Taking the pulse of a new football franchise: Team identification and the Melbourne Heart FC in Australia's A-League

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ABSTRACT

In a bid to revive soccer’s fortunes in Australia, the A-League was created whereby private franchises represented the country’s major cities. This article examines the Melbourne Heart FC and the emotional attachment of members during its first two seasons. A survey methodology was used to identify attitudes towards the brand and the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS) measured their identification with the franchise. There is conclusive evidence that strong levels of identification can develop quickly for a new team, yet three of the scale’s items made a weaker contribution. There is also a suggestion that identity is multi-layered. New sport teams need to build awareness and a fan base, however, while the SSIS has been used extensively to study established teams, its application to a newly-formed football club is less common. This article discusses how members of a new franchise in Australia’s A-League quickly developed a strong emotional attachment.

Introduction

Although Association football was the first football code in Australia to establish a national league, soccer has historically struggled. While the sport acted as an important cultural symbol for many postwar immigrants who had settled in the country, it was often perceived as ‘un-Australian’ and poorly managed. In a bid to address these issues, the Football Federation of Australia chose to replace the National Soccer League (NSL) with franchises based on ‘clear geographic locations rather than ethnicity’.

The original eight franchises were given exclusive rights to their local region for the first five years so as to establish an identity, develop fan bases and build strong brands, yet the decision was unpopular in cities like Melbourne that had historically fielded at least two NSL clubs. However, in a bid to capitalize on Australia’s success at the 2006 FIFA World Cup, the A-League decided to expand, especially in those areas that had the financial and supporter base to sustain a franchise, and so Melbourne Heart FC was officially awarded an A-League licence beginning in the 2010–11 season.

A second Melbourne franchise saw the A-League aggressively expand into established markets and prompted talk of further expansion with a system of promotion and relegation as seen in most domestic football competitions worldwide. However, as a new product, Melbourne Heart needed to differentiate its brand and fight for market share in a competitive environment; a city that fields representatives in every national sporting league and is consistently voted as the world’s ultimate sports city. Furthermore, management needed to understand its supporters and the level of emotional attachment they had with the club so as to best plan for a sustainable future.
The need for change and birth of the A-League

Sport can act as a vehicle of identity and, for many postwar immigrants, football was an important ethnic symbol that helped them to celebrate a shared cultural identity and adapt to Australian life. As such, the 1950s saw the birth of clubs such as Melbourne’s South Melbourne Hellas and SC Croatia, Sydney’s Marconi Fairfield and Brisbane’s Hollandia-Inala. It was largely as a result of this history that Soccer Australia tried to ‘de-ethnicise’ the sport in the 1990s to ‘broaden the appeal of soccer in general [and go about] Australianising the game’.

Attempts to make the product more mainstream exacerbated tensions between NSL clubs and traditional supporters and threatened to split the code. At the same time, the sport continued to make headlines for the wrong reasons: violence between rival fans, poor crowds, alleged corruption, financial mismanagement and heartache as the Australian Socceroos failed (yet again) to qualify for the FIFA World Cup. By 2003, the game needed a major overhaul and so a task force was formed to examine the structure and timing of the national competition and criteria for participating clubs.

The newly formed Football Federation of Australia (FFA) – replacing Soccer Australia – set out to restore the game’s financial stability and introduced a new eight-team competition that it was hoped would revitalize domestic football. The new one-city, one-team model saw bids accepted from Sydney FC, Melbourne Victory, Queensland Roar, Perth Glory, Adelaide United, Newcastle Jets, Central Coast Mariners and the New Zealand Knights, and these privately owned franchises would represent Australia in the Asian Champions League and the World Club Championship. In August 2005, with renewed confidence and a slick new advertising campaign – ‘Football, but not as you know it’ – the Hyundai A-League had arrived.

Expansion of the A-League

Melbourne has greatly influenced the development of football in Australia and many of its strongest clubs came out of the European diaspora that settled there. Given its passion for the game, and that the greatest interest came from Melbourne bidders, many thought the city should have two teams in the new league. Despite concerns that the one-team, one-city model was ‘untried and risky’ for a city that had historically fielded at least two NSL clubs, Melbourne Victory was awarded an exclusive licence to the Victorian market and a five-year moratorium to develop a strong brand. According to Ben Buckley, then Chief Executive Officer of the FFA, the city had the ‘capacity to sustain a second team and with the new stadium coming on line it would have the perfect venue. I think the financial support and capital is there, and I think the supporter base is there. The benefits of expansion outweigh any potential downside’.

Melbourne Heart FC was officially awarded the A-League’s eleventh licence on 12 June, 2009 after the public had earlier chosen this name ahead of Sporting Melbourne FC, Melburnians and Melbourne Revolution. According to the business team behind the successful bid, ‘there is clearly room for a second club [and] the passion for the game extends well beyond what’s there’. The ownership group believed the new franchise could offer a ‘more intimate, community-based appeal’ to fans rather than the strong corporate image portrayed by the Melbourne Victory. Melbourne Heart needed to quickly differentiate its brand from both its cross-town rival and other substitute products in the competitive marketplace, as the more supporters a club has, the greater its potential to increase revenue and brand value. However, the expansion franchise
struggled in its inaugural season, lost $A2.5 million and missed the finals. In its first season, Melbourne Heart had signed up approximately 5,500 members, compared to Melbourne Victory at the same stage in that club’s history. Management needed to understand the nature of this supporter base and the level of identification, or psychological connection, they had with the club to ensure the sustainability of the business. Intercity rival, Sydney FC, faced the same challenges during its infancy – an unknown brand in a highly competitive sports marketplace – so comparing these two brands early in their lifecycle could provide a valuable benchmark and would have offered heart to those behind the new club.

Team identification and its measurement

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a useful theoretical lens to study the connection supporters have with the Melbourne Heart FC. SIT helps to explain the creation of brand equity, especially for service brands, as consumers often have high levels of identification with these brands. An individual’s social identity is a ‘mechanism for tapping the emotional connection between the consumer and the service brand’. It also provides an appropriate perspective to explore sport consumption because this behaviour ‘is heavily affected by the level of identification with a team’. As such, the theory has been a popular framework for examining team identification over the past thirty years.

Defined as ‘the extent to which a fan feels psychologically connected’ to a particular team or player, team identification is critical to the sustainability of a sport organization. Such connections are vitally important to the financial health of a football club and brand, for being a fan is an important part of one’s identity for those with high levels of identification and it drives one’s behaviour, loyalty and attitudes towards the team. Individuals who possess a high degree of identification for a favourite sport team will invest more time and money expressing their support for that team.

The conceptual parameters of team identification, and how best to measure it, have formed an important series of debates within the literature on sports fan development. Although team identification can be measured indirectly, for instance, by measuring the frequency of attendance at a favourite team’s games, direct measurement attempts have also been made, notably by using the Sport Spectator Identification Scale (SSIS). The SSIS has been translated into a number of languages to measure the psychological attachment individuals have with their favourite team. Although there has been recent discussion as to how it could be modified to better understand supporter behaviour, many international studies have found the scale to be both a reliable and valid instrument to measure team identification and effective at predicting fan behaviour.

The development of team identification is critical for a new sporting organization as it seeks to grow a fan base and market share, yet there is little research that measures the identification supporters have with a new club. While the SSIS has been used extensively to measure fan identity in relation to an established club, its application to a new club has received far less attention. This leaves many questions unanswered, such as what role ethnicity might play in the development of an individual’s identification with a new club. One notable study that has applied the scale to a new team, and one that provides the basis for a comparative analysis in this paper, examined member identification with Sydney FC in its inaugural A-League season.

Melbourne Heart FC is a new brand in a highly congested sports marketplace. It was therefore imperative that management was able to measure the strength of identification and level of emotional attachment its supporters had with the franchise so as to increase revenue, enhance its brand value and best plan for a sustainable future in Australia’s newest national football competition, the Hyundai A-League.

The initial purpose of this study is to test the Sport Spectator Identification Scale with a new team, the Melbourne Heart franchise, so as to understand its supporters and their level of emotional attachment with the new brand. A secondary outcome of this study is to compare the strength of
member identity between two football franchises at the time they both began play as new clubs in the Australian A-League competition.

To achieve these objectives, five key research questions were developed: What are the characteristics of Melbourne Heart FC’s membership? How strongly do members identify with the new franchise? Does member identity strength change between its first and second season? Does identity strength differ between members by age, gender, education, language spoken at home or annual salary? Does the strength of identification shown by members of Melbourne Heart FC differ when compared to a prior study that examined A-League rival, Sydney FC, in its inaugural season?

The Football Federation of Australia’s decision to award Melbourne a second A-League franchise provided an excellent opportunity to use the Sport Spectator Identification Scale, a scale that has been used in dozens of studies worldwide, to measure and compare the identification of A-League members from football clubs in their infancy from Australia’s two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne.

There has always been a heated rivalry between these two geographic rivals. In the debate over federation in the late nineteenth century, there was even a long dispute over which city should be the nation’s new capital. This rivalry has continued unabated, whether it is over art and culture, fashion, weather or even sporting reputation.

For many years, Sydney FC had the advantage of being based in Australia’s largest city and with a slightly more culturally diverse population than Melbourne. This would seem to have given the franchise a sizable advantage over other A-League brands, especially given the historical links between migration and football and concerns over the sport being ‘un-Australian’. In terms of the product’s affordability, while Sydneysiders earn a little more on average, their cost of living is also higher, especially when it comes to the cost of housing. Ultimately, in terms of population, one-in-five Australians live in Sydney while another one-in-five call Melbourne home.

On the other hand, Melbourne has greatly influenced the development of football in Australia. The city had historically fielded two clubs in the national football competition and there were calls that it should be given two A-League franchises from the very beginning. While Melbourne Victory faced the competitive threat of a local rival after five seasons, Sydney FC had a little longer to establish its brand and cement its first-mover advantage, albeit A-League clubs faced significant competition from elsewhere. In terms of a competitive marketplace, in 2010 Sydney had nine National Rugby League (NRL) teams, while there were nine Australian Football League (AFL) teams in Melbourne. Sydney also had an AFL team while Melbourne had an NRL team.

While Sydney is an iconic destination recognized for its arts and culture, Melbourne is renowned for having some of the world’s most passionate sports fans and it is often voted the world’s ultimate sports city. For all their differences, football in each of these cities faces a battle with the other codes in terms of popularity, sponsorship and membership numbers. For all its support, football has taken, and continues to take, a back seat to the NRL and AFL, in Sydney and Melbourne, respectively. As such, the opportunity to compare the membership bases across both cities is irresistible.

**Materials and methods**

The case study has become a popular avenue to explore football fandom and the Internet has increasingly been used to engage with football fans. Online questionnaires have also been found to often produce higher-quality responses as respondents are given the opportunity for greater anonymity and hence often give more honest responses.

During a four-week window at the end of the club’s inaugural (2011) and second (2012) A-League seasons, all members in the Melbourne Heart FC database were invited to complete a survey assessing their experience and attitudes towards membership and the team, membership package held, future purchasing intentions and their identification.
The online questionnaire was identical for both surveys, including questions relating to demographic variables to establish characteristics of the supporters and the SSIS to measure how they identified with the club. The SSIS is a seven-item scale with ratings from one to eight, with higher numbered responses indicating a greater level of identification with the team. Factor analysis (Principal Components Analysis) was used to mirror the Sydney FC study and measure the fit of the SSIS in relation to the new team. In addition, congeneric modelling assessed the contribution of each of the seven SSIS items to the scale. Data were analysed using IBM SPSS v.22 and AMOS v.21.

The online questionnaire was designed in collaboration with club management and was distributed to members via an email invitation sent by its marketing department. Respondents were asked to follow a hyperlink that directed them to the survey, hosted by an online survey provider. The survey examined the identification of members in relation to the new team, a franchise that offered a wide range of membership options including three-game, Country Victoria and interstate memberships and the premium Ace of Hearts package. Members make a financial, and perhaps an emotional, investment with a football club and so confidence was high that the survey would generate a sufficiently large number of responses and deliver a sample size representative of its membership. Furthermore, in order to encourage their participation, all respondents had a chance to win a signed jersey as an additional incentive. The expansion club had approximately 5,500 members at the end of its first season and the invitation generated 747 useable responses in 2011 and 672 useable responses in 2012.

Results

Comparison of membership profiles

The demographic profile of members was remarkably similar between the inaugural and second seasons. As seen in Table 1, more than 85 percent of respondents were male, aged on average in their mid-to-late thirties and approximately half were married. Slightly more than a quarter of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Samples by selected demographic variables.</th>
<th>2011 sample (n = 747)</th>
<th>2012 sample (n = 672)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>M = 38.7 (SD = 11.9) median = 37</td>
<td>M = 36.3 (SD = 11.8) median = 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born in Australia</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language other than English at home (LOTE)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Highest Education Completed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Degree</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired/not in workforce</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gross annual income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUD 30,000-60,000</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUD 61,000-80,000</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUD 81,000-100,000</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUD &gt;$100,000</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/professional</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/sales</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
respondents lived in households where a language other than English was spoken and roughly three-quarters had been born in Australia. These figures suggest that its membership may be far less multicultural than Greater Melbourne as a whole. At the same time, 63 percent of Melbourne’s population was born in Australia and 34 percent spoke a language other than English at home.\textsuperscript{37}

With respect to its socio-economic composition, more than half of respondents had completed a tertiary education and more than 70 percent were employed full-time in a managerial or professional setting. The median income in both samples was between 60,000 AUD and 100,000 AUD per annum, and more than a fifth earned more than 100,000 AUD. In summary, Melbourne Heart FC members were likely to be male, aged in their thirties, well-educated and professionally employed with higher than average incomes. This profile closely mirrored that of the Sydney FC members in its inaugural season.\textsuperscript{38}

**Strength of member identity**

The strength of identity shown by members was measured using the SSIS whereby the seven variables were recoded into a single variable, each member’s individual ‘identity score’ or ID score. The mean ID score for Melbourne Heart’s 2011 membership was 43.49 – similar to that found with Sydney FC members\textsuperscript{39} – however, the mean ID score of 45.49 was higher for members in the second season (and higher than that seen with Sydney FC members\textsuperscript{40} at the same stage in the club’s history).

The increase in identification was logical, and expected, as members were likely to have attended Melbourne Heart football games, watched its games on television, bought merchandise and supported the franchise during its inaugural season. As such, members were likely to have begun to form an emotional attachment with the club, its brand and its players. For both samples, the SSIS was reliable with alpha scores of .819 (2011) and .782 (2012). The SSIS scores for the new Melbourne and Sydney A-League franchises are found in Table 2. Bivariate correlations are reported in Table 3.

Three variables were significantly correlated with the SSIS at the bivariate level for both samples. Neither gender nor employment was significant, however, age, education, salary and language other than English spoken at home (LOTE) were found to be significant variables. Those aged younger

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. SSIS scores for Melbourne Heart FC and Sydney FC.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSIS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cronbach’s alpha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>± change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Significant bivariate correlations.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSIS correlated with:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (Pearson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (ANOVA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostGrad – Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostGrad – Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgrad – Undergrad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary (Pearson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTE (Pearson)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p = <.05  
** p = <.01
were more highly correlated with higher ID scores (−.300, p = <.01, 2011) (−.276, p = <.01, 2012),
while postgraduate educational achievement was significantly more weakly correlated with higher
ID scores. Lower salary was more highly correlated with higher ID scores (−.203, p = <.01, 2011)
(−.131, p = <.01, 2012) and households where a LOTE was spoken was significantly more highly
correlated with higher ID scores (.120, p = <.01, 2011) (.097, p = <.05, 2012). The same relationship
between the SSIS and age and salary was found with Sydney FC members, although education and
LOTE were not measured.

In order to measure the interrelated effects of the variables identified in Table 3 upon the SSIS ID
score, a multiple regression analysis with the SSIS as the dependent variable was conducted. The
final model is shown in Table 4 for both samples. In the regression, salary was not significant and
was omitted from the final model.

Three remaining variables had a significant predictive effect for ID score in the final model. In order
of predictive strength they were: being younger (age in years) (β = −.293, p = <.01, 2011) (β = −.275,
p = <.01, 2012); having a lower educational achievement (β = −.198, p = <.01, 2011) (β = −.148, p = <.01,
2012) and coming from a LOTE household (β = .096, p = <.01, 2011) (β = .092, p = <.05, 2012).

The model explained 14 percent of the variance in the SSIS for the 2011 sample (F = 6.36, p < .01)
and 10.6 percent of the variance in SSIS for the 2012 sample (F = 26.501, p < .01). In both samples,
and controlling for all other variables in the model, the strongest predictor of SSIS was age, with
younger members more likely to be more strongly identified. Other significant predictors were (in
descending order): education (those with lower levels of education) and LOTE (members coming
from a home where LOTE were spoken) were more likely to score higher on the SSIS.

Factor analysis
A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) was conducted on the seven SSIS items for both data sets.
This replicated the method used in both the Sydney FC membership study and by the original
creators of the scale and was used to validate the scale in relation to the new sport team. The
results, together with comparison scores found with the Sydney FC members, can be seen in
Table 5.

Both Melbourne Heart FC data sets produced satisfactory KMO test scores and achieved significant
results on Bartlett’s test of sphericity. As such, these indicated that factor analysis might be useful with
this data. They also resulted in a one-factor solution confirming the results found in the Sydney FC
study and in the original study that constructed the scale. The scree plots clearly indicated a one-
factor solution that explained 53.7 percent of the variance in the 2011 data and 50.3 percent of the
variance in the 2012 data (compared to the 55 percent found in the Sydney FC study). As was the
case with Sydney FC members, the lowest loading scale items were: 1. How important is it that (team)
wins?; 6. How often do you display (team’s) name or insignia at your place of work, where you live or
on your clothing? and 7. How much do you dislike (team’s) greatest rivals? Therefore, the members of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables in model</th>
<th>SSIS 2011</th>
<th>SSIS 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
<td>−.293**</td>
<td>−.275**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTE</td>
<td>.096**</td>
<td>.092*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (low to high)</td>
<td>−.198**</td>
<td>−.148**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R square</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>40.425**</td>
<td>26.501**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>747</td>
<td>672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p = <.05
** p = <.01
both these new A-League clubs related differently to their ‘start-up’ franchises than those in studies of established teams. This was hardly surprising given that members of both franchises were given very limited time by which to identify with the team when the studies were undertaken.

**Congeneric model testing**

Congeneric model testing provided a more rigorous test of the scale than the factor analysis. A one-factor congreneric model represents the regression of the 7 SSIS items on a single latent variable, ‘identity.’ This was to test the assumption that the indicator variables contribute to the overall measurement of the latent variable and are uni-dimensional. A condition of uni-dimensionality is that error terms are not correlated. Given the test, the goodness of fit measure (chi-square) will measure the content validity of the construct. The models were first specified by setting the variance of the latent variable (identity) to 1. The data failed to fit the model with a chi-square of 66.39 (14df), p = .000 (2011 sample) and a chi-square of 68.285 (14df), p = .000 (2012 sample).

**Four-item scale congreneric test**

The results from the full SSIS congreneric testing indicated that no pairs of item indicators were highly correlated at a level suggesting item redundancy. However, standardized residuals indicated that co-variation between three items – ‘how important is it that Melbourne Heart wins?’, ‘how often do you display Melbourne Heart’s name or insignia at your place of work, where you live or on your clothing?’ and ‘how much do you dislike Melbourne Heart’s greatest rivals?’ likely led to model fit problems.

Omitting these three items saw both the 2011 and 2012 data fit a four-item model. The 2011 sample fitted the four reflexive indicators well (chi-square = 3.301 [2], p = .192; RMSEA = .030, GFI = .998, TLI = .998 and CFI = .999) and, when retested on the 2012 sample, the data again fitted the model well (chi-square = 4.926 [2], p = .085; RMSEA = .047, GFI = .996, TLI = .993 and CFI = .998).

---

**Table 5. Comparison of SSIS item factor analysis (PCA) for the 3 studies.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Melbourne Heart 2011 (n = 747)</th>
<th>Melbourne Heart 2012 (n = 672)</th>
<th>Sydney FC 2005 (n = 510)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Comp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>1.607</td>
<td>.528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>1.588</td>
<td>.822</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>1.462</td>
<td>.896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.42</td>
<td>1.833</td>
<td>.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.91</td>
<td>1.385</td>
<td>.760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>2.373</td>
<td>.633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.41</td>
<td>2.521</td>
<td>.528</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% Variance accounted for: 53.69 50.32 54.85

*Key
1. How important is it to you that (team) wins?
2. How important is being a fan of Sydney FC to you? (Lock et al. 2009)/How important is being a member of Melbourne Heart to you? (Present study)
3. How strongly do you see yourself as a fan of (team)?
4. How strongly do your friends see you as a fan of (team)?
5. During the season how closely do you follow (team) through either the television, radio, newspapers or contact with other fans?
6. How often do you display (team’s) name or insignia at your place of work, where you live or on your clothing?
7. How much do you dislike (team’s) greatest rivals?

2011 KMO = .870, Bartlett’s test = 2311.3**
2012 KMO = .851, Bartlett’s test = 1721.4**
Discussion

Although the expansion franchise had budgeted to lose money in the short-term and hoped to break even in year three,\textsuperscript{45} as an emergent brand in a highly competitive marketplace, the Melbourne Heart FC needed to quickly differentiate its brand and provide a point-of-difference against more established and stronger rivals to create and sustain a supporter base. Melbourne is considered one of the world’s ultimate sports cities and the club has a very strong A-League rival in Melbourne Victory, a club that had been crowned A-League champions twice before the Melbourne Heart was born and had leveraged its first-mover advantage to develop a strong fan base and brand.

That was the challenge facing a consortium headed by successful businessman and racing identity, Peter Sidwell. While he had earlier sought to invest in Melbourne Victory during the early days of the league, the key now was to offer a product that could provide consumers with choice and an unique selling proposition. Having a club brand that offers something distinctly different to the incumbent was critical, especially as both teams would benefit from the establishment of an intra-city rivalry. That is precisely what happened in Melbourne as local derby games between the two clubs regularly attracted more than 40,000 fans.\textsuperscript{46}

As stated earlier, the consortium had highlighted how they could provide a greater community-based appeal in contrast to the strong corporate image portrayed by the incumbent Melbourne Victory. In this vein, the club quickly offered a Country Victoria membership to recognize those members outside of Melbourne city and, leading up to the second season, nearly four percent of the survey respondents had purchased these memberships. The club also actively engaged with regional Victoria by hosting events and friendly matches in Bendigo, Geelong, Shepparton, Albury-Wodonga and Gippsland.

Club management worked hard with its commercial partners to offer a distinct alternative to its older sibling and support grassroots football. Although in its infancy, Melbourne Heart FC believed it had a responsibility to further the cause of football in the state and so, when it signed Australian bank, Westpac, as its major sponsor early in 2010, they agreed to work together in creating community and coaching programmes around the state. As Julie Rynski, Westpac’s State General Manager for Victoria explained, ‘a key reason why we partnered with Melbourne Heart is because of their commitment to bring football to local communities across Victoria’.\textsuperscript{47} The Melbourne Heart staged Westpac Community Football Festivals throughout regional Victoria in June of that year and also announced the Westpac Heart 2 Heart Program. Under this programme, grassroots football clubs could register at the Melbourne Heart website, tell the story of their club and vision in order to have the chance to win cash donations to help fund its dream. Melbourne Heart CEO, Scott Munn, said that the partnership with Westpac marked an important step in the club’s history and affirmed ‘its commitment to develop into a team truly representative of the wider Victorian community.’\textsuperscript{48}

The more supporters a club has, the greater the potential to increase revenue and brand value, yet the ability to grow revenue hinges largely on the degree of identification, or level of psychological ‘connection’, a supporter possesses. As such, management needed to understand how members viewed the Melbourne Heart FC to grow their brand and best ensure a sustainable future. The results of the surveys in this study showed encouraging signs that there was a place for the new franchise in the local marketplace. The majority of respondents had not held a membership with any football club (74.3 percent) in the three years prior to the club’s launch. Anecdotally there was also a belief that many supporters in Melbourne were looking for another top-level football team to support, and the survey showed that nearly 17 percent said they had been members of Melbourne Victory in the three years before Melbourne Heart joined the league. Moreover, on a scale of 1–10, respondents were asked how accurate a number of statements were about their decision to become a member. When asked, ‘I like the Melbourne Heart FC brand and what it stands for’, the average was 9.17. While it cannot be determined whether this early popularity was due to the club’s commitment to the football community in the state, it is clear that the brand resonated with many potential members and there were many Victorians looking for another choice.
The survey data highlighted that members identified strongly with the Melbourne Heart FC despite its very short period of existence, and demonstrates that identification can develop quickly for a new or ‘start-up’ sport team. As one might expect, this identification strengthened markedly between its first and second seasons. Members might realistically expect poor on-field performance in an inaugural season but expect the franchise to steadily improve, making the post-season in its second season. Indeed, this was the case and, while the expansion franchise narrowly missed the A-League finals in its first year, it made the finals in its second, finishing sixth.

It was interesting to note that the mean ID score for the importance of winning was much higher for Sydney FC members (6.81) than for the Melbourne Heart FC (6.28). At the time of the Sydney FC study, the club was the only team in the largest market in the league and featured Dwight Yorke, a player who had excelled for more than a decade while at Aston Villa and Manchester United, and so expectations were understandably high. These expectations were realized when Sydney FC claimed the A-League’s inaugural championship. Compare this to Melbourne Heart who had to compete with the most successful A-League club at the time, Melbourne Victory. Over the course of the first two seasons, members of a new club are likely to develop a greater understanding of the team and have had more time to form an emotional attachment with the brand. This level of identification is critical, especially for new teams, and would have had affective, cognitive and behavioural benefits for the club.

The Melbourne Heart FC data support the previous Sydney FC study whereby higher identification, as measured by the SSIS, was associated with younger age, lower salary, LOTE status and lower educational achievement and neither gender nor employment status. In survey one, younger age, less than an university education, earning less than 60,000 AUS per annum and LOTE were predictors of higher identification (in order). Multiple regression of the survey two data showed only younger age and LOTE background as significant predictors of identification, while the latter was quite weak and much weaker than shown in the survey one data. Regression indicated that the significant predictors of identification with other variables controlled for were lower age, lower educational achievement and LOTE status. These results support international studies that found younger supporters and those with lower levels of education identified more strongly with a favourite team.

While the data and analysis supports a one-factor model that was found in the Sydney FC study, it also suggests that the SSIS may need to be modified in the case of a new, as opposed to an established, sport team. Members of both new A-League franchises were less likely to express their identification with the club away from the stadium (e.g. wearing branded supporter clothing, displaying club merchandise at the office, etc.). It is unknown whether this is related to their status as football clubs, the newness of the brand in the marketplace or perhaps a mixture of both. In a study on the identification of J-League football supporters, this item was removed from the SSIS since wearing supporter clothing and club merchandise was uncommon in Japan.

In this study and analysis, one-factor congeneric tests were used to demonstrate that a modified 4-item SSIS was perhaps more appropriate for the sample data and that this may indeed constitute a better scale to use with start-up teams more generally. Congeneric testing confirmed the weaker relationships shown by some of the items and that for the Melbourne Heart data the SSIS best comprises questions 2, 3, 4 and 5 (excluding questions related to the importance of winning, displaying the club’s name or logo in the workplace, etc. and a dislike of rivals). The Sydney FC study also reported that two items, identifying strongly with a rival and expressing their support for the club outside the ground, had demonstrated a weaker relationship. Such results contrast markedly with studies of established clubs and is surprising given the importance of football as a means of celebrating a shared cultural identity in Australia. Individuals often favour those from their own group and dislike for a rival is reflected in the violence and tensions sometimes seen by football supporters. As a result, this latest study postulates that identity is multi-layered and that
the SSIS may need to be modified or adapted to suit a new team and the particular circumstances and research questions.

**Conclusion**

In their early years, both the Hyundai A-League and Melbourne Heart FC faced an uncertain future. The A-League had expanded to embrace the passion Melbourne had historically shown for the round-ball game, yet the start-up club needed to quickly differentiate its brand in a hyper-competitive market and try to nurture and cultivate a community focused on its brand. Brand communities are about the ‘tie that binds’ and football supporters have been found to possess the three traditional markers of community: a shared consciousness; rituals and traditions; and a sense of moral responsibility. The new franchise needed to develop a strong psychological connection with supporters so as to increase revenue, brand value and ensure its future sustainability. Team identification is critical for sport organizations because those supporters who are more highly identified are more engaged with the brand, actively consume the sport product and represent a lucrative revenue stream.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the academic literature, both for identification with a new sport team and an examination of football fandom in the Australian A-League. The Sport Spectator Identification Scale is a reliable and valid instrument to measure team identification and it has been used extensively with established sport teams, yet its application to new teams has received very little attention. It had, however, been used to measure the identity strength of Sydney FC members in the league’s inaugural season. The decision by the Football Federation of Australia to award Melbourne a second A-League franchise provided an excellent opportunity to test the SSIS with a new team and compare the identification of members from clubs in the same football competition in Australia’s two largest cities at the same stage in the evolution of their brands.

This study shows that members identified strongly with the Melbourne Heart FC during its infancy. The data also supports the maturation hypothesis as the overall strength of identification increased for members between seasons one and two, as too did the scores for each of the individual items that comprise the SSIS increase during this period. Age ultimately proved the single most important predictor of ID score for members whereby younger age led to higher identification. The results are very positive as management needs to cultivate a loyal fan base, and highlights the importance of creating a ‘cradle to grave’ mentality when trying to connect with and engage younger consumers in order to build a lifelong revenue stream. This study argues conclusively that identification can develop quickly for a new or start-up team brand.

While congeneric testing suggests that a four-item scale may be a better fit to measure the data, and that a modified version of the SSIS might be a more reliable and valid measure of identification for new or start-up clubs, further study would be welcome to see how a modified scale might work in other sports and across different cultures. Moreover, research to examine the relationship between supporter identification and the role of key demographic variables, such as age, gender and culture, would be a welcome addition to the literature, especially as little is known about the potential role of ethnicity in the development of identification with a team.

This study has successfully ‘taken the pulse’ of the Melbourne Heart A-League franchise and its supporters during the club’s early years. For six years it was competitive on the field and had steadily developed a fan base until it ultimately captured the attention of well-heeled investors. In 2014, the club was acquired by the City Football Group, adopted a sky blue strip, and rebranded as Melbourne City FC. This was seen as a monumental vote of confidence in the league and mirrored the parent brand’s investment in strategic markets worldwide. The group aims to give City ‘a unique and tangible presence and visibility in football markets fostering loyalty to all the clubs, and giving them more commercial opportunities as a consequence.'
The battle for the hearts, minds and wallets of football fans in Melbourne has only intensified with a Western Melbourne consortium joining an expanded A-League in 2020. As the marketplace becomes more competitive in the ‘world’s ultimate sports city’, being able to leverage the global popularity and appeal of one of the world’s most valuable football clubs, a brand worth more than $US1 billion, should position the club well. As FFA CEO David Gallop explained, Manchester City and their partners can only strengthen the Melbourne Heart and the Hyundai A-League as a whole. It’s another sign that the world is taking notice of Australian football [soccer]. Despite being on life support for many years, the future of football in Australia seems healthy.

Notes

3. Hay and McDonald, ‘A Victory for the Fans?’
18. Reed, ‘Melbourne Awarded Licence’.
20. Gieske and Forato, ‘Most valuable football brands’.
22. Underwood, Bond and Baer, ‘Building Service Brands’.
23. Ibid., p. 2.
25. Notable studies over the years range include Delia and James, ‘Meaning of Team’; Doyle et al., ‘I Was There from the Start’; Dimmock, Grove and Eklund, ‘Reconceptualizing Team Identification’; Dimmock and Gucciardi, ‘Utility of Modern Theories’; Gwinner and Swanson, ‘Model of Fan Identification’; Heere and James; ‘Stepping Outside the Lines’; Katz, Ward and Heere, ‘Explaining Attendance’ and Sutton et al., ‘Creating and Fostering’.
29. Wann and Branscombe, ‘Sports Fans’.
31. Theodorakis et al. ‘Sport Spectator Identification Scale’.
33. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’.
34. Fell, ‘Sydney vs. Melbourne’.
35. Ibid.
38. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’.
39. Ibid.
40. Lock, ‘New Team Identification’.
41. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’.
42. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’; and Wann and Branscombe, ‘Sports Fans’.
43. Ibid.
44. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’.
47. Melbourne Heart FC, ‘Westpac Heart 2 Heart Program Launched’.
48. Melbourne Heart FC, ‘Heart and WESTPAC unite’.
49. Lock, Darcy and Taylor, ‘Starting with a Clean Slate’.
51. Matsuoka, Chelladurai and Harada, ‘Direct and Interaction Effects’.
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55. Delaney, ‘Manchester City Ownership Group’.
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58. Ozanian, ‘World’s Most Valuable Soccer Teams’.

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