

# Identity Development: The Case of a New Football Team

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## Abstract

In 2003 the Football Federation Australia (FFA) assumed control of football (soccer) in Australia, following a government intervention to ‘rescue’ football from financial and governance difficulties. The FFA embarked on a change management process to capitalise on football’s growing participant base and reposition the game in the Australian sportscape. This included a restructured National Soccer League (NSL) containing a number of newly created clubs. A major challenge for the FFA and its clubs was how to develop a new fan base for the clubs and the league – a fan base that corresponded with the new image of football and FFA’s longer term vision for the game in Australia. The development of this new fan identity, and its nuances, is examined here. Research aim The aim of the research was to examine the social identity of members of a new professional sports team, namely what attracts members to identify with a new sports team and the process, nature and development of this relationship. Research measured the salient factors in identity creation and development in a new sporting competition.

## Theoretical Background

The current research was conceptualised by drawing on the body of research on fan identification (Madrigal, 1995, Sloan, 1989, Wann, 1995b, Wann & Branscombe, 1993), conceptualisations of the sport fan (D Funk & J James, 2001, Hunt, Bristol, & Bashaw, 1999), and structured classifications (Giulianotti, 2002, Lewis, 2001). Previous studies have examined new or relocated sports teams (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002, Kelley, Hoffman, & Carter, 1999, Lewis, 2001) and provide an understanding of psychological connection to a new sports team, but have not grappled with the dimension of social identity. Investigations of identity in new sports teams are just emerging (James et al., 2002). This study applies of social identity theory and fans (D Funk & J. James, 2001, Jacobson, 2003, Jones, 1998, Wann, 1995, Wann & Branscombe, 1990, 1993, Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000) to the new team context. Method An online questionnaire was developed and conducted in collaboration with Sydney FC’s marketing department. This was administered to 1200 Sydney FC fans during the first year of the competition. Identity strength was measured using the Sports Spectator Identity Scale (SSIS) (an 8-point likert scale) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Results and discussion Respondents (n=500) were mainly male (91.8%), wore official merchandise at games (52.1%) and had attended <8 games (74.4%). Findings suggested that fans of the new sports team identified strongly with the club despite its lack of history. Conversely, results also suggested that fans of the new sports team

were not as likely to display their support outside of the in-ground context. Additionally, the definition of rival groupings was weak in relation to the findings of previous studies of fan identification.

To test the strength of identity and the affect of selected demographic variables, responses to the seven SSIS variables were recoded into a single variable representing participants total "Identity score" (ID Score) (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Mean ID scores for the sample group was 42.94, which is considerably lower than the 56.20 reported by Wann and Branscombe (1993). A one-way ANOVA tested whether significant between-group differences existed based on age, gender, salary bracket (i.e. under \$25,000, \$25-50,000 etc), membership category and current employment. Significant between-group differences were apparent for age (sig= .019) and salary (sig= .004). Gender (sig= .531), membership category (which determines seating area) (sig=.174) and current employment (sig=.101) did not demonstrate significant between-group differences.

The findings have three major implications. Firstly, evidence suggests that fan identification develops quickly in relation to a new team. Perceived support levels for the new team were similar to levels reported in studies of established clubs (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Secondly, identification with a definitive rival was not strong, and this is a notable difference from the clear rivalries reported in studies of established teams. This suggests that there is a significant opportunity for the FFA to leverage rivalries and strengthen fan identification, which in turn would facilitate higher levels of consumption of club products. Thirdly, studies of established teams suggest that fans publicly display their sporting allegiance in all aspects of life, however, this was not as evident in our study of new teams. The project will continue to track how fans and spectators of new sports teams evolve their identity over time as this is a sparsely researched area of sport fan development.

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