoked sets of memory, thus enhancing the likelihood that consumers will purchase the brand (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). Brand personality and brand identification combine to play a positive role in ensuring brand loyalty and the formation of favorable attitudes towards the brand (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014; Kim et al., 2001). Thus, we posit that the likability of a brand logo positively influences brand loyalty towards a sports club.

H₁: The likability of a logo has a positive influence on brand loyalty towards a sports club.

2.2.2 Jersey

The major components that help to form a perception of a jersey are its colors and design. The colors of a brand and its personality are interlinked (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014). For instance, blue and red are often associated with competence; green with sincerity; and pink, yellow, and purple with excitement (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera, 2001). Many sports teams around the world have used these colors abundantly on their jerseys. Examples are the profuse use of the color red for teams such as Manchester United, Liverpool, and Arsenal. At the same time, it should be noted that historically, the colors selected signified religious affiliations at times. While several of the clubs having links to Roman Catholicism chose green (e.g.: Glasgow Celtic) or red (Liverpool), Protestant teams from the same cities wore another color, usually blue (e.g.: Glasgow Rangers, Everton). It has been established that brand associations and characteristics are inferred from user imagery, employees, and product endorsers (Aaker, 1997). The role of a distinctive brand personality in enhancing brand loyalty and brand equity has also been studied (Seimiene and Kamarauskaite, 2014; Lin, 2010). As brand associations and personalities are interlinked with brand loyalty, we propose that the likability of a jersey, including its colors and design, has a positive influence on brand loyalty towards a sports club.

H₂: The likability of a jersey has a positive influence on brand loyalty towards a sports club.

2.2.3 Mascot/ Brand character

A carefully chosen/crafted brand mascot can contribute to brand awareness by standing out among the clutter in the marketplace (Keller, 2003). Brand characters are sources of brand identity and favorable brand associations (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004). They denote emotions and ideas (Mize and Kinney, 2008). For example, the FIFA World Cup makes use of mascots with qualities associated with the host nation in all their promotional event activities. This practice helps to building a deeper connection between clubs and people from

the host nation, as well as football fans around the world. Several researchers have noted that the practice as an increasing trend and consistent with the commercialization of sport and events (Pick and Gillett, 2018; Gillett and Tennent, 2017). The visual brand element of a mascot also occupies a prominent position as a source of brand equity, particularly in increasing brand awareness among consumers. It has been shown that high awareness of a brand increases consumer loyalty towards it (Chi, Yeh, and Yang, 2009). There are abundant examples of mascots or characters that are endearing to generations of fans (e.g.: Benny the bull, the Philly Phanatic) and increase the enjoyment of fan's interactions with clubs. Hence, we may consider mascots to be a part of the overall brand experience. We posit that the likability of a brand mascot would positively influence brand loyalty.

H₃: The likability of a mascot has a positive influence on brand loyalty towards a sports club.

2.2.4 History/Heritage

With particular reference to professional sports, researchers view club history and traditions as a basis for brand equity (Gladden, Milne and Sutton, 1998). History and traditions include a club's legacy from social classes (e.g.: the working-class roots of FC Schalke) or past sporting achievements. History moulds the club brand perceptions (Bauer, Exler and Sauer, 2005; Schilhaneck, 2008) and hence is considered to be a very important symbol for the brand. For a sports club, the number of championships won, major players who have played for it, and landmark events contribute to fans' perception of a club's history for the fans. Nostalgia, which evokes fond memories, can be a rich source of a brand's image. Belk (1990) has argued that a sense of the past, that is associated with group experiences, prompts consumers to make purchases because it rekindles their past experiences. Recalling landmark events in the history of the club likewise provides a sense of the past, and the legacy/traditions of a sports club is an important reason for fans to stay loyal to a club. Contextual factors concerning a team, such as club history and traditions, are of considerable

relevance to fans in terms of shaping a brand's image (Bauer et al., 2005). The image-congruence of a consumer with the brand positively affects brand loyalty (Kressmann et al., 2006). It has also been found that the likelihood of consumers' purchasing tickets to games and buying team merchandise are significantly influenced by brand image and brand knowledge (Esch, Langner, Schmitt, and Guess, 2006). Therefore, we posit that the likability of a club's history and its related associations influence loyalty towards the brand. Likability of a club's history refers to how much a fan likes a set of factors, including playing style, the set of players who have played and contributed towards the club, and famous wins and performances.

H₄: The likability of the history of a club has a positive influence on brand loyalty towards a sports club.

2.2.5 Anthem

Brand anthems and slogans have a profound influence on the meaning consumers attribute to a branded entity (Weszka, 2011; Adamson, 2007). A club anthem can capture the essence of the brand and act as a powerful memory trigger that increases the ability for brand recall (Bindea et al., 2009). For example, Keller (2003) recognized that brand jingles could enhance brand awareness and Buchanan (2005) states that "slogans marry the name of the brand to the melody that clings to the mind." Brand awareness is thereby shown to aid in brand identification by keeping the brand in the consumer's memory, thereby enhancing the likelihood of a purchase (Hoyer and Brown, 1990). In addition, researchers have observed that when awareness of a brand is high, consumer loyalty towards it will also increase (Chi et al., 2009). In line with research assessing brand loyalty by level of consumer likability (Bristow and Sebastian, 2001; Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978), we posit that the likability of an anthem would influence brand loyalty.

H₅: The likability of an anthem has a positive influence in the brand loyalty towards a sports club.

3 Methodology

We employed a mixed-methods approach, starting with a focus group discussion to identify the major themes, and used those themes as the basis for the adaptation of a questionnaire for our survey (Weidner, Bal, Rains and Leeds, 2016; Rao and Perry, 2003). The participants of the focus group discussion included students at Masters and Doctoral levels who were football club followers and attending a large Southern University in India (N= 10; Mean age= 23). The study began with questions on the participants' loyalty to clubs and the reasons for their loyalty. This was followed by questions on their clubs' playing kits, logos, mascots, anthems and slogans, and landmark events. The major themes identified from the discussions include the colors of the clubs' jerseys, the appearance of the brand elements, club achievements, the major players who played for the clubs, scope for improvement, and constant comparisons between the clubs regarding all these brand elements. The clubs the students followed included Manchester United, Arsenal, Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund, Kerala Blasters, and Jamshedpur FC.

3.1 Instruments

We created a survey questionnaire which included the themes identified from the focus group discussions. We measured the likability of brand elements according to respondents' feelings towards the brand element in question and their rating of the brand element compared to that of the other clubs they know. This was deemed necessary, as the brand elements of competitor clubs also vie for the attention of followers. For this, we adapted scales from extant literature in line with Keller (1993) and Bauer et al. (2008), who formulated measures to assess fans' perceptions concerning brand attributes. Scales for the likability of logos and

jerseys were adapted from Maderer et al. (2016). Sample items included “I like the colours of my favourite club”, “I like the logo of my favourite club”, and “My favourite club’s uniforms are attractive” (Cronbach’s alpha= 0.838). The scale for tradition/history was also adapted from Maderer et al. (2016) and included items such as “My favourite club has a history of winning”, and “My favourite club has a rich history.” The likability of these brand elements was measured on 7-point Likert-type scales, with anchors of “1 = strongly disagree” and “7 = strongly agree”. We adapted the 5-point Likert scale for loyalty from Neale and Funk (2006) and Yoo, Donthu, and Lee (2000). These scales include items such as “I consider myself to be loyal to X,” and “I would watch my favourite team regardless of which team they were playing against at the time” (Cronbach’s alpha= 0.835). While assessing loyalty towards the club, we specifically asked respondents if they would stay loyal to their club even after a bad performance/bad performances. A detailed description of measures is given in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

3.2 Data collection and procedure

We used convenience sampling technique for our survey. Online questionnaires provide respondents with the flexibility of access from any geographical location (Pick and Gillette, 2018; Selm and Jankowski, 2006). At the outset, the respondents were asked to note down their favorite football club and answer questions based on their perceptions about that club. This ensured that only fans who follow a club’s activities well took the survey. Furthermore, we subtly hinted about the brand status of modern football clubs. This was deemed necessary as we wanted respondents to think about the business and brand sides of the clubs, apart from their associations with clubs as fans. The respondents were then asked to rate the brand elements under each item.

3.3 Participants

Participants of the survey were not only football club followers, as some of them had played at various levels from local clubs to state teams. They were from different walks of life and included software professionals, students, and government employees. We included respondents from the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Mexico, India, and the United States of America. We received data from 188 respondents, yielding a response rate of 94% among the participants who passed the screening question about their football followership (males=72%, mean age=25.38 years, age range: 17-42). It is generally observed that football is predominantly followed by males (Bauer et al., 2005), which is the case for this study as well, as 72% of the respondents were males. The English Premier League, La Liga, Bundesliga and Indian Super League were the major leagues in which the respondents' favourite teams performed.

3.4 Analysis

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using IBM AMOS 21 estimated the parameters of the model. Goodness-of-fit was the criterion employed to assess the reliability and validity of the proposed model (Bagozzi and Baumgartner, 1994). The reliability and validity criteria, viz. Cronbach's alpha, used for the variables have been presented in Table 2. We used the global fit criteria to evaluate the consistency of the structural model, while local fit criteria tested the fit of single indicators and factors (Maderer et al., 2016). The absolute fit indices used in this study are the chi-square index divided by degrees of freedom (CMIN/df), the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), the Parsimony Goodness-of-Fit Index (PGFI) and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). Additionally, this study employed two comparative fit measures: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Parsimony Comparative Fit Index (PCFI).

Insert Table 2 about here

4 Results

We examined the normality assumptions using skewness-kurtosis tests. No skewness values surpassed the absolute value of three and no kurtosis values exceeded the absolute value of ten (Kline, 2011). Thus, the data did not appear to violate the assumptions of normality. Table 3 provides the correlations for all variables.

Insert Table 3 about here

4.1 Model testing

The results of the CFI implied that the measurement model exhibited an acceptable model fit overall. We obtained the Relative/Normed Chi-Square (X^2/df) at an acceptable level of 2.34, above the threshold level of 2 (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007; Wheaton et al., 1977). While no threshold levels are specifically endorsed for parsimony indices (Hooper, Coughlan, and Mullen, 2008), researchers have noted that it is possible to obtain parsimony fit indices around 0.50 (Mulaik et al., 1989). The PCFI value suggests that the parsimony of the measurement model was 0.723, which is above the acceptable level of 0.7. Additionally, we used these parsimony indices with other measures of goodness-of-fit to overcome the absence of a threshold level. The CFI value 0.92 was above the cut-off needed to ensure that the model fits well (Hu and Bentler, 1999). The RMSEA value of the model was 0.095, which also exceeded the accepted threshold level of 0.08 (MacCallum, Browne, and Sugwara, 1996). Subsequently, the tests for discriminant validity, convergent validity and construct reliability were conducted to investigate the psychometric properties of the model. Ideally,

the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value must be more than 0.5 to ensure that a particular construct accounts for more than 50% of the variances; we obtained AVE above 0.5 for Jersey, History, and Loyalty (Table 4). Scores above 0.7 indicate good construct reliability (Hair et al., 1998), and we found the construct reliability scores for all the constructs to be above 0.8.

The ideal scenario of establishing discriminant validity is to have the squared correlations of the constructs lesser than the AVE. In this model, some of the correlations (e.g., Logo and History) did not comply with the ideal condition. This could be attributed to any possible reduction in data quality due to respondent fatigue and could also indicate that the constructs share common errors (e.g.: effects of team performance and star players spill over to logo and jersey). Table 4 provides the values of the test for discriminant validity.

Insert Table 4 about here

After the reliability and validity of the model were confirmed, we conducted a Path Model test using SEM. The results revealed that jersey, logo and history have a significant influence on brand loyalty ($p < 0.05$), providing support for H₂, H₁ and H₄. However, we did not get support for hypotheses related to the brand elements of anthem and mascot having a positive influence on loyalty (H₃ and H₅). The results of the Path Model analysis are presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

The results obtained provided the basis for the ranking of brand elements according to their influence level.

5 Discussion

The history of the club is seen to have the most significant influence on brand loyalty. This is followed by jersey and then by logo. We did not find that anthem and mascot had any impact on brand loyalty towards sports clubs.

The perception of the history of a club is influenced by the number of championships it has won, the great players who have played for it, and its excitement-inducing landmark events. Fans who take pride in the history of their favorite clubs are often seen to indulge in debates with fans of rival clubs on this aspect (Harris and Ogbonna, 2008). Several clubs display their trophies and medals from championships in their museums for the fans to see and learn about the clubs' rich histories (e.g. Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC) museum in the Lord's and Fenerbahçe Sports Club Museum in Istanbul). The rituals propagated by fan communities also play a role in stimulating nostalgic feelings about the clubs. A case in point is the Everton Football Club's toffee throwing ritual prior to kick-offs at Goodison Park stadium. Foster and Hyatt (2008) suggest that sport organisations use or 'invent' traditions to create and maintain fan loyalty. Past research also argued that this "invention of tradition" can be used to attract non-local individuals into becoming loyal fans (Foster and Hyatt, 2008; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Brand managers also place importance on utilizing perception of place in order to create or leverage history. The influence of the legacy of a place in relation to the perception of history can be observed in fans who display loyalty to a club when they believe the club to be a key civic asset, a behaviour termed as civic allegiance (Lewis, 2001). Consequently, if the club relocates to another city, these fans sever their connection to it as it would not continue to maintain the unique identity associated with place (Foster and Hyatt 2007; Lewis, 2001). Several cities or provinces wish to position themselves in relation to professional sports, one example being the Green Bay city's promotion through its Packers club in the National Football League (Mason and Foster 2007). With the advent of

social media, it has become easy for sports clubs to remind their followers about a tradition or a landmark event on a particular date. Thus, our findings underline the importance of such efforts for making the fans aware of the history of a club.

Jersey and logo are among the most visible elements of a club, from the viewpoint of the fans. Several participants in our focus group discussions endorsed this view. Ardent fans often associate certain colors with particular clubs to the extent of even identifying clubs using colors. For instance, the association with colors is so important that the media frequently refers to the Manchester United Football Club as Reds and the Chelsea Football Club as Blues. Further, the elements of jersey and logo feature prominently in most of clubs' brand communications. Keller (2003) has recognized that visual brand elements play a central role in brand awareness. As brand awareness and associations influence brand loyalty, it is not surprising that there is a noteworthy relationship between these two brand elements and loyalty.

Most sports club fans who follow the matches of their favorite clubs through television/internet telecast may focus on the medium only when the actual match action is on. They may not hear the club's anthem played before or after the match, and radio/television may not play it all due to time constraints. For instance, Real Madrid's anthem 'La Decima' and the Liverpool Football Club's 'You'll never walk alone' are more than two minutes long. Further, the mascot is not a very prominent feature in live telecasts or social media updates, and many participants in our focus group discussions were even unaware that their favorite clubs had mascots. The visibility of mascots is so low that only fans who have watched matches in their loyal clubs' stadiums recall seeing a mascot, as reflected by our focus group discussion participants. There is also a chance of the design of the mascot not being received favourably by the supporters of the club, which could negatively influence brand associations. Past research has suggested that viewers' preferences and perceptions must be

used to properly design a brand mascot (Lin, Lin and Kop 1999). Since the awareness about anthem and mascot is low for most of the fans, we did not find that these brand elements had any influence on brand loyalty. It is also worth noting that social media has of late become an important source of sports news and updates. Instant scores are available on the internet or social media, without much exposure to brand elements such as anthem or mascot.

5.1 Managerial Implications

The current investigation sheds light on the significance of the brand elements of sports clubs, which can help the brand managers of the clubs to effectively focus their attention or investment. Professional clubs often hire brand consultants to design their logos and user-interface elements, including communications regarding the history and major achievements of the club. Sportswear brands also make an effort to design the jerseys of the clubs they sponsor, after discussing and recognizing the club's requirements. This study suggests that investing in the brand elements of the club's history/legacy, jersey design and logo design is crucial for reinforcing its brand awareness and thereby improving loyalty towards the club. We also find that spending on brand elements such as the anthem and mascot may not yield many rewards.

Further, the results of this study show that the history/legacy of a club is a very influential element in terms of fan loyalty towards the club. This implies that clubs will particularly benefit if they make existing and potential fans aware of their history, championships, trophies and great players who have played for them. Social media presence may be one of the key strategies that could be adopted for improving communications with fans. Several clubs are now utilizing social media to give fans score updates and news, which rekindles nostalgic feelings about landmark events.

Jersey and logo designs have a significant influence on brand loyalty towards a club. LeClerc and Little (1997) find that product involvement and attitudinal loyalty are highly correlated. Hence, co-creating brand elements with fans or incorporating their suggestions regarding the design of these elements would have a positive effect on loyalty.

Keller (2003) suggests that reaching a high level of brand awareness demands that brand elements are easily recognized and recalled (memorable), and convey the intended meaning, with either descriptive or persuasive content (meaningfulness). Brand elements will be aesthetically appealing if they are interesting and rich in visual and verbal imagery (likability). Ensuring that brand elements are transferable across and within product categories, as well as across geographical boundaries and cultures, will build brand equity (transferability). It is also important to consider the adaptability and flexibility of brand elements over time (adaptability). Finally, they should be protectable both in a legal as well as a competitive sense (protectability). The brand managers of sports clubs may apply this broad framework while designing their brand elements. It should be noted that a good brand elements strategy should strive for the right mixture and balance between the verbal and visual contexts of these elements in order to maximize their collective contribution towards brand equity (Keller, 2013).

In summary, brand elements are crucial for sports leagues and clubs in terms of creating unique brand associations and attracting loyal followers. To the best of our knowledge, the present investigation is one of the first attempts in the literature to explore the part of symbolic brand elements in building loyalty. Our findings regarding the major symbolic brand elements needed to attract maximum followers will help clubs in new leagues

such as the West Australian Football League (WAFL¹) and the Premier Badminton League (PBL²), which are trying to build themselves as brands.

6 Limitations and future research

This study on the relationship between brand elements and brand loyalty has its own share of limitations. Firstly, football was used a proxy for all sports in order to highlight club brand management practices. However, the selection of football clubs for the purpose of this study is in line with past investigations in this area (Thomas, 2015; Schilhaneck, 2008) and it should be noted that the research implications are relevant to professional clubs for any other team sport.

Secondly, the players of a club are not considered to be symbolic brand elements. However, for many sports fans, the presence of a favorite player is an important reason for following a club or a national team and can shift fans' loyalty towards that particular club. For instance, an ardent fan of Cristiano Ronaldo mentions that he started following the matches of Real Madrid after Ronaldo moved to the club from Manchester United. Thus, the omission of players from the list of brand elements might have limited the scope of this study.

Thirdly, the scope of our research is mostly limited to team-based sports where visual imagery enhances the viewing experience. In addition, not all professional sports clubs have all the brand elements covered in this study. Future research could consider including person-related brand elements such as star players and their relationship with brand loyalty towards a club. Similarly, a club's manager/head coach, management, and owners also may have an

¹ Established in 2018, the WAFL is a women's football league in Australia. As on March 2021, the competition is contested by 6 clubs.

² The PBL is a franchise league in India, administered by the Badminton Association of India. Founded in 2013, it has 9 teams each representing a city in India.

important influence on perceptions of the club (e.g., Sir Alex Ferguson's impact on the Manchester United brand). At the same time, researchers could consider that players and training staff often change clubs or leagues, whereas symbol-related brand elements are permanent features of a sports club. Fans who have supported a club for long may become used to the transfers in and out of players and coaches, which is called "glory hunter phenomenon" (Maderer et al., 2016; Giulianotti, 2005). Fourthly, we have not delineated between recent history and long-term history. Future research may look into the recency effect of history on brand loyalty.

Fifthly, several researchers have noted the link between brand loyalty and brand associations sports settings (e.g.: Gladden and Funk, 2001). The question whether brand associations mediate the relationship between brand symbols and brand loyalty is a possible avenue for further research.

An extension of the present research could be examining the reverse direction of causality – that is, whether brand loyalty leads fans to like the symbols of club brands. There is scant literature that has investigated whether loyalty towards a club arises from its location/place of origin. Loyalty towards multiple clubs in different leagues or different countries is a real possibility for sport followers and future research could explore if our findings can be replicated in such situations. Another interesting question may be how fans' nationalities moderate the findings of a study. Consequently, the interaction between national pride and club loyalty demands additional research attention.

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Appendix

Table 1

Description of items

Logo	Design of the logo of my favourite club is sporty The color of the logo is pleasant I think the logo is the best among the logos of all the clubs I know
Jersey	Design of the jersey of my favourite club is sporty The color of the jersey is pleasant I think the jersey is the best among jerseys of all the clubs I know
Mascot	The mascot of my favourite club looks entertaining The mascot symbolizes what the club stands for I think the mascot is the best among the mascots of all the clubs I know
History	I am aware of the championships that my favourite club has won I know the major players who have played for this club I feel proud of its history
Anthem	I know the anthem/ theme song of my favourite club I think the anthem/ theme song suits my club I think this anthem/ theme song is the best among the anthems of all the clubs I know
Brand Loyalty	I consider myself to be loyal to my favourite club Even when they do not perform to my expectations, I am with this club I will not see any other match if this club's match is available

Table 2

Reliability of the constructs

	Factor Loadings	Standardized Regression Weights	Cronbach's Alpha
Logo			0.823
L1	0.557	0.812	
L2	0.789	0.844	
L3	0.601	0.713	
Jersey			0.859
J1	0.669	0.775	
J2	0.804	0.888	
J3	0.752	0.746	
Mascot			0.888
M1	0.509	0.818	
M2	0.712	0.897	
M3	0.66	0.867	
History			0.905
H1	0.718	0.847	
H2	0.758	0.87	
H3	0.65	0.806	
Anthem			0.866
A1	0.579	0.793	
A2	0.457	0.973	
A3	0.799	0.761	
Brand Loyalty			0.859
BL1	0.807	0.898	
BL2	0.946	0.894	
BL3	0.628	0.676	

Table 3

Inter-factor correlations

	Logo	Jersey	Mascot	History	Anthem	Brand Loyalty
Logo	1.00	0.817	0.618	0.841	0.568	0.8
Jersey		1.00	0.655	0.769	0.609	0.801
Mascot			1.00	0.545	0.469	0.505
History				1.00	0.697	0.903
Anthem					1.00	0.618
Brand Loyalty						1.00

Table 4

Discriminant Validity

		Logo	Jersey	Mascot	History	Anthem	Brand Loyalty
	AVE	0.431	0.553	0.4	0.504	0.394	0.646
Logo	0.431	1					
Jersey	0.553	0.667489	1				
Mascot	0.4	0.381924	0.429025	1			
History	0.504	0.707281	0.591361	0.297025	1		
Anthem	0.394	0.322624	0.370881	0.219961	0.485809	1	
Brand Loyalty	0.646	0.64	0.641601	0.255025	0.815409	0.381924	1

Table 5

Results of the Path Model Hypothesis Test

	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Brand Loyalty <--- Logo (H1)	.150	.048	3.137	.002*
Brand Loyalty <--- Jersey (H2)	.282	.055	5.102	.000*
Brand Loyalty <--- Mascot (H3)	-.044	.043	-1.015	.310
Brand Loyalty <--- History (H4)	.596	.064	9.322	.000*
Brand Loyalty <--- Anthem (H5)	.051	.038	1.367	.171

Sig: *- $p < 0.05$, **- $p < 0.001$