BRAND EQUITY IN SPORT

Conceptualisation, advancement and extensions

Jay Gladden

There has to be more than winning!

Growing up in the Chicagoland area, I spent my childhood following the hapless Chicago Cubs. As I grew older, though, and began to focus on a career working in sport, I was struck by the fact that while fluctuations in the Cubs’ won-loss record had some impact on attendance at games, it was not as dramatic as one might expect. During my early career as both a master’s student and then working for an agency primarily conducting fan/audience research around sport events, I was struck by how professional teams and college athletic departments exclusively focused on winning as a driver of revenues. This seemed misguided and myopic – there had to be more to the financial success of a sport team or organisation than winning. Or, was the Cubs situation an anomaly? Given the entirely inconsistent outcomes in competition, even for the most revered franchises over time, there seemed to be a need for a new outlook or approach. To some degree, I left industry and entered a doctoral programme to develop a deeper understanding of the team sport environment, and more specifically what caused some sport organisations to be financially successful over time, even when performance was not at a championship calibre.

I was fortunate. I found a useful literature base while sitting in a doctoral seminar early in my PhD studies. This doctoral course, taught by Dr George Milne at the School of Management, University of Massachusetts, focused on marketing and was structured to expose students to some of the most important work in the discipline. Each week the course covered a different literature base and during this particular week we had some great conversations about branding theory. This led to a discussion after class in which Dr Milne encouraged me to consider the possibilities of applying the branding literature to sport. A review of the sport literature revealed that there had been no attempts to apply branding theory to the sport setting. Given the lack of research, Dr Milne and I were excited about the opportunities to conceptualise how branding applied to sport, and then later to test those conceptualisations.

What is brand equity?

People unfamiliar with brand management assume it refers to the management of the logo and marks of a particular company or product. While a brand is a name, often a logo, and sometimes
even a slogan or positioning statement, the development of brand equity is a much more involved process. The brand provides a connection point – it is what the organisation does, both purposely and inadvertently, to develop strong connections to the brand that ultimately result in loyalty. The brand provides distinctiveness and provides the product/organisation a point or points of difference in comparison with competitors (Aaker, 1991). This resonated with me. The Cubs did not win much, but they had a unique stadium in a wonderful Chicago neighbourhood, which allowed for a completely unique attendance experience.

Two of the early and foremost thought leaders on the topic of brand equity were David Aaker and Kevin Keller, and some of their early work on brand management heavily influenced my initial efforts developing branding theory in sport. Aaker’s (1991) book, *Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name*, remains one of the most often cited pieces on branding. The book offers, then discusses, a conceptual framework for brand equity that suggests five components to be managed: perceived quality, brand awareness, brand associations, brand loyalty, and other proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991). The first four components received most of the attention in the book and thus became the foundation for my initial work in the sport setting. This framework was appealing in that it both addressed the driver most often thought to influence revenue in sports – quality – but it also captured other elements, such as brand awareness and brand associations. Another intriguing element of the Aaker framework was its attention to loyalty as a component of equity. Perhaps the most interesting element of Aaker’s model as it applied to sport was the concept of brand associations. Generally defined as the connections that one has when a brand name is mentioned, this seemed to be very appropriate for spectator sport, where the product was experiential and intangible. For example, Wrigley Field would present a strong, unique and favourable association with the Chicago Cubs.

Keller (1993) further developed the concept of brand association, conceiving ‘consumer-based brand equity’ as being composed of brand awareness and brand image. In Keller’s (1993) conceptualisation of brand image, brand associations combined to create the image. Furthermore, Keller (1993) argued that there were three types of associations – attributes, benefits and attitudes – and it was strong, unique and favourable brand associations that led to the generation of brand image. This conceptualisation seemed particularly appropriate given there are basic elements of a sport brand, such as the logo, the players, the coaches, the owners and so on (Gladden and Funk, 2002). There are also benefits provided by the sport brand, such as nostalgia or identification with a group of people following the team (often referred to as fan/team identification; Gladden and Funk, 2002). The third form of association, attitudes, measured the strength of the association by gauging people’s knowledge about a brand or the importance that people attach to the brand (Gladden and Funk, 2002).

**Early work: conceptual framework based on the work of Aaker**

Our first attempt at applying brand equity to sport (Gladden et al., 1998) utilised Aaker’s (1991) conceptual framework as a foundation for better understanding intercollegiate athletics (see Figure 20.1). Focusing on the four main components of Aaker’s framework (awareness, perceived quality, associations and loyalty), we identified potential antecedents that would lead to brand equity. While we liked the broader structure presented by Aaker’s framework, we sought to add to the understanding by identifying the precursors, or creators of brand equity in sport. I started with intercollegiate sport, because that was the setting of greatest interest to me at the time. To identify potential antecedents of brand equity, I perused both the academic literature and the popular press for evidence or conjecture of elements outside of winning that might lead to a stronger brand or positive marketplace outcomes. I also spent considerable time discussing
these potential constructs with Dr Milne and Dr William Sutton. Once I identified a variety of potential antecedents, Dr Milne suggested that we organise the potential antecedents based on common factors. As a result, we categorised them into three areas: team-related (coach, star player, success), organisation-related (management, tradition, conference/schedule and product delivery) and market-related (competitive forces, local/regional media coverage, geographic location and team support/following).

Another addition to the application of the Aaker model was a recognition that the creation of brand equity resulted in marketplace outcomes. Consequences, such as merchandise sales, national media coverage, corporate support, atmosphere at games and ticket sales, were also all potentially visible and measurable outcomes. Finally, we realised that some of the consequences, and the resulting marketplace perception, could lead to the enhancement of antecedents of brand equity. For example, increased ticket sales could impact the product delivery and entertainment package (an antecedent of brand equity). As a result, we built a feedback loop into the framework depicting the potential impact of the consequences on the antecedents and brand equity. The connection of factors creating brand equity that also resulted in positive marketplace outcomes provided the deeper explanation, which had driven my initial motivation for doctoral studies. This first work provided the foundation for my doctoral dissertation and was published in the *Journal of Sport Management* (Gladden et al., 1998).

A logical follow-up to the conceptual framework piece was to empirically test the framework, and this became the mission of my doctoral dissertation. Before testing the model, we decided

![Figure 20.1](image_url)

*Figure 20.1 Conceptual framework for assessing brand equity in Division I college athletics*

to broaden the model so it could be applied to a variety of spectator sport settings, including professional sport. To do so, some modifications to the initial framework were necessary. Specifically, logo design and stadium/arena were added as organisation-related antecedents. Additional revenues, such as those realised through brand extensions (e.g. merchandise stores or practice facilities that generate revenue and fuel brand equity), were added as a consequence of brand equity. In my first empirical exploration of brand equity, I sought to validate a broader working hypothesis: that brand equity matters. It was clear that winning led to positive outcomes, but did brand equity also matter in the development of these positive marketplace outcomes? To answer this, my doctoral dissertation compared the predictive abilities of brand equity and team success on a variety of potential marketplace outcomes. This work established that both brand equity and success were predictive of positive marketplace outcomes, thus supporting the notion that winning is not everything. As a follow-up, Milne and I (Gladden and Milne, 1999) documented and discussed the results of regressing brand equity and success on merchandise sales.

Concurrent to the work above, I also developed ways in which the theory could be used in the classroom. Because the framework expressed clear antecedents and consequences of brand equity, the utilisation of this model to analyse the position of a brand was a natural extension. Along with Glenn Wong, we published a case study in McDonald and Milne’s (1998) Cases in Sport Marketing that challenged students to apply the brand equity framework to a better understanding of the University of Massachusetts Athletic Department during a time of transition around their basketball programme (Gladden and Wong, 1998). The use of the model beyond the team sport setting was also possible. The Aaker (1991) framework provided the foundation for an analysis of New Balance’s brand management efforts. As a niche competitor in the highly competitive athletic footwear industry, New Balance employed various strategies to create awareness, associations, a perception of quality and loyalty (Gladden and McDonald, 1999). This case study was designed to illustrate how an athletic footwear and apparel company focused on brand management. In doing so, the case was intended to be used as a teaching tool for both students and executives to better understand brand management in a sport setting that did not focus on teams.

Customer-based brand equity – towards a deeper understanding

While my initial work based on Aaker’s (1991) model was rewarding, I felt as if we were only beginning to understand brand equity in sport. Prior to entering a PhD programme, my work led me to travel all over North America collecting fan and consumer perceptions related to sport brands and sponsors. I knew that while very clear trends could be identified, each individual’s consumption experience and relationship with the team/organisation was unique. Thus, as I started my work as an Assistant Professor, I sought a better understanding of the fan’s perception of sport brands. To do so, I moved towards Keller’s (1993) conceptualisation of customer-based brand equity as a useful base. In his pivotal Journal of Marketing piece, Keller explained customer-based brand equity as ‘conceptualized from the perspective of the individual consumer and a conceptual framework is provided of what consumers know about brands and what such knowledge implies for marketing strategies’ (p. 2). There were two very appealing aspects to this approach. First, Keller explicitly focused on the consumer’s experience, and second, the goal of his work was to yield insights that would drive marketing strategy. Given the inconsistency of the sport product, where success cannot be guaranteed, this orientation seemed particularly relevant. Under Keller’s (1993) conceptualisation, brand equity is dependent on consumer’s knowledge of the brand, where knowledge is composed of brand awareness and
brand associations. Unlike Aaker (1991), who conceptualised brand awareness, associations, loyalty and perceived quality together, Keller (1993) argued that, ‘high levels of brand awareness and a positive brand image should increase the probability of brand choice, as well as produce greater consumer (and retailer) loyalty’ (p. 8). In essence, if there are high levels of awareness and strong brand associations, then loyalty can result. Applied to sport, if people are aware of a team brand and hold strong associations toward that brand, then it would make sense that the brand would be stronger.

Using Keller’s (1993) model, initial work with Dr Dan Funk focused on conceptualising the potential set of brand associations in sport and then empirically testing the relevance of the model. The wealth of sport research provided an excellent foundation to identify potential brand associations. We conducted a thorough literature review and identified a list of potential brand associations. Then, focus groups were conducted with graduate students to determine if any potential associations were missing. Next, it was important to empirically validate the model and demonstrate the link to brand loyalty. The result was the Team Association Model, which presented an empirically validated model that included attributes, benefits and attitudes towards a sport team (Gladden and Funk, 2002). The model was extended to examine the relationship between attributes and benefits and loyalty to a professional sport team. At the same time, Dr Funk and I (2001) demonstrated how the Team Association Model could account for the variance in brand loyalty, thus validating the notion that if a team is successful in creating brand associations, that team will realise some degree of brand loyalty.

As my work in the area continued, and I could point to empirical validation of the theoretical application and development, I also observed a number of early conversations and efforts within the sport industry that focused on developing team brands. Additionally, some of the trends at the time (e.g., acquisitions and extensions, and early efforts around customer relationship management) suggested that this foundation and perspective would be relevant for the industry. This provided the foundation for a prospective piece with Dr Bill Sutton and Dr Dick Irwin, where we argued that the development of brand equity would be a central focus of North American professional team sport between 2000 and 2010 (Gladden, Irwin and Sutton, 2001). This piece suggested that teams would employ two broad strategies to develop brand equity: the acquisition of assets and the development of customer relationships. While some of the specific directions suggested within these categories were not fully realised, the two broad strategies turned out to be quite accurate.

**Extending the initial work**

Following the four-year period (1998–2002) that included the publications based on the work of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), I increased my efforts to fully understanding brand equity in sport. In collaboration with Dr Matthew Robinson, we altered the conceptual framework focused on team brand equity to apply to the intercollegiate recreation and intramural sports environment (Robinson and Gladden, 2003). This paper took into account the unique facets of recreation and intramural sports on a university campus and identified ways that brand equity could be developed in that setting.

As the focus on globalisation intensified between 2000 and 2010, there was also a need to consider how technology significantly enhanced the reach of sport teams across international borders. Accordingly, a collaboration with Dr Anthony Kerr resulted in a paper that revised the initial framework to conceptualise team brand equity in the global marketplace (Kerr and Gladden, 2008). Central to this piece was the addition of antecedents to brand equity that would lead a sports consumer in one country to start following or think highly of a brand in another
country. For example, the concept of a star player was expanded to identify three potential types of star players (ambassadors, magicians, icons) based on how they helped a team develop brand equity across borders. Another interesting addition was sponsor alignment, which argued that those teams that had major global brands as naming sponsors had a better chance of developing brand equity. The final addition to the antecedents was the concept of brand community. The revised framework applied the concept of brand community (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002), where people formed social bonds around a brand and linked it to the creation of brand equity.

**Brand associations in sport – A flurry of activity**

While the initial work based on the Aaker model (Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden and Milne, 1999) stimulated a few studies attempting to extend the theory, the initial studies on brand associations (Gladden and Funk, 2001; 2002) have seen a much more significant cascade of follow-up from a variety of researchers. Most notably Stephen Ross and a variety of colleagues have spent considerable effort extending the understanding of brand associations. Ross’ (2006) first publication on the topic offered an alternative conceptual model that included elements of both Aaker’s (1991) and Keller’s work, as well as elements of our initial work on brand equity. In this first paper, Ross argued that organisation-induced, market-induced and experience-induced antecedents led to spectator-based brand equity (composed of brand awareness and brand associations). In turn, the brand equity resulted in consequences similar to those articulated in the work of Gladden et al. (1998) and Gladden and Milne (1999) around intercollegiate and professional sport. Soon thereafter, Ross, James and Vargas (2006) published a second paper proposing an alternative means to measure brand associations in the team sport setting. Rather than using a literature review to develop the range of brand associations, Ross et al. started by eliciting brand associations from a free-thought listing technique from thirty-seven undergraduate students. The result was the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS).

There were several differences between the TAM and TBAS. First, the TAM identified sixteen potential associations whereas the TBAS identified eleven. Second, nearly all of the TBAS associations could be classified as attributes (either product-related or non-product related), whereas the TAM identified attributes, benefits and attitudes. In addition, there were significant correlations between eight TAM constructs and seven TBAS constructs suggesting significant overlap between the two models (Ross et al., 2006). A third study, by Ross, Russell and Bang (2008), expanded the TBAS to include two measures of brand awareness to create the spectator-based brand equity model. Brand equity research following Ross et al. (2008) has used a combination of our initial work and the work of Ross. To date, there is no clarity as to which model/framework is the most widely accepted. This is likely due to the similarities between a number of the proposed associations in each.

In addition to the work of Ross and colleagues, other authors have attempted to further develop the understanding of brand associations, particularly in reference to team sport. Kaynak, Guletkin Salman, and Tatoglu (2008) argued that the most appropriate conceptual framework for brand equity would include attributes, benefits and attitudes creating brand associations which, in turn, would result in loyalty. This piece drew heavily on our earlier work in attempting to provide a comprehensive discussion of brand association and brand loyalty in professional sport. Bauer, Stockburger-Sauer and Exler (2008) advanced the literature when they conceptualised and demonstrated the empirical links between brand equity elements. They suggested that attribute-based associations lead to benefits, which result in strong attitudes, psychological commitment and ultimately brand loyalty. This study follows the framework work of Gladden...
and Funk (2001, 2002), but suggests some different associations. This study is of particular note because it suggests and validates the linkage between basic associations (attributes), more complex associations (benefits and attitudes) and brand loyalty, and in doing so demonstrates a process where one element causes another.

Another interesting extension focused on how a professional sport league could develop brand associations. Kunkel, Funk and King (2014) employed a free-thought listing technique (similar to Ross et al., 2006) to identify a potential set of league brand associations and then empirically validated these constructs in the Australian professional sport context. This paper identified seventeen different potential associations for a sport league, a number of which (e.g., star player, tradition, nostalgia, logo, management) were similar to the team-based constructs but were applied to the league. However, there were some new and interesting associations identified through this work. For example, player development (the league helps develop young athletes) and education (following the league expands the consumer’s knowledge of the sport) were both identified as unique brand associations with a league.

Other applications and extensions of brand equity in sport

One other substantive piece of work conceptualising brand equity in sports adopted a significantly different approach in comparison with our conceptualisations. In 2007, Boyle and Magnusson suggested social identity creation was central to the development of brand equity. They argued that the groups with which people self-identify are at the core of brand equity formation (Boyle and Magnusson, 2007). Their research built upon initial work by Underwood, Bond and Baer (2001), who proposed the social-identity brand equity model. The work of Boyle and Magnusson, and of Underwood and colleagues, focused on social identity as a driver of brand equity. While my initial brand association work identified the related concept of fan identification as one of many sources for salient brand associations, this work focused on multiple dimensions of social identity. While the work of Boyle and Magnusson identified strong links between social identity and brand equity among students, alumni and the general public who supported an intercollegiate athletics programme, the results were more mixed across groups related to what led to the creation of social identity. For example, the history of a university’s basketball programme was an important factor leading to social identity formation for alumni and the general public, but not for students. Watkins (2014) extended the social-identity brand equity model as a basis for understanding brand equity by looking at the fans of an NBA team. This research discovered that salient group experience (participating in spectating with a group of people), community group experience (how the team represents the city) and the venue in which the team plays were all significant factors leading to fan/social identification. Interestingly, history/tradition was not a significant factor leading to fan identification.

Unfinished business: still much more can be done

Our initial work around brand equity in sport has clearly sparked conversation, interest and study from a variety of different standpoints. However, I do have one regret to date. I am unaware of any circumstances where a brand equity framework is utilised by a team or athletic department. It is gratifying to see how teams and athletic departments have increasingly focused on managing relationships with their fans and providing the best possible experience for their fans. In both cases, such a focus can lead to stronger and more favourable associations. However, when branding is discussed by industry, it is still usually focused on logos, team colours, team names or advertising slogans. There is still a great opportunity to further develop our understanding of brand equity.
such that there is widespread adoption of consistent measures of the phenomena. Granted, there are available measures, such as Forbes' annual valuation of franchises, but none of these measures has a specific focus on brand equity.

The lack of widespread adoption by teams and leagues might be overcome via two strategies. First, the research using brand associations as a framework for understanding brand equity has advanced to the point that we have empirical support that associations can lead to brand loyalty. These studies provide an excellent understanding of the range of potential associations, but at the same time may have offered too many potential associations for any one organisation to manage. Narrowing the pool of associations to those that can actually be influenced by the organisation may help ease adoption and utilisation. However, this task could prove to be quite challenging. For example, in our 2002 work on brand associations, we found that benefits such as fan identification and nostalgia were more predictive of brand loyalty than attributes. Yet, the work by Bauer and colleagues (2008) demonstrates that attributes impact the creation of benefits. Thus, the complexity of these relationships would challenge any effort to reduce the number of factors.

Additionally, there is likely a need to identify one-item measures for the various associations so organisations can deliver shorter instruments and increase response rates. While some accuracy may be compromised, this could help stimulate adoption. A second strategy would specifically examine the linkage between a select set of associations and loyalty. For example, product-related attributes could be examined: To what degree does a head coaching change, recruitment or acquisition of a star player, or renovation of a stadium impact brand equity over time?

Thus, while our understanding of brand equity in sport has advanced significantly, we still have much to do. It appears a bridge to industry must still be built. The adoption of brand equity research by practitioners as they make organisational decisions is a goal for which we should strive.

Notes
1 This chapter is a reflection on Gladden, Milne and Sutton, (1998), and the work related to it.
2 Late in 1995, the first work to examine brand equity by Boone, Kochunny and Wilkins appeared in Sport Marketing Quarterly.

References


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**Applying the brand equity in sport model**

*Artemisia Apostolopoulou*

I had the good fortune and privilege to have Dr Jay Gladden as my PhD advisor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I was first introduced to his work on brand equity in the summer of 1999 while reviewing literature on brand management and brand extensions. This article caught my attention because it made sense! In a very effective manner, it reviews mainstream research on brand equity and applies it to the sport setting with examples. The list of antecedents and consequences identified in the article is comprehensive, while the connection of each of those elements with the four components of brand equity validates the relevance of the framework to collegiate sport. Beyond that, I consider the ability to apply with relative ease this framework to a number of settings within the sport industry a major strength. Whether the sport property is a professional team, a governing body or an event, the proposed brand equity framework can serve as a tool for assessment and growth.
Over the past twelve years I have regularly assigned this article, as well as subsequent branding-related work by Dr Gladden, as required reading in my undergraduate and graduate sport marketing classes. No matter how much has been written since about the management of sport brands, I find this work to be theoretically sound, easily adapted and timeless. And the feedback I have received from my students supports that. The framework provides a starting point from which students are called to assess a sport property's awareness, perceptions of quality, associations tied to the brand and levels of sport consumer loyalty. In addition, students are trained to think of sport properties as brands, to identify ways to strengthen each component of equity and to apply the framework to settings other than collegiate sport. I have also used this theory to discuss with students their own brand and what they need to do in order to achieve high levels of personal equity. This article has provided me with the necessary theoretical platform for those discussions and has greatly contributed to my students' learning.

This theory has informed my own research, too, particularly my writings on the branding of sport properties and on sport licensing (Apostolopoulou and Biggers, 2010; Apostolopoulou, Papadimitriou and Damtsiou, 2010; Apostolopoulou, Papadimitriou, Synowka and Clark, 2012; Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold and Synowka, 2009; Giannoulakis and Apostolopoulou, 2011; Papadimitriou, Apostolopoulou and Dounis, 2008). Introducing extension products or services is largely dependent on the existence of a strong parent brand. Sport properties are no exception. Realising the factors that influence the equity of a property is important in order to strengthen and further develop it via the introduction of line and brand extensions. The brand equity framework has provided me with a solid understanding of how branding principles apply to sport properties and how extensions can be used in the brand building process. Furthermore, my own research on licensing connects well with the discussion on brand associations since it positions licensed products as vessels of meaning that can impact consumer behaviour and consequently the equity of a sport brand.

I fully expect that Gladden’s work will continue to inform and inspire my teaching and research in the future.

Note

1 Artemisia Apostolopoulou is a Professor of Sport Management in the School of Business at Robert Morris University.

References