



# Exploring sport brand development strategies to strengthen consumer involvement with the product – The case of the Australian A-League



Thilo Kunkel <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jason P. Doyle <sup>b</sup>, Daniel C. Funk <sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Temple University, United States

<sup>b</sup> Griffith University, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

The branding of sport leagues represents an emergent area of scholarship. The current research capitalised on an opportunity to explore the strategies sport leagues can implement to develop their brand and consequently better satisfy their consumers. The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) was used to guide the examination of sport brand development strategies recommended by consumers of a sport league. Mixed method data were collected from football consumers in Australia ( $N=230$ ). Seven themes were uncovered through qualitative content analysis representing three brand development strategies – market penetration, market development and product development. The study contributes to sport management literature by (1) identifying strategies that can be used to position sport brands; (2) indicating how these strategies may be used to influence consumers' brand associations; (3) demonstrating the close brand relationship between leagues and their clubs and (4) enhancing market research sampling knowledge. The study also provides sport managers with strategic brand management directions.

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, we explore sport brand development strategies within the context of a professional sport league. Professional sport leagues represent highly visible and valuable brands that require strategic development. These brands reflect consumers' overall evaluation of the league based on the attributes and benefits that the league provides (Kunkel, Funk, & King, 2014). Existing literature outlines the developmental process that explains how consumers perceive (Gladden & Funk, 2001, 2002) and develop connections with sport brands (Funk & James, 2001, 2004, 2006). Within this developmental process, a number of external factors (e.g., culture, location) and internal factors (e.g., demographics, psychographics) influence the connection sport consumers may have with their favourite sport brand. In regards to attitude formation and change, external factors such as attributes (Gladden & Funk, 2001) or attractive characteristics (Funk & James, 2004) of the sport brand are more easily influenced than consumers' internal factors such as culture or motives. Conceptually, modifying the attributes or characteristics of a sport brand to better serve consumers' needs and wants may have an impact on consumers' connection with their favourite sport brand (Funk & James, 2001). To achieve this goal, strategic efforts to build relationships with consumers by developing overall perceptions linked with the organisation are crucial to the success of sport brands (Gladden, Irwin, & Sutton, 2001).

\* Corresponding author at: 1810 North 13th Street, Speakman Hall 307, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA. Tel.: +1 215 204 0307.

E-mail address: [thilokunkel@gmail.com](mailto:thilokunkel@gmail.com) (T. Kunkel).

The development of league brands represents a strategic approach aimed at expanding the league's consumer markets and strengthening consumers' involvement with the product. This, in turn, should assist clubs within the league in attracting and retaining consumers (Kunkel, Funk, & Hill, 2013). Sport leagues can either add to, or alter, their offerings to appeal to new or existing consumers. To attract consumers, many sport leagues have run major rebranding campaigns designed to change the perceptions linked to their core offerings. Rebranding campaigns have been observed within North America's Major League Soccer (MLS), the Australian Football League (AFL) and in Australia's elite level football (soccer) competition, the A-League. In one such example of successful rebranding, the A-League emerged after the existing National Soccer League (NSL) was modified to remove the ethnic roots attached to member clubs and thus, make the new competition more attractive to a broad consumer market (Lock, Darcy, & Taylor, 2009). Similarly, the AFL changed its structure as a closed competition, established expansion clubs in strategic markets and introduced its own television channel (Stewart, Nicholson, & Dickson, 2005). These attempts may be seen as strategies implemented to better serve existing consumer bases and attract new consumers. Thus, these changes demonstrate that league brand development strategies provide the framework to develop the league brand as well as to assist clubs in developing their individual brands. However, to improve their success, strategic brand development decisions should be based on a good understanding of the consumer marketplace (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2009).

The competitive nature of the sport marketplace necessitates that sport organisations attract and retain a significant number of consumers (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002). The success of sport leagues depends on consumers as they contribute to the revenues of sport leagues and clubs through various consumption behaviours (Mason, 1999). Most leagues and clubs share revenues generated through broadcasting deals, corporate sponsorships, merchandise sales and game attendance. Consumers that demonstrate a strong psychological connection or identification with their favourite sport brand have been linked with increased consumption behaviour (e.g., Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and thus form a key market segment that sport organisations aspire to attract and retain. Recent research indicates that leagues and clubs are closely linked in the mind of consumers and therefore have mutual interests in attracting consumers (Kunkel et al., 2013). Consequently, league brand development strategies aimed at increasing consumers' involvement with the league are beneficial to both the league and its affiliated clubs. Although researchers have identified characteristics that influence how sport brands are perceived (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2014), strategies that outline how sport organisations can manage these characteristics have not been investigated. This lack of research provided an opportunity to examine brand development strategies from a consumer's perspective, thus enhancing understandings related to how leagues and their clubs can attract, retain and develop fans.

The purpose of this study was to explore brand development strategies that sport leagues can implement to strengthen the level of involvement of existing consumers and to build connections with new consumers. The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM; Funk & James, 2001, 2006) provided the theoretical foundation used to understand how consumers connect with a sport brand. Complementing the PCM, Ansoff's (1957) market and product growth strategies were used to conceptualise how leagues may implement strategies concerned with brand development. To explore the purpose of this research, data were gathered from knowledgeable consumers of the A-League. The A-League provided a relevant context for this study as it is a relatively young league (i.e., established 2005) and must therefore adopt innovative brand development strategies to compete with more established national league competitors. Additionally, a number of A-League clubs have struggled to attract consumers and consequently experienced financial losses. Therefore, the A-League provided a theoretically and practically relevant context to explore sport brand development strategies. Having outlined the purpose of this study, a literature review starting with a discussion of the theoretical framework utilised in this study is now provided.

## 2. Theoretical framework and literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

The Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) functioned as the theoretical framework to guide our understanding of how consumers connect with sport leagues. The PCM represents a theoretically sound framework that has been applied to understand consumers' connection with sport brands (e.g., Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008; Funk, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2013; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). Within the PCM, it is conceptualised that external factors, such as socialising agents, and internal factors, such as consumers' psychological needs, interact with each other and influence evaluative processes. Evaluative processes are largely determined by consumers' prior knowledge and involvement. These processes include motivation, perception, learning and memory, which each influence the evaluation of the internal and external factors and, therefore, create psychological and behavioural outcomes, such as involvement or game attendance.

Previous research has highlighted the relationship between brand associations and consumer attitudes (Funk, 2002; Funk & James, 2006). Although consumers generally gain initial awareness of the existence of a sport league through socialising agents (Funk & James, 2001), subsequent interaction with the league leads to the creation of beliefs based on attributes of the league and benefits that the league provides. These beliefs represent brand associations that consumers link with the league (Kunkel et al., 2014). If these brand associations are evaluated positively and the league meets consumers' personal and social needs, it is expected that consumers will develop positive attitudes towards the league (cf. Funk & James, 2006). Conversely, if these brand associations are evaluated neutrally or negatively and the league is not able to meet consumers' personal and social needs, it is expected that consumers will develop neutral or negative attitudes towards the league (cf. Lock & Filo, 2012; Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2013). Supporting this line of thought, Kunkel et al. (2014) identified 17 brand

associations consumers linked with professional sport leagues and demonstrated that these associations were positively correlated with league commitment and behaviour. Furthermore, the authors showed that the associations were useful in highlighting league specific characteristics. Therefore, knowledge of consumers' brand associations should assist league managers in developing and managing their brand.

Although research indicates sport brands reap positive benefits from developing consumers' brand associations (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2014), researchers have not examined the potential strategies that can be used to manage and develop these brand associations. With the current research we aim to address this gap in the literature by examining consumer perceptions of potential league-based branding activities. This approach adopts a consumer perspective to evaluate league brand management and marketing actions that incorporate knowledge and direct experience of the individual. Strategic marketing literature (Ansoff, 1957; Shaw, 2012) provides a starting point to conceptualise product and market growth strategies, which are outlined in the next section.

## 2.2. Market and product growth strategies

Previous research indicates that four basic strategies are available to sport organisations wishing to grow their market and enhance their product. The four strategies are market penetration, market development, product development and diversification (Ansoff, 1957; Shilbury, Westerbeek, Quick, & Funk, 2009). Each strategy describes a distinct approach that generates a unique outcome. Therefore, organisations decide their growth strategies based on specific organisational goals and objectives. The four basic strategies are reviewed in this section with a focus on their application to sport leagues.

The first strategy is market penetration, which is concerned with increasing the number of sales to existing or new customers (Ansoff, 1957). Typically, the market penetration strategy seeks to increase sales through advertising and promotional campaigns. In the sport context, market penetration can be implemented through television advertising campaigns, social media engagement or 2-for-1 promotions (e.g., Shilbury et al., 2009). An example for league market penetration is the A-League's "We Are Football" campaign, which was designed to engage a core consumer segment of the league (Fourfourtwo, 2011). Thus, the market penetration strategy provides league consumers with increased exposure to the core product.

The second strategy is market development, which involves extending the product to new markets (Ansoff, 1957). The market development strategy seeks to gain new consumers through expansions into new markets designed to increase the overall reach of the product or service. In the sport context, market development is usually implemented through league expansion, where new teams are added to a league's roster in regions that have been identified as strategically important (e.g., McDonald & Stavros, 2012; Shilbury & Hooper, 1999). An example for league market development is provided by the introduction of new clubs from previously unrepresented regions (i.e., Gold Coast and Greater Western Sydney) to the AFL. Therefore, the market development strategy provides consumers in new geographical regions with the opportunity to consume the league's core product.

The third strategy is product development, which is undertaken when the organisation modifies the characteristics of its core product to appeal to existing or new customers (Ansoff, 1957). The product characteristics are generally modified and adapted to better serve consumers' wants and needs. In the sport context, product development is usually implemented via the modification of rules, or small changes in the structure of the competition (e.g., Stewart et al., 2005). An example of league product development where an existing product is modified is the designated player (MLS) or marquee player rule (A-League), which has allowed clubs to sign star players such as David Beckham (MLS) and Alessandro Del Piero (A-League). An example of league product development where a new product is introduced is the introduction of Twenty20 Cricket, which is a shorter and more exciting form of cricket aimed at making the game more attractive to spectators. Thus, the product development strategy allows leagues to alter characteristics of their core product to appeal to new and existing consumers.

The fourth strategy is diversification, which consists of the organisation modifying the characteristics of the product and targeting a new market (Ansoff, 1957). Diversification involves investments in new business interests and the development or acquisition of external assets. In the sport context, diversification may be achieved through investment portfolios and by entering into partnerships or takeovers of related leagues or other assets in new markets (Shilbury et al., 2009). Diversification can be classified as vertical, horizontal or lateral diversification depending on the position of the new asset in the value chain of the diversifying organisation (Ansoff, 1957). If the new asset is at the same stage within the value chain (cf. Porter, 1991) as the existing asset, the organisation is using horizontal diversification to expand their portfolio. An example for horizontal league diversification is Major League Baseball's (MLB) investment in the Australian Baseball League (ABL) in 2009, which made the MLB a majority shareholder (75%) of the ABL. If the new asset is at a later stage within the value chain, the organisation is using forward vertical diversification. An example for forward vertical league diversification is the National Basketball Association (NBA) establishing NBA TV in 1999, which is a cable network sports channel dedicated to the sport of basketball. If the new asset is at an earlier stage within the value chain, the organisation is using backward vertical diversification. An example for backward vertical league diversification would be if the MLB acquired Majestic Athletic, which is the exclusive provider of all MLB team jerseys. If the new asset is beyond the industry to which the organisation belongs or beyond the organisation's core competencies, the organisation is using lateral diversification. An example of lateral diversification would be if MLB invested in a zoo. Although diversification strategies may or may not gain new consumers for the leagues, they can be implemented to gain valuable resources, such as access to a pool of players, staff

training possibilities and potential long-term television rights income. Therefore, the diversification strategy provides leagues with additional assets and new consumers, resulting in economic benefits for the organisation.

Overall, these four basic strategies provide sport leagues with a framework to grow their market and product. A sport brand can select one of the four strategies, or it can combine strategies depending on the circumstances. The discussion of the four basic strategies provides a general overview on the possible growth strategies available to sport leagues. Although these examples of product and market growth strategies provide insights on how organisations can grow, to date no information exists regarding whether they also represent brand development strategies that are effective in enhancing the brand from a consumer's perspective. From a conceptual perspective, it is likely that the above strategies may be relevant for not only market and product development applications, but also in instances where overall brand development is the desired outcome. Although Ansoff's (1957) strategies theoretically should apply to brand development, opportunities exist to provide empirical evidence of such applicability and also how relevant these strategies are to sport brands. Whilst sport management scholars (e.g., Shilbury et al., 2009) have briefly discussed how the four strategies relate to sport brand development, this research remains conceptual and has thus far excluded the consumers' perspective. This distinction is important given brand performance is based on the consumer's perception of the brand rather than the consumers' perception of the organisation (Leuthesser, Kohli, & Suri, 2003).

The current research sought to capitalise on the above opportunities by assessing sport brand development strategies as recommended by consumers. Such research that considers the perspective of the consumer is important to build on existing conceptual research and to assess the applicability of product and market growth strategies as brand development strategies. Given that strategic brand development is necessary for a sport league to satisfy its consumers' wants and needs, the purpose of this study was to explore sport brand development strategies from a consumer perspective. Specifically, the following research question guided this study:

*Research Question: What are the brand development strategies that sport leagues can implement to strengthen their consumers' involvement with the product?*

### 3. Methods

We used a case study approach to explore sport brand development strategies from a consumer perspective within the context of a professional sport league. In particular, knowledgeable existing consumers of the Australian A-League were consulted to provide feedback on their assessment of the league management and how the league could improve their experience. The rationale was to collect data from highly involved consumers given that they possess knowledge of the league and are thus likely to understand how the league can improve the consumer experience. With this study, we did not aim to identify themes that are applicable to all sport leagues given that consumer perceptions of brands are socially constructed and context dependent (e.g., Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). However, we aimed to utilise knowledge gained from the context of one specific sport league to foster the understanding of sport brand development strategies broadly. We would like to acknowledge that each sport league is unique and findings of this study may not be applicable to other sport leagues. To alleviate readers' concerns of the generalisability regarding the findings of this study, we provide a detailed overview of the research context of this study in Section 3.1. In Section 3.2, we outline how participants of this study were recruited through online fan forums. In Section 3.3, we present the questions utilised in the mixed method questionnaire. In Section 3.4, we provide an overview of the respondents who contributed data for this study.

#### 3.1. Research context

The A-League, Australia's elite football league, provided the context of this study. The A-League is a ten-team competition governed and managed by Football Federation Australia (FFA).<sup>1</sup> The league is structured as a closed competition consisting of clubs that have been attributed a franchise license. The A-League was introduced in 2005 to provide a league without expressive ethnicity, which had proliferated in its predecessor the NSL (Lock, 2009). The A-League was designed to provide a successful and sustainable competition without ethnic affiliations and thus cater to a greater number of fans. Consequently, the A-League started as an eight-club competition covering most of Australia's metropolitan regions. The branding of the A-League was highly focused on reframing 'soccer' into 'football' and introducing a one-club-per-city policy to provide a game for all Australians.

The clubs were selected on a competitive basis under strict guidelines, including the submission of long-term business plans (Skinner, Zakus, & Edwards, 2008). In return, all foundation clubs were guaranteed exclusivity in their given region for five years to protect the development of their consumer market base. The A-League expanded the competition with the introduction of new clubs in the 2009/10 season (Gold Coast United and North Queensland Fury) and the 2010/11 season (Melbourne Heart). The decisions for expansion of the A-League were based on the initial success of the league in creating

<sup>1</sup> In this article we used A-League management instead of FFA because the A-League is only one of FFA's many responsibilities, which include Australian national football team, youth development and grass-roots football.

solid attendance figures and removing perceived barriers to attendance created by the strong ethnic heritage of many NSL clubs (Lock, 2009; Lock et al., 2009).

The decision to first expand the competition was also justified given the noticeable shift in fan culture and increasing crowds that characterised the A-League's first three seasons (Lock, 2009). Despite these initial successes, the A-League has struggled to build its consumer base in recent years with average attendance figures decreasing from 15,344 in the 2007/08 season to 8746 in the 2010/11 season (AUStadiums, 2013).<sup>2</sup> This decreased consumer attendance resulted in many clubs experiencing financial difficulties. These problems led to the decision to revoke the license of the North Queensland Fury after the 2010/11 season, and withdraw the license of the confirmed expansion club Sydney Rovers prior to their planned inclusion for the 2011/12 season. This information provides a short overview on the research context until the end of the 2010/11 season, which was the time of data collection. Developments of the A-League after the 2010/11 season are outlined in a post-script at the end of this article and related to the findings of this study.

### 3.2. Procedures

Invitations to participate in the research were posted in online fan forums of the A-League clubs that participated in the 2010/2011 season. The lead researcher created an online profile for each forum, then introduced himself to a moderator of the forum and requested permission to post the invitation to participate in the research (cf. Kozinets, 2002). The invitations were posted after permission was granted by the moderator and included a link that directed potential participants to a webpage containing the online questionnaire (cf. Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). The webpage provided a general overview of the research project, information about the chance to be entered in a prize raffle (three \$100 gift vouchers), the ethical clearance number of the research project and the researcher's contact information. The webpage reminded participants that their responses were confidential and that they would automatically provide their consent by participating (cf. Riva, Teruzzi, & Anolli, 2003). On average, participants spent 23 minutes answering the questionnaire, which was available for two weeks in May 2011, after the conclusion of the 2010/11 A-League season.

### 3.3. Materials

An online questionnaire was used to collect data. The first part of the questionnaire contained quantitative items to gain demographic, psychographic and behavioural information to describe participants and outline their connection with the sport of football. Demographic measurements included questions about participants' age, gender, ethnicity and annual income. Psychographic measurements included three items to measure consumers' involvement with the league (Doyle, Kunkel, & Funk, 2013) to examine their level of connection with the league and qualify them as appropriate participants of the study. Respondents were also asked to answer a single item to examine whether consumers perceive that the league is well managed (Kunkel et al., 2014). Behavioural measurements included a three-item media behaviour measure (Pritchard & Funk, 2010) and a one-item game attendance measure to examine league related consumption behaviour. These questions helped to determine if respondents were suitable participants for the purposes of this research. A copy of the above items as they appeared on the survey is provided in Table 1.

The second part of the questionnaire contained an open-ended essay style question (Lock & Filo, 2012; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009), which asked consumers for their recommendations on how the league could better satisfy their wants and needs. Participants were asked: "What can the A-League do to improve your experience?" and invited to submit open-ended responses. This unrestricted line of questioning allowed respondents to express their thoughts anonymously "without any manipulation (other than the question posed) or interference from the research team" (Lock & Filo, 2012, p. 190).

### 3.4. Participants

Participants were a sample of football consumers with a strong interest in the A-League. Each participant was a registered user of an A-League club's online fan forum. Generally, these consumers represent a knowledgeable market segment through their engagement in the online communities (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein, & Kunkel, 2010) and are opinion leaders who are willing to share knowledge related to general sport experiences and their favourite sport (cf. Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004). The questionnaire was fully completed by 230 participants. The majority of participants were male (91.7%) and aged between the A-League's demographic target market of 15–35 years (64.1%). Most participants (51.8%) possessed an Oceanic (Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Islands) or European (39.5%) heritage. Participants earned an average weekly income of \$1288 Australian dollars. Participant demographics were indicative of the A-League consumer base and showed similar characteristics compared with previous research of A-League consumers (Lock et al., 2009) and previous research of football consumers conducted within fan forums (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). Detailed characteristics of respondents whose comments were cited in this article are presented in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The A-League's main competitors were able to keep their average attendance numbers fairly consistent over this time period. For example, the average attendance of the Australian Football League (AFL) slightly decreased from 33,006 in 2007 to 32,582 in 2011, and the National Rugby League (NRL) slightly increased from 16,580 in 2007 to 17,234 in 2011 (AUStadiums, 2013).

**Table 1**  
Questionnaire items.

Construct	Items
Involvement	[1] strongly disagree to [7] strongly agree I really enjoy following the A-League Following the A-League says a lot about who I am Following the A-League has a central role in my life
Satisfaction with management	[1] strongly disagree to [7] strongly agree The A-League is well managed
Consumption	Open-ended question How many A-League games did you watch on television last season? How many A-League games did you attend last season? [1] never to [7] several times a day How often do you use the Internet to get information on the A-League How often do you read newspaper articles/editorials about the A-League

### 3.5. Analysis

Completed questionnaires were downloaded at the end of the data collection period and prepared for data analyses. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 19.0. A data quality check was performed before both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed. The quality check involved investigation for response biases characterised by unrealistically short completion times, participants who marked the same response for every question and inconsistent combinations (e.g., [Hospers, Kok, Harterink, & de Zwart, 2005](#)). A total of 230 participants were allocated a respondent number (1–230) to help with the subsequent analyses (cf. [Lock & Filo, 2012](#)). Responses to the essay style question ranged from 2 to 578 words, with an average of 76 words. Quantitative data analysis involved calculating descriptive statistics to identify participant characteristics. Cronbach's alpha scores were calculated for the three involvement items ( $\alpha = .79$ ). Afterwards, the three involvement items were combined to create a composite mean score representing consumers' involvement with the league. Respondents' involvement represented an internal validity check to ensure that respondents had knowledge of, and prior experiences with, the league. This indicates that they were knowledgeable consumers who can provide valuable and accurate feedback, supporting the credibility of their answers. Descriptive statistics were calculated for involvement with the league, assessment of league management, league related media behaviour and team game attendance.

Qualitative data were entered in QSR International NVIVO 9 qualitative data analysis software, which was used to organise the data in a structured way. After checking that the data were successfully imported, [Neumann's \(2003\)](#) three-round coding sequence was utilised to analyse the data. The first sequence was open coding in which the lead researcher examined the data to locate common themes that affected the league brand. Themes were identified when words, phrases or concepts were used repeatedly, representing a shared response ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#)). Initial codes were assigned to the located themes to condense the data. At the end of the open coding sequence, a codebook was developed that contained the identified themes with direct quotes representing each theme (cf. [Ryan & Bernard, 2000](#)). A second researcher provided qualitative feedback on the codebook and the identified themes. After a discussion between the two researchers, the revised codebook was used as a guide to review the initial codes.

The second sequence was axial coding, in which the lead researcher examined the data a second time. The initial codes were then recoded into the themes uncovered in the revised codebook. From there, the second researcher used the revised codebook as a guide to code the data. Inter-coder reliability of the two researchers after the axial coding sequence was calculated using [Perreault and Leigh's \(1989\)](#) index of reliability. Differences in coding were resolved through discussions and in consultation with an academic who was considered an expert on football consumer research in Australia (cf. [Bryman, 2008](#)). The third sequence was selective coding in which the lead researcher identified quotes that represented the final themes ([Edwards & Skinner, 2009](#)).

## 4. Results

Quantitative results provide an overview of participants' responses to psychographic and behavioural measures. On average, participants showed a high level of involvement with the A-League ( $M = 5.31$ ;  $SD = 1.23$ ). In addition, participants attended an average of 12.95 ( $SD = 8.31$ ) games in the previous season, and watched approximately 31.70 ( $SD = 24.97$ ) games on television in the previous season. The participants frequently used the Internet to get information on the A-League ( $M = 5.90$ ;  $SD = 1.35$ ), and often read articles about the A-League ( $M = 5.10$ ;  $SD = 1.51$ ). Although participants displayed high involvement scores and positive behavioural characteristics, they did not agree that the league was well managed, reporting a mean well below the midpoint ( $M = 2.91$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ).

Qualitative data analysis uncovered that respondents' recommendations of how the league could improve its brand could be classified into seven general themes. The seven themes were (1) media accessibility and marketing, (2) fan engagement,

**Table 2**  
Identified themes.

Theme	# of mentions	Index of reliability
(1) Media accessibility and marketing	154	.853
(2) Fan engagement	54	.850
(3) League expansion	46	.847
(4) Competition structure	28	.857
(5) Product quality	32	.875
(6) Match day experience	98	.833
(7) Unique club identity	22	.879
Total	438	.851

(3) league expansion, (4) competition structure, (5) product quality, (6) match day experience and (7) unique club identity. In total, 438 codes were identified and allocated to one of the seven above themes. Reliability calculation identified acceptable (85.1%) inter-coder reliability for the two researchers (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The seven themes and the number of mentions for each theme are presented in Table 2. Following this, each theme is presented alongside personal narratives, which provide context and meaning to the themes (e.g., Rinehart, 2005).

#### 4.1. Media accessibility and marketing

The first theme was concerned with the accessibility of league related media and marketing of the league and clubs. Respondents suggested new consumers could be effectively targeted through improved marketing and by making league related media more accessible to a broader audience. Respondent 42 recommended the A-League should “get a match of the day on free-to-air TV to capture more fans, people who don’t have Foxtel or Austar [subscription television providers] simply have no access to games and most have no idea it exists.” Furthermore, Respondent 109 stated that “more advertising is needed badly; most people won’t even know when an A-League game is on.” Respondent 42 recommended more media exposure through free-to-air television and marketing, whereas Respondent 109 highlighted the lack of awareness of less involved people. Additionally, Respondent 89’s statement highlights the responsibility of league management to assist its clubs in promoting games. He said: “FFA need(s) to promote the game and individual clubs more on local TV and other media. It should not be left up to the club.” This section highlights respondents’ desire for more media exposure through accessible media and marketing promotions run by the league to support its clubs in attracting consumers.

#### 4.2. Fan engagement

The second theme was concerned with improving fan engagement. Respondents requested that the league listen to their concerns and desired to be engaged in an open communication with the league. Respondent 84 commented: “FFA needs to stop alienating its support base. Every decision it makes is turning away more and more supporters of our game. They need to re-think their strategies and start listening to the people who pay their wages.” This sentiment was reinforced by Respondent 188 who said: “The FFA have to stop being so secretive, they drip-feed information to the fans so we are always kept in the dark. They treat us like outsiders.” These comments show that consumers did not feel valued by the A-League management. Respondent 167 suggested one way to solve this problem would be receiving a “weekly email from the FFA to let us know what is happening. Lots would be confidential, but surely there is lots happening that they can let us know about other than telling us where to get our tickets to games.” Respondent 167 acknowledged that some information was confidential, yet the A-League could engage their community with information and updates on the league. This opinion was supported by Respondent 201 who suggested that the A-League management “needs to listen to and engage with the fans and view them as the future, not customers.” Overall, respondents wanted to be respected as an important part of the league rather than customers and suggested that the league could achieve this by listening to their concerns and better informing them about league related news.

#### 4.3. League expansion

The third theme was concerned with expanding the league. Respondents suggested expanding the league to include more regions and having a higher number of competing clubs. Respondent 7 stated: “The A-League needs to have more clubs. It feels like a ‘Mickey Mouse’ league with only 10 clubs.” Respondent 24 elaborated why more clubs within the league would enhance his experience. He recommended “opening the doors for expansion from other areas. A league of about 16 clubs would give us a 30-week home and away season.” Similarly, Respondent 2 also indicated that “expansion would be good if [it is] done right. It would be great to have a league of around 16 teams so we don’t have to play other sides so often.” Furthermore, respondents recommended specific areas in which the A-League could expand. Respondent 118 stated: “The A-League should expand into areas such as Western Sydney and Canberra”, whereas Respondent 31 suggested the A-League should: “Bring in a Western Sydney team.” Overall, respondents indicated that more clubs would improve the reputation of the league and enhance their experience with the league as clubs would only compete with one another twice per season

instead of three times. Furthermore, respondents outlined specific locations where they believed these new clubs should be established to give the league a greater national presence.

#### 4.4. *Competition structure*

The fourth theme was concerned with the structure of the competition. Respondents suggested opening the league for other clubs and introducing an additional competition. Respondents recommended adopting a European-style open league structure with promotion and relegation. For example, Respondent 31 stated that the league should “Have a promotion/relegation system and cup competition in place.” Respondent 118 provided a similar recommendation outlining how the league needed to “bring in a second division with promotion and relegation, as well as a national knock-out cup competition.” Both respondents suggested that changes in the league structure would add to the attractiveness of the league. Furthermore, Respondent 133 stated: “It would be good to have possible promotion and relegation for non-ethnic named clubs and a FA cup style competition. Then state league clubs could have more exposure and get to compete for major silverware.” He believed that a cup style competition would better involve consumers of state league and grass roots football clubs and therefore grow the consumer base of the A-League.

#### 4.5. *Product quality*

The fifth theme was concerned with the quality of the product. Respondents suggested improving the quality of the league through further education of league and club personnel, professionalisation of youth development structures and through the inclusion of star players. Respondent 44 postulated that the league would benefit by increasing “the salary cap to sign quality players like Marcos Flores and Sergio van Dijk on a more permanent basis. The A-League needs legends of the league and I feel we lose them as soon as they start to dominate.” The star players were believed to “increase the standard of the competition” (Respondent 152) and “bring crowds back” (Respondent 74). Furthermore, Respondent 15 stated: “Further professionalism of the league and all its structures would be a welcome addition – providing more professional youth structures and better providing for development coaches and other officials would be a good start to continued improvement.” The quality of the product was also linked to official personnel of the league, such as managers, coaches and referees. This was evident by the comment of Respondent 154: “Referees [are] to inconsistent, [the A-League] need an agreed standard and must be policed correctly.” Respondents’ suggestions for further professionalisation of personnel and youth development structure highlight that respondents wanted to improve the quality of the league long-term, whereas the inclusion of star players was believed to have a short-term effect on the quality of the league.

#### 4.6. *Match day experience*

The sixth theme was concerned with consumers’ match day experience. Respondents suggested several actions that both the league and the clubs can implement to enhance the consumer experience at league games. Respondent 124 recommended that “ticketing at stadiums behind either goal needs to be made general admission to increase the atmosphere and the ability for people in these areas to bring friends and family.” These sections are generally the supporter bays and the perception was that “reduced ticket prices would lead to fantastic crowds” (Respondent 31). Respondents felt that high ticket prices were a factor that prevented other consumers from attending A-League games, whereas low attendance figures negatively impact the atmosphere in the stadiums. Therefore, respondents recommended to “play in smaller purpose built 12,000–15,000 seater stadiums” (Respondent 46), or have “20,000 seater stadiums, [because] it just doesn’t look right with the [club name] drawing 10,000 [attendees] in a 50,000 seater venue, the atmosphere gets lost” (Respondent 147). Additionally, respondents mentioned that the league needed to better manage and control the behaviour of stadium staff. Respondent 220 commented that the league needed to “ensure stadium security staff are less rude to spectators and make sure any staff working on game days are football friendly not anti-football.” This aspect was expanded upon by Respondent 53 who commented:

The A-League needs to allow fans to express themselves and not react to the vocal minority. The majority of fans go to the games because of the atmosphere. At away games don’t treat the away supporters as terrorists; do not surround them with over-zealous security. The security creates more problems than solve them. We want our game to be different from other sports to provide an environment and atmosphere that the public want to experience and keep coming back for more.

Respondent 53 emphasised the different atmosphere created at A-League games compared to other leagues, and how it was the league management’s responsibility to ensure stadium and security staff did not negatively impact the supportive atmosphere at games. Additionally, inconsistent scheduling of league games was perceived to negatively impact the match day experience of fans. Respondent 77 said to improve the A-League experience, there needed to be a “major focus on correct scheduling – it needs to be more regular and predictable.” This view was supported by Respondent 14 who recommended to “bring back routine and certainty to the fixture; every team plays at home every second week, mid-week fixtures only during summer school holidays and reduce the chance of fixture clashes with the major football codes.” Consistent scheduling was perceived as important to help consumers planning other activities around home games. Respondents recommended



scheduling games on the weekends and moving the start of the season to October to avoid competition from other leagues within Australia such as the AFL and the NRL. Respondents suggested that these adjustments would positively impact game attendance numbers and, therefore, improve the atmosphere at A-League games and the overall match day experience of consumers.

#### 4.7. Unique club identity

The seventh theme was concerned with developing the unique identity of clubs within the A-League. The clubs of the A-League were perceived as artificial clubs without a unique identity because of the league's standardised branding approach. Respondent 117 commented the A-League would be more interesting "if clubs had more of an individual approach or direction rather than the generic A-League teams with the same websites and same promotions." This sentiment was reinforced by Respondent 103 who stated: "Clubs should be allowed to change colours to their liking and their fans' liking." Both comments highlight respondents' perceptions that clubs within the A-League needed a stronger identity inherent to their appearance, such as colours, websites and promotions. Additionally, Respondent 133 recommended that the league should "give clubs more freedom to create their identity and position themselves as rich buying clubs, youth producing clubs, [or] mid-table [clubs] with aspirations, etcetera." The comments accentuated the need for differentiation between the clubs. According to the respondents this could be accomplished by the league management taking a secondary role and providing the clubs with freedom to create their own unique identity.

### 5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to understandings of perceptions knowledgeable consumers hold towards the brand activities of a sport league and how the league can improve the consumer experience. Within the present study, participants reported a high level of involvement with the league ( $M = 5.31$ ) yet did not agree the league was well managed ( $M = 2.91$ ). Although respondents were highly involved with the league, their recommendations provided insights into not only strategies that would impact their own connection with the league, but also strategies that they perceived would be effective in attracting new fans. Consumers' willingness to provide recommendations that can be used to increase the attractiveness of a league to appeal to a broad audience may be understood through the tenets of social identity theory (cf. [Tajfel, 1982](#); [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)). A proposition from social identity theory is that members of social groups will enact strategies to improve the group when it is threatened or negatively compared to a rival group. Given that the A-League is not considered a market leader compared to its salient rivals (i.e., AFL, NRL), respondents' suggestions characterise an attempt to increase their group's status. [Lock et al. \(2012\)](#) demonstrated how fans might take affirmative action to improve their group's status via spruiking the credentials of a specific club to others via positive word of mouth. In the current case, increasing the league's overall market share is an objective for not only the league management, but also for existing consumers who may have an interest in improving the status of the league to reap associative benefits (cf. [Tajfel & Turner, 1979](#)).

Qualitative findings highlight seven general themes consumers recommended on which the A-League should focus its brand developing efforts. The seven identified themes were (1) media accessibility and marketing, (2) fan engagement, (3) league expansion, (4) competition structure, (5) product quality, (6) match day experience and (7) unique club identity. Before a discussion of the themes is provided, we acknowledge that identified themes are context specific to the case of the A-League and may not be feasible or even follow the strategic directions of the league. However, relating the themes to [Ansoff's \(1957\)](#) four basic market and product strategies provides insights beyond the context of the current study. This classification shows that the themes conceptually aligned with three general strategies – market penetration, market development and product development. No theme represented a diversification strategy. The following section provides a discussion of the themes within the strategy they represent.

#### 5.1. Market penetration

The market penetration strategy aims to attract new consumers or strengthen the connection of existing consumers ([Ansoff, 1957](#)). The two themes *Media accessibility and marketing* and *Fan engagement* both represent a market penetration strategy aimed at attracting new fans and encouraging existing fans to consume the league more frequently. *Marketing* campaigns influence socialising agents that introduce new consumers to the sport league and strengthen consumers' psychological connection with the league (cf. [Funk & James, 2001](#)). *Media accessibility* represents consumers' ability to access league related information and consume the league product. The importance of the media was demonstrated by [Pritchard and Funk \(2006\)](#) who showed that some consumers mainly consume sport leagues via the media. Additionally, the authors demonstrated a symbiotic relationship between game attendance and media usage, which means the more games consumers attend, the more games they also watch on television and vice versa. Both marketing and media accessibility can have a mere-exposure effect which indicates that consumers develop more positive attitudes towards objects the more they are exposed to them (cf. [Doyle, Filo, McDonald, & Funk, 2013](#); [Zajonc, 1968](#)). Marketing campaigns and the accessibility of media may have a stronger influence on less involved consumers due to their ability to act as a socialisation agent, and because these consumers have not yet developed strong positive brand associations towards the league (cf. [Funk & James, 2001](#)).

*Fan engagement* represents the league's ability to interact and engage with its consumers. This strategy can be classified as a brand development strategy that satisfies the personal and social needs and wants of consumers. In broader marketing literature, consumer engagement has been linked with feelings of trust in, and passion for, the brand (Bowden, 2009). Fan engagement strategies, such as the use of social media, can make consumers of sport leagues feel valued and important and make the league personally relevant (cf. Funk & James, 2001). Therefore, fan engagement may satisfy consumers' wants and needs and subsequently strengthen their connection with the league.

### 5.2. Market development

The market development strategy aims to extend the product to new markets (Ansoff, 1957). The theme *League expansion* represents a market development strategy aimed at expanding the league to new regions. The market development strategy incorporates consumers' recommendations related to the introduction of expansion clubs to extend the league product on a permanent basis to new markets. Expansion can be achieved through the addition of clubs in strategically located markets that have not been territorialised (Stewart et al., 2005). New consumers may become exposed to the league through an existing affiliation with the sport (e.g., Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2011) or local socialising agents, such as friends and local media, and may develop a connection with the league. Additionally, leagues may have existing consumers in markets they expand to, and these existing consumers may increase their connection to the league because the expansion club provides brand associations that fulfil consumers' personal and social needs and wants (cf. Gladden & Funk, 2001).

### 5.3. Product development

The product development strategy aims to attract new consumers by making the league product more appealing, or to strengthen the connection of existing consumers by better serving their personal and social needs and wants (Ansoff, 1957). The four themes *Product quality*, *Match day experience*, *Unique club identity* and *Competition structure* represent product development strategies where a new product is introduced as well as product development strategies where an existing product is modified. Product development strategies aimed at modifying the league follow a differentiation business level strategy (cf. Porter, 1991) to better satisfy consumers' wants and needs; whereas product development strategies where a new product (e.g., cup-style competition) is introduced are aimed at creating a league related product that may generate spill-over consumer engagement from the cup to the league.

The *Product quality* theme is related to star players, the development of professional structures to improve league staff performance (e.g., management and referees), and the improvement of the league's youth development system. Star players have been identified as attributes of professional clubs that increase the attractiveness of the given club and function as brand associations consumers link with the club (Gladden & Funk, 2001). Although star players may help generate interest in a club, it has been reported that they have little impact on highly involved consumers unless they are key to the club's success or integrated into the club's host community (Lock et al., 2012; Neale & Funk, 2006). Given the close connection between the league brand and the club brand (Kunkel et al., 2013), some club brand associations are also applicable to their respective league (Kunkel et al., 2014). All three aspects identified in the current research (star players, league management and youth development) have previously been identified as league brand associations and their relationship with consumer commitment with a league was demonstrated in research by Kunkel et al. (2014).

Consumers' *Match day experience* is related to several aspects including; ticket prices, stadium size, staff and security training, and game schedules at convenient times. Inflated ticket prices (Zhang, Pease, Hui, & Michaud, 1995), inconvenient game schedules (Trail, Robinson, & Kim, 2008) and negative experiences with stadium staff and security can lead to reduced attendances (Theodorakis, Kambitsis, & Laios, 2001). These external factors may have a stronger negative influence on less involved consumers because they have not internalised the league and/or club (cf. Funk & James, 2001). The stadium atmosphere is one of the most important reasons to attend sport events (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005) and contributes to the overall attractiveness of sport leagues (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). Improvements related to consumers' match day experience are expected to lead to increased attendance figures and, therefore, to a better atmosphere at stadiums.

Allowing clubs to develop a *Unique club identity* represents brand differentiation in the product development strategy and highlights how league managers can influence consumers of clubs. Brand differentiation is a key element in attracting and retaining consumers (Cornwell, Roy, & Steinar, 2001). Brand differentiation for sport clubs aims to distinguish the clubs from their competitors based on characteristics, such as positioning as a "youth producing club", and other elements of the marketing mix to meet consumers' wants more accurately (cf. Dickson & Ginter, 1987). Clubs can differentiate their brand based on their identity (Carlson, Donovan, & Cumiskey, 2009), which could be closely linked with the image of their host community. However, given the history of 'ethnic' clubs of the NSL, both leagues and clubs need to be cautious in their differentiation strategies. That is, rather than limiting their potential consumer base by linking their brand identity to a specific target market, we advise to position the brand closely aligned with the image of the host community. An example for this is the Central Coast Mariners (located in a coastal region) using yellow (representing sand) and blue (representing water) in their logo and club colours. Clubs can utilise brand differentiation strategies to grow their consumer base, however, research indicates that unique clubs can also contribute to the overall attractiveness of leagues (Koenigstorfer et al., 2010). Therefore, unique club identities may foster unique brand associations consumers link with the club (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001) or with the whole league (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014).

Changes in the *Competition structure* represents a product development strategy aimed at altering the existing product and introducing a new product to connect with a grass-roots market. This theme incorporates consumers' recommendations related to promotion and relegation as well as a FFA cup-style competition. Unlike strategic league expansions that grow the league (Stewart et al., 2005), promotion and relegation would allow lower-level clubs to enter the league based on their performance without changing the total number of clubs. Furthermore, a cup-style competition may have the ability to get grass-roots community clubs involved with the league. The introduction of a FFA cup-style competition represents a product development strategy where a new product is developed. The FFA cup-style competition represents a new product that is highly related to the A-League and draws on the core competencies of the league management. In particular, the new product is a series of knockout football games that involve clubs from the A-League as well as grass-roots clubs. Similarly to the market development strategy, new consumers may become exposed to the league or existing consumers may strengthen their involvement with the league because they perceive the changes as attractive or because they like the new product. Therefore, these strategies are expected to improve the community standing and status of the league (e.g., Stewart et al., 2005). The league's community values may be linked with consumers' own community values and thus consumers may develop stronger brand associations that initiate a stronger connection with the league (Kunkel et al., 2014).

#### 5.4. Diversification

The diversification strategy aims at both modifying product characteristics and targeting a new market and generally leads to drastic changes in the experience associated with the business (Ansoff, 1957). The diversification strategy was not identified in the current research. This strategy generally focuses on expanding the portfolio of an organisation with a focus on generating economical benefits for the organisation. Given the A-League's early stage in the life cycle (cf. Howard, 1999), it would be premature for the A-League to follow a diversification strategy, as this would require resources that the league would need to invest in their core business rather than in diversifying its portfolio. Therefore, the context of this research (i.e., a relatively new sport league) may have contributed to the absence of consumer recommendations that could be classified as a diversification strategy.

Furthermore, the current findings indicate that a diversification strategy may not have an effect on the league brand as perceived by the consumer. The reason for this may be that the league's links with diverse new external assets are not visible to the consumer and consequently they do not directly change consumers' experience with the league. Thus, consumers may be unaware of, or may not care about, the positive aspects that a diversification strategy could provide to the sport league. As a consequence, although this strategy may provide financial benefits to leagues and may function as an organisation development strategy, the diversification strategy may not impact consumers' brand perception of the league, and therefore not represent a potential brand development strategy for sport organisations.

### 6. Contributions

Four main contributions to existing sport management literature are derived from the current study. The first contribution is related to improving strategic sport brand development knowledge. Kunkel et al. (2014) indicated that leagues needed to strategically manage their brand development, yet they did not explain how leagues might achieve this aim. The current study indicates the sport brand development potential of three market and product growth strategies. Knowledgeable consumers suggested league management and marketing actions, representing market penetration, market development and product development strategies, could be employed by the A-League to better satisfy their wants and needs, and the wants and needs of new consumers. Therefore, the current findings add to previous research by uncovering strategic sport brand development options.

The second contribution is related to brand association knowledge. The authors examined sport brand development strategies from a consumer perspective. Strategic brand development as recommended by consumers enables leagues to alter their characteristics and consequently better serve consumers' wants and needs. As a result, consumers' brand associations towards the league may change positively and align more closely with consumers' personal values and beliefs. This may influence an internalisation process and initiate a stronger connection between consumers and the league (e.g., Funk & James, 2001, 2006). Thus, uncovered sport brand development strategies provide a useful tool for managers to influence consumers' brand associations.

The third contribution is related to knowledge on the brand relationship between leagues and clubs (Kunkel et al., 2013; Mason, 1997). Findings support that league and club brand development are fundamentally related concepts and leagues and clubs are held closely together in the mind of the consumer. For example, the product development strategy represents a strategy that focuses on the development of brand associations consumers link with the league (e.g., Kunkel et al., 2014) or clubs that produce the league product (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2001). This relationship has implications on the strategic brand development of the league and indicates that the league needs to provide a brand development framework that considers both league and club brand development. This is particularly important because some brand development strategies are moderated by the clubs. For example, the league may use a product development strategy by adjusting the salary cap to allow the signing of an additional marquee player. However, the implementation of this strategy is left to the individual clubs that have the freedom to decide whether they actually sign an additional marquee player, or not. Findings of this research therefore contend that brand development strategies need to consider the best branding approach for the overall league

brand, whilst providing individual clubs with enough freedom to develop a distinct and attractive brand. Thus, the current study supports the close brand relationship between leagues and teams, which is determined by their brand architecture (Kunkel et al., 2013).

The fourth contribution is related to market research sampling knowledge. The authors demonstrate that sport managers can consult opinion leaders to gain an improved understanding of how they can develop their brands to better cater to consumers with differing levels of involvement. Responses indicate that participants of this study are likely to represent opinion leaders (cf. Walsh et al., 2004) who provided recommendations to improve the league experience for both highly involved consumers and less involved consumers. This highlights the potential role of socialisation agents and the value of engaging with developed consumers. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), these highly involved consumers are motivated to engage in actions designed to positively position their groups and thus represent a useful resource for sport brands seeking brand development. By implementing brand development strategies recommended by consumers, sport organisations are likely to both satisfy their highly involved existing consumers and attract consumers who have less developed connections. As the PCM is a developmental framework (Funk & James, 2001, 2006), highly involved consumers have themselves developed from lower stages and thus understand some of the factors and processes which led to their own involvement progression. Hence, these consumers provide a data rich sample to gain understanding of strategies to satisfy the wants and needs of consumers with different levels of involvement.

## 7. Limitations and future research

Four main limitations inherent in this research should be addressed by future research. First, the study was focused on football consumers of a relatively young league. Therefore, the transferability of this study to other contexts requires consideration. Some brand development strategies, such as unique club identities or competition structure may not be relevant for established sport leagues because they have already satisfied consumers' wants in these areas. However, other brand development strategies may be applicable to all sport leagues, such as enhancing the product quality or match day experience. Therefore, future research should explore brand development strategies which are salient for consumers of established leagues (e.g., NRL) to examine differences, or other emerging leagues (e.g., Chinese Super League) to examine similarities.

Second, participants in this study represented consumers that were already involved with the league. They represented a knowledgeable segment of league consumers and therefore provided the sample for this study. However, future research should consider exploring brand development strategies from the perspective of potential consumers who have no previous league involvement, or those who are less involved with the league. Brand development activating this segment provides the most potential to grow the consumer base of leagues (cf. Lock & Filo, 2012).

Third, the identified brand development strategies reflect the recommendations of consumers. The strategies, such as free-to-air television or the introduction of expansion clubs, may strengthen their connection to the league. However, these strategies may not be financially feasible or may collide with the league's overall brand approach. Therefore, leagues need to conduct market research to investigate the feasibility of recommended brand development strategies and link them to their overall brand identity.

Fourth, the use of an open-ended essay style question did not allow for probing questions to further examine responses. Future research could build on this research method and add in-depth qualitative follow-up research to develop a deeper understanding of the proposed league brand strategies. In doing so, future research could consider both knowledgeable highly involved consumers and consumers that are less involved.

## 8. Conclusion

In this study a consumer perspective was adopted to investigate brand development strategies that are available to a sport league. Seven qualitatively identified themes represented three brand development strategies – market penetration, market development and product development – sport leagues can implement to better satisfy their consumers' wants and needs and develop positive consumer-based brand associations. Findings of the study contribute to sport management literature in four ways. First, findings present brand development strategies managers can utilise to strategically position their brand as perceived by consumers. Second, the brand development strategies provide a useful tool for managers to influence consumers' brand associations. Third, findings support a close brand relationship between leagues and their clubs. Fourth, findings illustrate how sport managers can capitalise on the opportunity to gather feedback from highly involved consumers to gain an understanding of the wants and needs of consumers with different levels of involvement. Overall, sport leagues are provided with knowledge on how to strategically develop their brand to better satisfy their consumers' wants and needs.

## 9. Post-script

The data for this study were collected in May 2011. Since then, the A-League has implemented several brand development actions recommended in this study. For example, the A-League moved the start of the 2011/12 season to October to avoid competition with other Australian football codes (i.e., AFL and NRL), invested in star players and launched a league-wide

marketing campaign. Clubs signed several Australian star players, which was possible because the league raised the number of marquee players each team was able to sign. Additionally, the league launched a “We Are Football” campaign that had a strong social media focus. The A-League management withdrew the licence of Gold Coast United, because the club was not able to create a strong supporter base and the club’s owner criticised the competition and the league management. The club was replaced with the Western Sydney Wanderers, a newly formed club that is owned and managed by the league. Additionally, the league made changes to its top management and announced the introduction of the FFA Cup to commence in 2014 to connect the league with grass-roots football.

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## Appendix A. Characteristics of quoted respondents

Respondent	Age	Gender	Involvement	# of games seen on television	# of games attended in stadium	Satisfaction with management
2	39	M	7.00	70	23	3
7	43	M	7.00	60	4	2
14	48	M	4.67	20	15	3
15	28	M	7.00	60	19	1
24	31	M	7.00	90	7	6
31	21	M	6.33	20	6	4
42	42	M	6.00	30	10	3
44	20	F	7.00	30	5	3
46	18	M	6.00	15	14	3
53	38	M	5.33	20	10	1
74	40	M	6.67	60	10	5
77	23	M	6.33	20	15	1
84	32	M	6.00	30	8	1
89	31	M	7.00	60	5	5
103	33	M	5.67	35	18	2
109	30	M	7.00	60	9	3
117	27	M	6.33	30	27	2
119	23	M	6.00	23	7	2
124	21	M	6.67	30	2	1
133	33	M	6.33	40	7	3
141	60	M	4.33	5	0	5
147	57	M	3.00	55	0	3
152	22	M	6.33	20	15	5
154	25	M	6.00	50	10	1
167	28	M	4.33	30	4	1
188	18	M	6.00	40	23	3
201	21	F	6.33	30	2	2
220	53	M	3.67	6	3	1

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