

**In the absence of achievement: Key themes leading to the formation of new team  
identification.**

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## **Abstract**

Motives to attend sport and form identification with sporting teams attract considerable attention in the literature to date. Research outlines vicarious achievement as a key construct leading to attendance and identification. Conceptual and theoretical development focuses on established sport teams, neglecting the formation of identification in a new team context. New sport teams do not have a history of achievement through which to attract fans, thus the formation of identification with new sport teams may be conceivably different and forms the focus of this study. A mixed-method approach was used to expose key themes leading to the formation of new team identification with a new sport team. Findings illustrated that in a new team, new league context vicarious achievement is less relevant. Instead fans were led to form new team identification to support the sport of football in Australia. The home city of fans and the match day occasion provided supplementary themes leading to identification.

## **Introduction**

The process associated with the formation of social identification with a sporting team has attracted widespread attention from social psychologists (Dimmock, Grove, & Eklund, 2005, p. 34; Sloan, 1979, 1989), sport psychologists (Wann, 1995; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and sport managers (James, Kolbe, & Trail, 2002; Trail & James, 2001). Past research has sought to provide a framework within which to understand why and how an individual transitions from awareness of a sporting team to an attraction to attend games or identify with the team (Funk & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2006). In the case of sport, research has shown that individuals affiliate with social groups, which reflect positively on them (Cialdini et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). This theoretical proposition suggests that affiliation with social categories with a rich and successful history provides sport fans with a conduit through which they can derive emotional value and satisfaction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The majority of conceptual and theoretical development focuses on the formation of identification with established (established team identification) sporting teams (Fink, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Neale & Funk, 2006). Established teams have some degree of history and achievement, which is derived from on-field performance, playing style, successes and failures, and spectator tradition. Previous studies have shown that teams with positive and successful histories attract the majority of spectators (Fink, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). High profile teams such as Manchester United, Real Madrid and the New York Yankees provide examples of

how a successful track record can foster not only a fan base in the team's home city and country, but globally (Kerr & Gladden, 2008; McDonald, Karg, & Lock, 2010).

At the time of their inception, new sporting teams playing in new competitions do not have a history of achievement, performance or brand presence. Therefore, new teams need to leverage “consumer interest and subsequent behaviour without being able to rely on the high levels of loyalty enjoyed by established teams” (Mahony, Nakazawa, Funk, James, & Gladden, 2002, p. 2). Knowledge of how identification forms with a new sport team (new team identification) is largely absent in current literature. It has not yet been determined whether theory developed in relation to established team identification is applicable to a new sport team. While recent literature has tested new team identification (Lock, 2009a; Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2009) and psychological connection with new sport teams (James, et al., 2002) – it has not explored how this relationship forms. Therefore, the aim of this research study was to explore the formation aspect of new team identification. Furthermore, we sought to determine how theory developed from studies of established team identification could inform the new team context.

To position this research study, the review addresses three key areas of literature on sport fandom and football in Australia. First, the literature exploring motives to attend sport matches and to form established team identification are canvassed. Second, existing theory developed from research into new team identification focuses the review of literature. Third, the specific case studied in this paper is outlined.

## Literature

The premise that individuals seek avenues to achieve positive self-esteem (End, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a basis to understanding the decision making process of those that attend or identify with sport teams. The decision to identify with a social category reflects a wider social need to join groups that reflect positively on the participant's self concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When an individual's social identity is unsatisfactory, they will strive to leave the associated group and join some other positively distinct group or attempt to positively alter the group they are a member of (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These theoretical explanations of individuals' cognitive, affective and evaluative procedures have been influential in framing work that models the motives or reasons to identify with sport teams (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Sloan, 1989; Wann & Branscombe, 1993; Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000).

Sport motivation theories have been classified in five categories: distinct emotions or psychological desires: salubrious effects, stress and stimulation seeking, catharsis and aggression, entertainment, and achievement seeking (Sloan, 1989). Mahony *et al.* (2002, p. 3) pointed out that "suspense/eustress and self-esteem benefits/vicarious achievement" are the only factors to receive consistent support in the literature. Specifically, these factors address the stimulation and excitement derived from attendance at games (Sloan, 1989; Trail & James, 2001; Wann, 1995; Wann, Roberts, & Tindall, 1999) and the attraction of identification with a successful other (Cialdini, et al., 1976; End, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Research exploring the reasons that individuals watch, attend, or identify with sporting teams can be dichotomised. This dichotomy is based on the conceptualisation that motives and antecedents to attend may be different to the reasons that individuals develop a meaningful social bond. The literature exploring fan motives and antecedents to attend sport and sporting events represents one grouping of literature (Funk, Mahony, & Ridinger, 2002; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2004; Kahle, Kambara, & Rose, 1996; Trail & James, 2001; Wann & Branscombe, 1995; Wann, Schrader, & Wilson, 1999). The research that explores how established team identification or psychological attachment with a specific team forms is considered as the second grouping of ideas (Funk, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Kolbe & James, 2000; Neale & Funk, 2006). Motives and antecedents to attend sport are canvassed now.

#### *Motives and antecedents to attend sport*

A multitude of factors and themes have been posited to influence the decision to attend sporting matches or events. The outcomes of past studies show that the concept of motive, or antecedent to attend can vary between contexts (Funk, et al., 2002). Therefore, a thorough consideration of the context researched is required (Funk, et al., 2002). Studies that explore motives or antecedents to attend a specific team's games provide significant, but varied findings (Funk & James, 2004; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, Ridinger, & Moorman, 2003; Funk, et al., 2004; Kahle, et al., 1996; Mahony, et al., 2002). The outcomes include the importance of the sport played by a team (Funk, et al., 2002; Kahle, et al., 1996); the influence of players as role models, star performers and loyal and contributing members of a team (Funk, et al., 2003; Neale & Funk, 2006; Trail & James, 2001); and the role of vicarious achievement by

associating with a successful other (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003, 2004) in the decision to attend games. Each motive to attend is explored now.

The importance of the sport played by a team has received sporadic attention in the literature on motives to attend live sport (Funk, et al., 2002; Kahle, et al., 1996). Essentially, these studies showed that people attend matches because they affiliate with the sport being played. This notion was first purported in an article that utilised Kellman's Functional Theory of Attitudinal Motivation to test what drove undergraduate and graduate students to attend college Gridiron matches (Kahle, et al., 1996). Specifically, Kahle *et al* (1996) argued that an internalised, long-term affiliation with the sport of Gridiron was a key motivation for college students to attend games. Despite criticism over the statistical rigour (Trail & James, 2001) employed by Kahle *et al.* (1996) the conceptual advance this paper provided was significant.

Other work has since highlighted the role of the sport as a motive to attend women's football and basketball matches (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003). The Sport Interest Inventory (SII) was used with a group of spectators at the 1999 U.S. Nike Cup football tournament (Funk, et al., 2002) and also with one-off attendees at Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) matches (Funk, et al., 2003). The sport was found to be a significant motive for attendance in the football and basketball contexts respectively (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003), which extended previous findings (Kahle, et al., 1996).

Players have also been shown to motivate people to attend as: star performers (Trail & James, 2001), loyal and contributing members of a team (Neale & Funk, 2006); and as role models (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003). Trail and James (2001) surveyed Major League Baseball fans in the U.S. in their extension of Wann's (1995) SFMS model. The model tested similar factors to Wann's (1995) SFMS, but proved that in today's era of superstar athletes star players were a conceivably important motive to attend (Trail & James, 2001). Other research has since retested the value of star players in the Australian Football League (AFL), employing the SII to further test the psychometric properties of the model (Neale & Funk, 2006). Neale and Funk (2006), found that players were only salient in the decision to attend games if they were deemed to be loyal and contributing members of the team (Neale & Funk, 2006). This outcome contrasted the work of Trail and James (2001), yet, the research context may conceivably have influenced the findings in each study.

Funk *et al* (2002) demonstrated that players can also motivate people to attend by serving as role models. This was a core motive for spectators at the 1999 U.S. Nike Cup football tournament. Funk *et al* (2003) validated this finding in additional testing of spectators of women's sport in the WNBA. The mean score for the factor responses in relation to players as role models was 6.17 on a 7 point scale, which indicated a very strong agreement level with the factor (Funk, et al., 2003). This study concluded that players as role models were a significant motive for spectators, but the authors qualified this comment by defining this factor as contextual to women's sport, thus tempering the broader applications of this theoretical development (Funk, et al., 2003).



The third area of interest in relation to motives to attend sport events or matches has received almost unequivocal support in the literature to date (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). The social psychological notion that people will attach themselves to social categories that reflect positively on them, or Bask In the Reflected Glory (BIRGing) of successful others is of seminal importance in the literature addressing sport spectators and fans (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; End, 2001; End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2002; Fink, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003). The opposite of BIRGing, Cutting Off Reflected Failure (CORFing) (Snyder, Lassegard, & Ford, 1986) states that when reflection from a sporting team is negative for a spectator, they will seek to distance themselves from the group, which aligns closely with the theoretical tenets of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). One research study has sought to extend the existing conceptualisations of BIRGing and CORFing (Campbell, Aiken, & Kent, 2004). This study posited that in addition to BIRGing and CORFing, some individuals will seek to Bask In Reflected Failure (BIRF) and/or Cut Off Reflected Success (CORS) associated with game attendance (Campbell, et al., 2004). Despite a compelling conceptual argument, this thesis has not received broader support to date.

Studies exploring the theoretical dimensions of BIRGing have generally conceptualised the construct as vicarious achievement (Fink, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003, 2004; Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005; Sloan, 1979, 1989). The literature investigating vicarious achievement highlights that the construct is a key motive driving attendance at sport matches (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003, 2004; Sloan, 1989) and to form established team identification (Fink, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Robinson, et al., 2005).

Research on the formation of established team identification, or psychological attachment can inform our understanding of team identification. The literature drawn from research into motives to attend sport and to form established team identification validates the role of vicarious achievement as a motive unanimously (Fink, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003, 2004; Robinson, et al., 2005; Sloan, 1979, 1989). Findings specific to studies exploring the formation of established team identification are focused on here to elaborate the current theorisations of vicarious achievement as a reason to identify.

#### *The formation of established team identification*

Fisher and Wakefield (1998) investigated fans of two un-disclosed Hockey teams in the U.S. to determine how team performance affected group identification. They argued that “individuals identify on the basis of group characteristics that promote a positive self-image” (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998, p. 34). Vicarious achievement was a primary factor in the formation of established team identification for Hockey, “in the present sports context, being linked to a winning team enables fans to be connected to the sport they love and to be associated with a winner” (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998, pp. 34-35).

Additional research has sought to model the role of vicarious achievement as a motive for fans of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division One to Four Gridiron matches (Robinson, et al., 2005). This study explored vicarious achievement and additional spectator motives on reason to attach to sport teams playing at different

levels. Spectator motives included an existing identification with the sport played (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003; Kahle, et al., 1996), which provided further support for the arguments presented on motive to attend sport matches or events (Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003; Kahle, et al., 1996). It also linked with the argument of Fisher and Wakefield (1998) that identification allowed people to affiliate with a sport they loved. Robinson *et al* (2005) found that fans of NCAA Division One (the highest level investigated) were significantly more likely to be motivated to support by vicarious achievement, a process the authors linked back to BIRGing, conceptually (Cialdini, et al., 1976). Pertinently, this study found that sport identification was a significant motive to attend for Division Three spectators, supporting the premise that individuals with a strong bond to the sport would be more likely to support lower levels of the game (Robinson, et al., 2005). This notion has also been supported in other literature (Bernthal & Graham, 2003). To date, Robinson *et al* (2005) provides critical insight into the role of the sport played by a team in the formation of identification or attachment with a team. It also supported the argument that the reason to form established team identification may exist beyond the scope of the team. This was a significant contribution and progression of theory made by Robinson *et al's* (2005) study.

Fink *et al* (2002) sought to identify the most salient reason to form established team identification and then to measure the specific relationships between fan motives and established team identification. Four motive subscales (vicarious achievement, aesthetics, drama, and social interaction) displayed significant relationships with established team identification. Of these, the subscale vicarious achievement explained the largest proportion of variance relating to established team identification

(Fink, et al., 2002). The literature on reasons to attend and identify with sporting teams highlights the role of vicarious achievement in the development of social identification with established sporting teams. Yet, there is scant understanding of whether vicarious achievement is relevant in people's decision to identify with a new sport team. This gap represents a key area for theoretical and practical development.

Other literature has espoused aspects beyond the scope of the team to be salient in the formation of established team identification or psychological attachment. Most notably, are the importance of aspects of community (Kolbe & James, 2000) and tradition and locality (Jones, 1998, 2000).

Kolbe and James (2000) explored what led season-ticket holders to form an established team attachment with the Cleveland Browns, a professional Gridiron club in the US. This study explicitly tested socialisation theory to assess the effect of the following motives: influential people; events and their influence on becoming a fan; and the importance of city and community of fans (Kolbe & James, 2000). Attachment to city and community of fans displayed the strongest influence. Growing up in Cleveland [home city of team]; the Browns as my hometown team; and the Brown's as a Cleveland institution were the most important factors leading to attachment with the club tested (Kolbe & James, 2000).

The role of community has been endorsed in other work. In his research on Luton Town Football Club (LTFC) fans, Jones (1998, 2000), sought to investigate why people continued to support a team which played in the lower professional leagues of

England and constantly underperformed. Jones (1998, 2000) elicited that factors pertaining to the tradition of support for LTFC and identification with Luton as a community were the key themes, which drove the formation of established team identification.

Key theories in relation to both motives to attend sporting events/matches and to form established team identification have been canvassed during this review. In doing so, we have provided indications of key theory, which explains how identification forms with established sport teams, not new sport teams. To date, the focus of research into new sport teams has been on the actual nature of the psychological connection (James, et al., 2002) or new team identification (Lock, 2009a, 2009b; Lock, et al., 2009) season-ticket holders and members formed with teams. The contributions of these studies are reviewed now.

#### *New sport teams*

Compared with the volume of literature on established sporting teams, studies of new teams are relatively rare. This trend is shifting with the development of a myriad of new sport teams to study. James, Kolbe & Trail (2002) investigated the psychological connection of season-ticket holders of a new Major League Baseball franchise (undisclosed in the study) in the US prior to the team's first season. They measured the cognitive bond season-ticket holders developed in the absence of team performances and found that season-ticket holders developed a surprisingly strong cognitive bond even before a game had been played. James *et al* (2002) conducted solely quantitative survey work in this case. Their study was innovative in its

sampling of a new sport team, yet, by including only scale based quantitative work, the authors may have overlooked key variables, which may have been unearthed by conducting additional qualitative research (Crawford, 2004; Jones, 1997, 1998). The authors included the MSSC (Trail & James, 2001) in the survey instrument, but the findings in relation to this scale were not discussed.

More recently, literature has sought to measure cognitive, affective and behavioural facets of new team identification in a brand new league (Lock, 2009b; Lock, et al., 2009) to develop on the initial cognitively based study by James *et al* (2002), which explored a new team in an established league. This work highlighted that members of a new sport team did not strongly identify with a rival grouping, which suggested that such competitive conflict needs time to develop (Lock, 2009b; Lock, et al., 2009). Additionally, the value of victory displayed a weak relationship to new team identification, which queried whether vicarious achievement would be as relevant in driving attendance and identification as it has shown to be in established team contexts (Lock, 2009b; Lock, et al., 2009). Further work in the Australian context has shown that fans of the new A-League competition are consumers of football on a global scale, identifying with multiple leagues. This study of Melbourne Victory sought to argue from a marketing perspective that clubs should seek to leverage fans interest in global football leagues to maximise fan numbers in Australia (McDonald, et al., 2010).

Broadly, the new team context has been shown to display clear parallels with fans and spectators of established teams (James, et al., 2002; Lock, et al., 2009). However, the

nuanced differences shown in the work of Lock *et al* highlight a potentially rich arena for research into the reasons that people choose to identify with sporting teams that lack tradition and history. The aims of this study and the context researched are presented now.

### *Context and aim*

Football in Australia has been plagued by maladministration (D. Crawford, 2003; Kemeny, 2003), corruption (Solly, 2004; Stewart, 1994) and ethnic tensions based on nationalistic rivalries at a National Soccer League (NSL) level. In 2003, the Australian Federal Government commissioned a report into the structure and function of the Governing Body of football in Australia (D. Crawford, 2003). This was followed with a second report, which provided a blueprint for the deconstruction of the NSL and the redevelopment of a new football league – The A-League (Kemeny, 2003). The A-League sought to move beyond the sport's historical problems by creating a totally new league containing six new teams and two established 'Australian' clubs that played in the National Soccer League (Lock, 2009a; Lock, et al., 2009). In doing so, the Football Federation Australia sought to create a league where individuals' identified with teams because they deemed them relevant. This provided a salient opportunity to study a new sport teams in a new league, which sought to extend on the work of James *et al* (2002), which studied a new team in an established league. To address the key topic of this research and emanating from the literature, two research questions were explored:

- What are the key themes driving the formation of new team identification?
- Why are these themes important to the members?

The research design and units of analysis targeted to address this specific query are outlined now.

## **Methodology**

The research design was mixed-method. The methods included two online surveys and in-depth interviews. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data is valuable in developing a fuller understanding of sport fans (G. Crawford, 2003; Crawford, 2004; Jones, 1997, 1998). The mixed-method approach sought the depth of qualitative methods, while also seeking to test the themes developed on a broader sample of the new team's fan base (Jones, 1997). Due to the lack of existing research exploring the formation of new team identification, an exploratory and inductive approach was employed.

An online survey was administered to Sydney FC's members that joined before season one of the A-League. The club estimated this population to include 1200 people. From this population 490 fully completed survey responses were gathered for analysis. To elaborate on initial survey data, 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with foundation members (those that joined when the first membership packages were announced). In season two the survey was distributed to a population of 3000 Sydney FC members; 788 fully completed questionnaires were collated for analysis.



## **Procedure**

*Surveys One and Two:* Both surveys were distributed to members of Sydney Football Club via an automated mail-out in conjunction with Sydney FC's marketing department at the end of seasons one and two of the A-League (Dillman, 2000). Members were provided with a description of the survey, research aims and a hyperlink for the survey, which was hosted by an online survey provider. The surveys addressed reasons to identify, level of identification and demographic variables. Survey one respondents were asked to indicate their interest in conducting a follow-up interview.

*In-depth interviews:* The interview process aimed to deepen the understanding obtained from survey one by using the words, thoughts and feelings of participants to explain key themes (Bryman, 2004; Jones, 1997). Participants were contacted via email following survey one to arrange a suitable time and place for the interview to take place. Interviews were conducted following season one of the A-League until a point of theoretical saturation on key points was achieved (Bryman, 2004; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, 1977).

## **Instrument & Analysis**

*Surveys One and Two:* A multi-response question was included in survey one to probe what drove the formation of new team identification for Sydney FC members. This question refined in survey two following analysis of in-depth interview data and in

light of survey one responses. In survey two, respondents were asked to select the key reason they chose to form new team identification with Sydney FC. The survey questions were used to retest emergent themes from survey one and in-depth interviews. Analysis of the survey questions in surveys one and two was descriptive and sought to evaluate the broader application of the emergent themes to a broader cross-section of Sydney FC members.

### *In-depth interview*

The interview schedule was developed to explore key themes leading to the formation of new team identification. Following each interview, the recording was downloaded electronically and transcribed to facilitate data analysis. Interview data was analysed using the NVIVO 8 software package. This software was used to catalogue, analyse and code interview transcriptions. As relevant themes and sub-categories became evident, Tree Nodes were created to facilitate the inclusion of further coding categories under the initial theme referring to the same tree structure. Themes were considered to be words, phrases and paragraphs that represented a common participant response (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each theme was checked and recoded independently by each member of the research team to ensure the integrity of the data analysis and the representativeness of the empirical outcomes.

## **Results**

### *Survey One*

The following Table includes variables to measure key themes acting in the formation of new team identification with Sydney FC. Survey one findings are shown in Table 1, below (N=490).

**Insert Table 1 about here.**

Table 1 indicated that identification with football was the most common theme acting in the formation of new team identification for survey one respondents. In-depth interviews provided participant narratives explaining key themes in the formation of new team identification with Sydney FC.

#### *In-depth interviews*

Interview participants were asked, *“At the start of the season, Sydney FC was an entity without direct history; what attracted you to support them?”* Stemming from member interview narratives, three primary themes drove the formation of new team identification. First, members highlighted an existing social identity with the sport of football. Second, members explained an existing affiliation with their city of origin, Sydney. Third, members defined the occasion of match-days as key to the formation of new team identification.

Table 2 illustrates the eventual coding structure graphically. The parent node “Formation of new team identification” sits on the left of the model. Each child node “Football First/Origin/Occasion” sits in the central column. Sub themes are provided on the right side of the model.

**Insert Table 2 about here.**

To elaborate on the coding structure, sample quotes for each primary theme are defined in table 3, below:

**Insert Table 3 about here**

The saturation of responses for each interview participant and theme follows in Table 4. This shows each interview participant, their age, gender and the themes that led to the formation of new team identification. Table 4 highlights the high number of interview participants that explained an existing social identification with football. A broader analysis of each of the sub-themes displayed above follows, including interview participants' words and quotes to elaborate on the initial analysis.

**Insert Table 4 about here**

*Theme 1: Football First*

The qualitative analysis unearthed two sub-themes, highlighted by members noting an existing affiliation with the sport, football (Table 5). First, members described a generic love of football, which followed survey one findings (Members 5, 6, 10 & 18). Sydney FC was relevant to one member simply "because I love the game [football]" (Member 10). For another member, the decision was straight forward; "I'm a football fan so I was always going to do it [support Sydney FC]" (Member 18). This notion was encapsulated in the following comment.

There's been nothing that you can identify with, that you could say yeah I'm going to support that and you see the level of fanaticism about it, it is fanaticism for football more than anything, give us a team called ABC and we'll follow it, because we want a team. (Member 5)

Member 5's social identification with football made Sydney FC relevant. Identification with Sydney FC provided an opportunity to attend and experience live football.

Other members described a purpose that drove the formation of new team identification. New team identification was fuelled by a specific desire to support the success of football in Australia (Members 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20 &

21). The A-League provided “a golden opportunity for us to get football right in Australia” (Member 16). Member 20 felt that the A-League, given the turbulent history of past competitions, held “so much promise for the future and for football in Australia.” Stemming from this notion, as supporters of football in Australia, members articulated that supporting Sydney FC was relevant as it provided a means to progress the sport in their homeland (Members 8 & 16). As follows:

I’m very much a big believer in supporting the things you believe in, so I’m behind supporting football in this country and supporting the A-League and physically paying money and hoping that you’re in some little way contributing to its eventual success and seeing it flourish (Member 8)

Member 8 saw his membership as a “little contribution” to the future of success of the A-League and football in Australia. To other members supporting Sydney FC provided an opportunity to watch the highest-quality football possible in Australia: “I would say that supporting football first [in Australia] was my objective to begin with, that was the idea. This is the best opportunity to see the best football that we have to offer in Australia” (Member 21). By supporting Sydney FC, members perceived that they could help to provide the opportunity to watch a high level of football in Australia. The role of respondent’s home-city provided the second theme acting in the formation of new team identification.

### *Theme 2: Origin*

‘Origin’ did not act as the sole factor (i.e. members explaining the importance of home-city also identified other sub-themes in the formation of their new team identification: See Table 4) in the formation of new team identification for any of the interview participants. However, five interview participants (Members 5, 10, 13, 15 & 18) highlighted that the city of Sydney influenced the formation of their new team

identification. In the five responses, two sub-themes emerged. First, identification with Sydney the city was salient in the formation of a new team identification with Sydney FC (Members 5, 10, 15 & 18). Member 10 stated that although he was motivated to support football, Origin influenced the choice of team. He explained: “I love the game and for a while I debated with myself about which team we should support, Sydney or Central Coast.” The decision between the two clubs was determined by Origin: “I suppose I identified with the city [Sydney] more than I identified with the Central Coast” (Member 10). Member 5, articulated how supporting football was the central factor in his new team identification with Sydney FC, but described the role his home city played in the process: “I’m from Sydney... it just makes perfect sense to me. It’s the team of this city”.

Second, one member noted the convenience of Sydney FC to his home: “Well, it’s just logical I suppose [to support Sydney FC], living in Sydney and also we live fairly close to Sydney Football Stadium, or Aussie Stadium so it was very convenient for us to get to the games, the home games” (Member 13). The role of Origin led some members to identify with Sydney FC instead of other teams but generally, across the sample it was not a critical factor in the formation of new team identification. The role of the match day Occasion is covered now.

### *Theme 3: Occasion*

Nine interview participants suggested that the match-day occasion associated with attendance at games was important in the formation of their new team identification with Sydney FC (see Table 4). Of the nine interview participants (Members 3, 5, 6,

13, 14, 17, 18, 19 & 20) that identified with the occasion at games, six also noted that support of football was the key theme leading to the formation of their new team identification (Members 5, 6, 13, 17, 18 & 20). Only two interview participants nominated occasion as the most important factor leading to the formation of new team identification (Members 3 & 19). Members defined two aspects of the occasion, which acted in the formation of new team identification: Social interaction and atmosphere.

Social interaction at Sydney FC home games provided some members with an additional factor influencing the formation of new team identification, as demonstrated by the following words:

My family, I think, were looking for a football team to support. As soon as the A-League was thought about they were in there getting tickets and everything and it was just assumed that it would be a family thing that we'd all do together. So we went to all the pre-season matches beforehand and then we got the memberships and went to all the games. (Member 3)

Of the other five interview participants articulating social interaction as important, each espoused an existing social identification with football as the key factor in the formation of new team identification (Members 6, 13, 17, 18 & 20).

For two members (6 & 17) attending games provided important 'father and son' time: "I thought it would be good to be involved with from the start. Also my sons just started to play and it was a good get together with a couple of mates who are also season ticket holders" (Member 6). However, the Occasion was a secondary aspect of new team identity formation for Member 6:

Oh, it adds to the enjoyment [social group], like if they hated it, I bought a family sort of thing because it was the best value and gets them into it. If they had turned around and said they didn't want to go next year, I would still be a member next year myself. I think it's just an added bonus that they are still enjoying it and it gives me that time with them but I would still go anyway. I probably would just end up in the pub rather than in the park

Members not espousing that social interaction was relevant in formation of new team identification (Members 2, 4, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16) alluded to the positive outcomes of attending games with friends and family members : "I'll attend games anyway, but if my friends come with me.... it's a definite bonus" (Member 12). Describing his social interaction at games, Member 8 noted: "It's sort of a nice to have, not a must have, really, I guess", while Member 2 described the time he spent with his wife at games as "the cream on the cake." Social interaction provided members of Sydney FC with an enjoyable aspect of attendance in this case, but it was not the central factor in the decision to form new team identification.

Other interview participants identified the Occasion and atmosphere at games as important in their decision to attend (Members 5, 14, & 19). Member 19 attended because: "it was purely just the atmosphere and singing and going for a few drinks" (Member 19). The act of singing, chanting and engaging in the atmosphere at games was the central factor leading to the formation of his new team identification with Sydney FC. He continued, "It's a bit of a release and it makes you feel part of something bigger, which I think is probably what people say when they are questioned, like why are you part of a gang, or why are you in the army, but it does make you feel more part of a community" (Member 19). Member 14 felt that if "they took the singing and the shouting away and the real spectacle, what football is, I probably wouldn't think about renewing my season ticket." Furthermore, the atmosphere at games was something that Member 14 associated with "what football



is.” Without the large, boisterous crowds that this member associated with ‘football support’ per se, attendance would lack the atmosphere he enjoyed.

### *Survey two*

Survey two retested the key themes emerging from survey one and the in-depth interview process descriptively. Thematic patterns from interview data were supported in survey two. Some 45 percent of respondents in the season two survey nominated support of football in Australia, while a further 28 percent defined being part of Sydney FC as the primary factor driving the formation of new team identification. Members’ existing social identification with football underpinned the desire for Sydney FC to be successful. Interest in football represented the only other significant theme driving the formation of new team identification (17%). Only 7 percent of season-two survey respondents selected either friends or family as relevant in the formation of new team identification, which supported the trend that match day Occasion was not the primary theme for the majority of Sydney FC members.

## **Discussion**

This study investigated the formation of new team identification. This question was developed through the initial argument that history is a key facet in relation to the formation of social identification with a sport team. Prior to season one of the A-League there was scant understanding of whether Sydney FC would be successful; how the team would play; and whether the successes/failures of the club would reflect positively or negatively on the self-concept of members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The findings presented here align with previous findings showing that game results were

less relevant in a new team context, initially (Lock, 2009b; Lock, et al., 2009). Instead of fans identifying to achieve vicariously - as is widely accepted in studies of established teams (Funk, et al., 2002) - the outcomes of this study highlight that existing social identifications may be the key mechanism to attract fans at the inception of a new team. The three themes driving the formation of new team identification in this case - Football First, Origin and Occasion provided key advancements in current understanding of how new team identification forms. The broader implications of these themes are broken down during the following sections. Initially, the three themes are shown graphically, below. The Venn diagram illustrates each concept, unearthed during the research process and implies the potential interrelationships between the three themes.

**Insert Figure 1 about here**

*Theme 1: Football First*

The existing premise that the sport played by a team can drive the formation of established team identification was replicated in a new team context, also (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk, et al., 2002; Funk, et al., 2003; Kahle, et al., 1996; Robinson & Trail, 2005). The quantitative focus of previous literature studying fan motives and reason to identify has advanced a statistically based overview of the role the sport plays in the formation of established team identification (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Kahle, et al., 1996; Kolbe & James, 2000). This study has demonstrated that the formation of new team identification can be more complex than a simple affiliation with the sport played.

The formation of new team identification to support football in Australia links with other work, which has argued that individuals will strive to positively alter a social category which reflects negatively on their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Members of Sydney FC continued their affiliation with football in Australia despite the constant failures of the national team and the insolvency and mismanagement that plagued the sport at a national governance and domestic league level, historically (D. Crawford, 2003; Kemeny, 2003). In this case, members choosing to support football in Australia supported Sydney FC to positively alter a sport they already identified with. The formation of Sydney FC members' new team identification related to fans higher-level desire to see football succeed (long-term) in Australia, which provides a notable extension on current understanding of fans of new sport teams.

Access to live football emerged as a key theme leading to the formation of identification with Sydney FC. Conceptually, this validated the relevance of existing literature on established team identification, highlighting the role the sport played in forming identification in this new team context (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk *et al.*, 2003b; Kahle *et al.*, 1996; Kolbe & James, 2000). Previous literature has explained a generic sport bond that acts in the formation of established team identification. However, the interview narratives elaborated on how an existing affiliation with football led to the formation of new team identification. Identification with the sport of football provided the impetus to form new team identification as a conduit to experience live football at games. Prior to the A-League, many study respondents were involved in football through support of clubs in other major football leagues across the globe (McDonald, et al., 2010), but the former context alienated

this group of fans. The A-League provided existing fans of football with an opportunity to identify with a professional football club and access the sport live.

### *Theme 2: Origin*

Origin represented a similar conceptualisation of community as shown in other work (Kolbe & James, 2000). However, unlike previous work (Jones, 1998; Kolbe & James, 2000), the role of community was not a primary contributor to the formation of members' new team identification. In this study, Origin acted by cementing the choice of team to form an identification with. Sydney FC members did not have the same opportunity to form new team identification based on tradition and locality as that observed in other studies (Jones, 1998), due to the absence of history and achievement.

### *Theme 3: Occasion*

The 'Occasion' and experience at home games provided a further influence on the formation of new team identification. Game experience, atmosphere and social interaction have all received attention in the literature on fan motives and reasons to attend sporting matches or events (Sloan, 1989; Wann & Branscombe, 1995). Like Origin, social factors and game atmosphere were secondary in the formation of new team identification. The Occasion at games provided a supplementary aspect, which acted in conjunction with support of football in Australia or globally, leading members to form a new team identification with Sydney FC. This aligns closely with the arguments of Kolbe and James (2000), who noted the importance of attendance at

games and the experience derived from the in-ground experience in the development of strong fan-team bonds.

In addition to the role played by the atmosphere within the match-day Occasion, members consistently described social factors at games as an added bonus to attendance. While social interaction with others at games was not critical to the formation of new team identification, it was meaningful in the broader context of the Occasion (Kolbe & James, 2000). Therefore, social interaction and atmosphere at games enriched and added enjoyment to the match-day Occasion, but did not act as a core reason to identify with the new sport team.

#### *Vicarious achievement*

In the literature review, it was demonstrated that vicarious achievement has received unequivocal support as a key motive to attend sport or as a reason to identify with an established team (Cialdini, et al., 1976; Fink, et al., 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998; Funk, et al., 2002). Members of Sydney FC did not describe vicarious achievement as important in the formation of their new team identification, despite the large body of work demonstrating the function of BIRGing in an established team context (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976; Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; End, 2001; End *et al.*, 2002; Fink *et al.*, 2002; Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). The new team–new league context may have contributed to this finding. Members initiated their support when Sydney FC had no performance history or public expectations due to prior success/failure and, hence, no background from which to BIRG (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). Based on these findings, to

BIRG, a history of achievement seems critical for vicarious achievement to act as a motive or reason to identify.

## **Conclusions on theory**

The formation of new team identification was driven at a fundamental level by members support of football in Australia. This demonstrated that fans (of sport) will act at a club level to develop a sport with which they already identify. This finding provides a critical progression in understanding why individuals identify with new sport teams. Furthermore, this study showed that in a new team context vicarious achievement will not necessarily be a key driver of identification initially. This displays a marked progression in existing conceptualisations of vicarious achievement, which are based on findings drawn from fans of established teams. While not critical to the formation of new team identification, the Origin of fans and the match day Occasion complemented and added value to attendance. Future research should seek to understand how new team identification forms in different contexts and using different methodologies. In alternative contexts and cases, the themes or factors, which drive the formation of new team identification may be different.

## **Outcomes for practice**

The broader outcomes of this research for practice centre on the concept of leveraging existing social identifications to attract fans to new sport teams. Although the on-field success of any new sport team will be fundamental to ongoing success, at the point of inception this study highlights that clubs should seek to establish whether people will

be motivated to attend by a social identification they already maintain. This could include the city a new team inhabits, the sport in which it plays or other social categories, which potential fans believe they can positively alter. To this end, social identity theory provides a pertinent and useful approach to understanding behaviour in such new markets. However, the knowledge based on new sport teams and their fans requires ongoing attention to develop current understanding and practical knowledge.

**Table 1: Formation of new team identification: Season-one**

Reason	Frequency	%
Friends	133	27.1
Value for money	149	30.4
Be part of Sydney FC	394	80.4
Love of football	444	90.6
Love sport	56	11.4
Players	81	16.5
N=	490	100.0

**Table 2: Formation of new team identification: Coding structure**

Parent node	Theme	Sub-theme
Formation of new team identification	Football First	Support Football
		Support football in Australia
	Origin	Convenience
		Support city
	Occasion	Social Interaction
		In-ground atmosphere

**Table 3: Sample quotes for primary themes**

<b>Football First</b>	“I’m very much a big believer in supporting the things you believe in, so I’m behind supporting football in this country and supporting the A-League and physically paying money and hoping that you’re in some little way contributing to its eventual success”
<b>Origin</b>	“Well, I’m from Sydney, well I’ve been here for 20-odd years, it just makes perfect sense to me. It’s the team of this city”
<b>Occasion</b>	“I thought it would be good to be involved with from the start. Also my sons just started to play and it was a good get together with a couple of mates who are also season ticket holders”

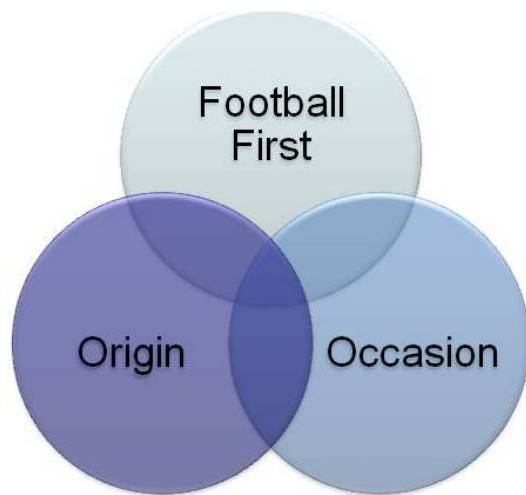


**Table 4: Formation of new team identification: Theme saturation**

Theme			Football First		Origin		Occasion	
Sub theme	Age	Gender	Support football	Support Australian Football	Support city	Convenient	Social interaction	In-ground Atmosphere
Member1	56-60	Female		√				
Member2	61-65	Male		√				
Member3	41-45	Female					√	
Member4	41-45	Male		√				
Member5	41-45	Male	√*		√*			√*
Member6	36-40	Male	√*				√*	
Member7	31-35	Male		√				
Member8	41-45	Male		√				
Member9	51-55	Male		√				
Member10	41-45	Male	√*		√*			
Member11	56-60	Male		√				
Member12	26-30	Male		√*				
Member13	41-45	Male		√*		√*	√*	
Member14	51-55	Female		√*				√*
Member15	31-35	Male		√*	√*			
Member16	31-35	Male		√				
Member17	41-45	Male		√*			√*	
Member18	21-25	Male	√*		√*		√*	
Member19	26-30	Male						√
Member20	51-55	Male		√*			√*	
Member21	21-25	Female		√				
N=21			4	15	4	1	6	3
Total			19		5		9	

\*Indicates interview participants that explained multiple themes influencing the formation of new team identification.

**Figure 1: Thematic model**



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