

Spectator-Based Brand Equity in Varsity Sports: South African Antecedents

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ABSTRACT

The aim was to study spectators as a source of brand equity in developing country collegiate sport systems. Responses from 662 football, rugby and netball players were analysed using SmartPLS 4.0 and partial least squares Structural Equation Modelling to evaluate thirteen hypotheses from the theory. Results indicated that star players make a significant contribution to team success, reputation, tradition, and the overall atmosphere of the event. Team success positively affected the game atmosphere, but did not predict reputation or tradition. Reputation and tradition strongly predicted brand awareness, association, perceived quality, and loyalty. Atmosphere predicted brand awareness, association, and perceived quality, but showed no positive correlation with loyalty. This research offers insight into collegiate sports systems in semi-professional sporting environments, which face issues related to brand resources, professionalism, and fan engagement. Additionally, the study presents practical strategies for collegiate sports administrators seeking to enhance their fan base while building brand equity and ultimately establishing long-term, sustainable institutions in emerging markets.

Keywords: event atmosphere; star players; team success; team reputation; sports management; fan engagement; collegiate sports



1. INTRODUCTION

Although there are many studies that indicate that globally, universities have recognized the benefits of using sports for improving student mental health, building team work, creating university identity, and assisting with recruitment of student athletes onto national teams, there are fewer studies examining the relationship between sports brand equity and the development of spectator loyalty (Stensrud, 2020; Keating, 2021). Brand equity has been identified by Ekebas-Turedi et al. (2020) and Yun et al. (2021) and as an essential factor in creating successful experiences for fans, securing sponsorship agreements, increasing media coverage, and ultimately creating a strong base of loyal fans. The cumulative result of these factors contributes to both the development and continued existence of the institution (Keating, 2021).

The current trajectory of sports management has shifted its focus away from achieving immediate on-field success to one of creating a sustainable sports brand through the implementation of long-term strategic objectives. A critical component in achieving the long-term goals of developing a sustainable sports brand is the creation of sports-based experiences that create an emotional connection between the fan and the brand and therefore establish long-term and continuous relationships between the fan and the brand (Shuv-Ami, 2016; Doyle et al., 2017).

Developing successful branding and marketing strategies in collegiate sports settings where the institutional image and the level of engagement from spectators will significantly affect how the organisation and team-related effects are perceived by spectators and sponsors (Popp Woratschek, 2016). Athletes who participate in Tier 2 (collegiate or semi-professional) and Tier 3 (amateur) competitions are the primary operational focus of collegiate sports in emerging markets. Tier 2 competitions provide a vital platform for emerging athletes to gain experience as well as develop national sport and spectator engagement opportunities (Varsity Sports SA, 2025). However, due to the limited resources available at Tier 2 competitions and the relative lack of professionalism in comparison to higher-level competitions, it creates challenges for the sustainability of sports brand equity at these levels. As such, it emphasises the need to understand how the organisational and team-related aspects of collegiate sports affect the perceptions of spectators and sponsors (Rivaldo et al., 2022; Muchenje et al., 2023). Although this research was completed in South Africa, the results may also apply to other emerging market collegiate sport systems where similar economic constraints, institutional structures, and culturally driven forces influence the branding and spectator engagement of collegiate sports. For instance, Varsity Sports SA (VSSA), established in 2012, presents a case in point where a semi-professional collegiate league showed enormous commercial success through spectator attendance of their live events, television viewership, and corporate sponsorships (Varsity Sports SA, 2025). While successful in its momentum both commercially and culturally, studies on brand equity in collegiate sports in South Africa are scarce compared to research on professional rugby, football and cricket leagues (Anagnostou & Tzetzis, 2021; Bulovic & Seric, 2021; Shukla et al., 2025). Globally, brand equity models have predominantly been applied in professional sport (Kerr & Gladden, 2008; Ross et al., 2008), while their potential for application in semi-professional collegiate sport in developing economies remains underexplored. Therefore, this study examines a model for use in collegiate sports by investigating the extent to which antecedents affect brand strength and spectator loyalty.

Both on-field performance and club reputation are recognised as key determinants of sports club brand success (Brito Souza et al., 2020; Shajie et al., 2020). Thus, sports team management should acknowledge all factors contributing to a club's overall success and brand strengths.

Collegiate sport organisations are inherently complex, shaped by a multitude of internal and external factors influencing identity, operational strategies, and stakeholder relationships (Grothe-Hammer et al., 2022). Critical determinants of their long-term viability include reputation, tradition, and event atmosphere, which are elements central to brand equity (Slavich et al., 2018). Yet, much of the existing evidence is derived from professional leagues, leaving semi-professional contexts underexplored.

Kim and Manoli (2022) and Cruz et al. (2022) stress that sports teams must be able to develop and maintain a strong brand equity for long-term success and survival. Though scholarly studies have explored the abilities for building strong brand equity in professional sports teams (Anagnostou & Tzetzis, 2021; Bulovic & Seric, 2021; Shukla et al., 2025), far less evidence is available on collegiate and semi-professional levels. Moreover, earlier literature has mainly focused on male professional sports or men's teams (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Biscaia et al., 2013; Theurer et al., 2018). An important area of research is gaining more insight into the effect of fan-based brand equity across sport types and gender. The objective of this study is to contribute South African research findings that can be compared to or adapted for similar collegiate sport ecosystems in other developing and transitional economies.

Understanding how various organisational and team-related factors affect brand equity can assist collegiate sports marketing professionals, sport administrators, and event organisers in making collegiate sports more appealing to fans, ultimately building a more meaningful relationship with enthusiasts and ensuring the long-term viability of their programs (Deheshti et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2020).

This study contributes theoretically by tailoring Aaker's (1991) and Gladden et al.'s (1998) brand equity models for semi-professional, developing nation contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THE SPORT INDUSTRY IN AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Sub-Saharan sport has become a key driver of employment and economic development. International investors have been drawn to the African sport industry due to digitalisation and the expansion of its sport population, spectators, and consumers (Global Africa Network, 2021). Estimates are that this sector currently generates under two percent of the total global sports industry value, with the expectation to increase vastly by additional investment in infrastructure and media rights associated with the sport industry (Agyemang et al., 2024; Global Africa Network, 2024).

Africa is known for uniting communities through sport to improve well-being and provide sustainable employment opportunities for youth transitioning into the workforce (Rivaldo et al., 2022). Sport is thus a significant part of the African culture, and offers entertainment, social unity and economic prospects. South Africa has a strong sporting culture, drawing countless passionate fans to different games. Moreover, the country has emerged as a leading host of major international sporting events and a champion in using sport to advance inclusion, health education and community development (Statista, 2024). Sport remains a driving force behind tourism, job creation and South Africa's position within the global economy, contributing to successful cultural and economic performance.

2.2 BRAND EQUITY AS A CONCEPT

The primary goal of creating a brand is to leave an impression on consumers through regular exposure that would encourage brand-related experiences (Gladden & Milne, 1999). The extent to which brand promises can be fulfilled depends on the organisation's ability to meet customers' expectations and deliver on its promises (Kotler and Keller,

2016; Kim et al., 2020;). Building brand equity is what enables professional sports teams to differentiate themselves from their competitors even though their performance in events may be inconsistent (Naik & Gupta, 2012; Hanson et al., 2020;). The literature provides different interpretations of the term (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Tong & Hawley, 2009). Some researchers view brand equity as the perceived utility of a brand, while others see it as market value (Pina & Dias, 2021; Oponng et al., 2025;). Brand equity is also assigned a perceptual or psychological characteristic by certain researchers (Brunello, 2018; Bagheri et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, Aaker (1991) depicts brand equity as a group of assets and liabilities that can raise or lower the brand value promised to consumers. Keller et al. (2019) and Kotler and Keller (2016) highlight the importance that brand knowledge plays, suggesting that customer experience and brand awareness determine their response and buying habits.

When related to sport, brand equity pertains to the value of the event, which is impacted by on-field performance, the history and reputation of the brand and the legacy attached to its athletes (Hasaan et al., 2021). Therefore, this study recognises Aaker's (1991) definition of brand equity as the total value that it generates in the consumer's mind. Such an understanding allows for not only a cognitive awareness of the brand but also includes its image, associations and related quality, all influencing spectator perception and loyalty toward the sport organisation (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Similarly, brand awareness conveys spectators' degree of recognition and recall of the Varsity Sports South Africa brand. Brand association deals with feelings, meaning and experiences, such as excitement, pride and identification with universities participating in the games (Hasaan et al., 2021). Perceived quality refers to how spectators judge the excellence and professionalism of events, influenced by both on-field performance and organisational delivery of promises (Aaker, 1991; Keller et al., 2019; Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Brand loyalty, in turn, symbolises spectator commitment and support, expressed through repeated attendance and positive advocacy (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Together, these elements provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating the mental and emotional values associated with the Varsity Sports SA brand.

2.3 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

This study discusses Aaker's (1991) customer-based brand equity model and Gladden et al.'s (1998) framework for assessing brand equity in Division I college athletics as the theoretical framework. A combination of concepts from these theories is discussed and extended to institutional and team characteristics defining brand equity at the collegiate sports level.

Based on the two theories above, this study examines two types of antecedents: (1) Antecedents related to teams (star players, team success/competence) and (2) Organisational antecedents (reputation and tradition, event atmosphere) to determine how these antecedents impact various aspects of sports brand equity (brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and spectator brand loyalty) in an organisation.

Star players are those athletes who, through their abilities, charm, and public persona, attract potential fans and increase spectator attachment and loyalty toward the team (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross et al., 2008;). Team success refers to team results and achievements that serve as an indicator of their fans' pride and perceptions of the quality of the brand (Ross, 2006; Kerr & Gladden, 2008;). Team competence refers to the perception of a team's professionalism and competitiveness (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Ross et al., 2008; Mathaba, 2024).

Organisationally, reputation and tradition represent the perceived credibility, history, and prestige of the sporting organisation, promoting trust and long-term loyalty (Keller, 1993; Bauer et al., 2005;). Event atmosphere denotes the level of enjoyment or entertainment that fans derive from the environment through activities associated with the event, such as interacting with other fans, music, and the collective energy of the crowd (Ross, 2006; Biscaia et al., 2013). Together, these antecedents indicate team-related and organisational factors that drive fans' cognitive and affective assessments of a sport organisation's brand, ultimately affecting brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Therefore, the conceptual model identifies how team- and organisational antecedents affect brand awareness, association and perceived quality, which jointly establish a loyal spectator.

The proposed model (Figure 1) illustrates the relationships between the constructs identified in this study. In total, five hypotheses were developed to examine the relationship between team-related antecedents and brand equity dimensions and eight hypotheses were posited to explore the relationship between organisational antecedents and brand equity dimensions based on findings from earlier studies discussed below.

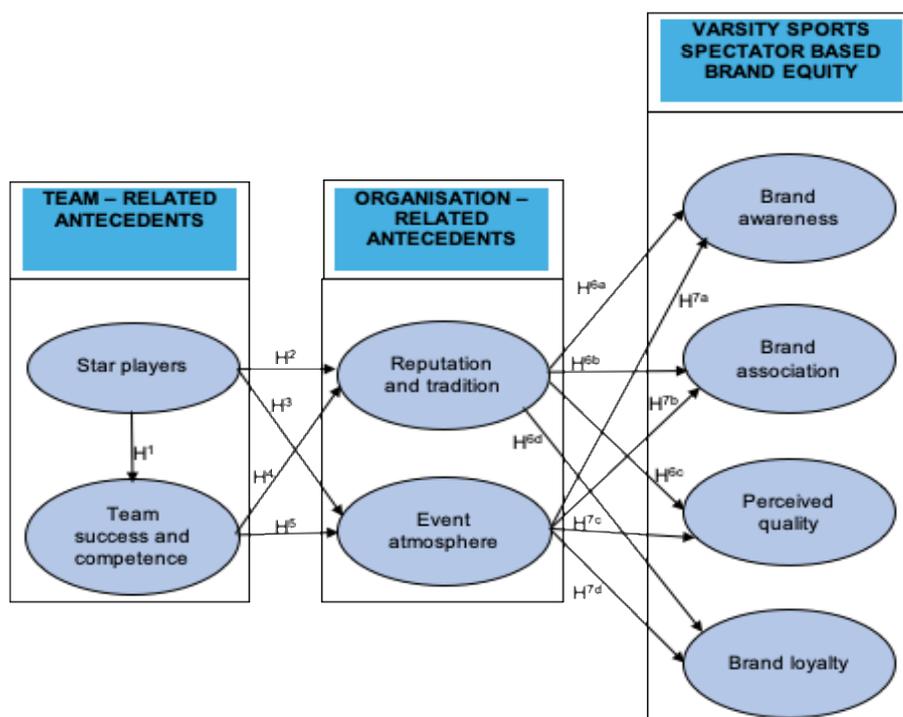


FIGURE 1: THE CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH MODEL

2.3.1 Team-related antecedents

According to Gladdan (1998), sports teams are perceived based on three main factors: success, head coach, and team members. Fans will more likely purchase team merchandise and attend games when the team is successful (Kaynak et al., 2008; Christian et al., 2022). The head coach and the "star" players add to the team's appeal as perceived by its fans (Morgan et al., 2020). There is a significant positive relationship between the number of "stars" and success (H1).

Maintaining an environment where the team is successful at home and on the road is key to developing long-term loyal fans and enhancing the prestige of a team (Brunello, 2018). Research has indicated that the ability of a team to achieve success in the league is in part dependent on the contributions of its "star" player(s) (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018; Park et al., 2019). Therefore, the key to a team's successful achievements and maintaining brand strength is attracting and retaining new "stars" (Baena, 2019; Aboagye & Opoku, 2022;). Star players are recognised by name

and are considered to be celebrity figures. As such, they contribute to the reputation of the teams they represent as well as the traditions of those teams (Kucharska et al., 2020). Chiu et al. (2019) and Rose et al. (2021) have determined that fans perceive the prestige of their team and the importance of a tournament to increase when star players are included. Additionally, these stars positively increase fan perceptions of the event atmosphere and create a greater sense of excitement among spectators (Namethe et al., 2020; Tarighi et al., 2021). Based on these discussions, the propositions are that there is a significant positive relationship between star players and team reputation/tradition (H2) and between star players and event atmosphere (H3).

While individual talent is necessary, team success is largely dependent upon how well all players work together in agreement with the coaching staff. Coaches can make a difference to team performance, consequently, also positively impacting the team's brand value (Ross et al., 2008). As mentioned earlier, Yousaf et al. (2017) advocate that the effectiveness of the team manager/coach, including leadership, impacts the performance/success of the team and overall brand value. Professional sports fans want to associate themselves with teams that win championships. Teams with successful histories of winning tend to promote the reputation, tradition, and financial impact of the team in competitive markets (Takamatsu, 2021; Yousaf et al., 2020; Agyemang et al., 2024). Winning also creates enjoyment and emotional attachment, increased game attendance, event atmosphere, and experiences (Foroughi et al., 2014; Barnes et al., 2022;). Thus, a positive relationship exists between team success and reputation/tradition (H4) and between team success and event atmosphere (H5).

2.3.2 Organisation-related antecedents

Reputation and tradition are significant factors influencing consumer perceptions and creating brand equity for a sports team (Suchao-In et al., 2021; Tarighi et al., 2021). Consumers use their recollection of a team's past performances (tradition) and history (reputation) as a way to identify with the team's brand (Stavros & Smith, 2020). Empirical research established that tradition and reputation increase brand awareness, which is positively associated with a specific brand (Ross, 2006; Biscaia et al., 2013; Jang et al., 2016; Theurer et al., 2018; Suchao-In et al., 2021;). Therefore, there is a significantly positive relationship between reputation and tradition and brand awareness (H6a) and between reputation, tradition, and brand association (H6b).

Research has further indicated that reputation and tradition increase a customer's perceived quality (Brewer & Zhao, 2010; Park et al., 2019) and increase fan loyalty (Gladden & Milne, 1999; Rak, 2013; Gul, 2014; Walsh et al., 2015). Thus, there exists a significant positive relationship between reputation and tradition and perceived quality (H6c) and between reputation and tradition and loyalty (H6d).

Event atmosphere presents itself as a key organisational factor affecting brand equity. A fun and engaging atmosphere at a sporting event increases spectators' sensory and emotional experiences of the event, which raises team and league brand awareness (Charumbira, 2018). The atmosphere at a professional sporting event creates strong, positive, and unique brand associations, which motivate a team to excel above others and impact fan engagement. Keller et al. (2019) reveal that the atmosphere at a professional sporting event significantly affects spectators' perceptions of the quality of the event (both entertainment and service aspects), as also found by Jones et al. (2023) and Hungenberg and Mayer Jr. (2019). The total match-day experience, including entertainment before the game, the activities at halftime, and the type of game being played, helps create an emotional connection between the fans and the team, encouraging the fans' loyalty to the team (Da Silva & Las Casas, 2017; Kogoya et al., 2022). Sport organisations that consistently provide a unique and enjoyable experience for their fans are able to retain fans and build long-term loyalty (An & Yamashita, 2024; Deheshti et al., 2016). It is therefore hypothesised that there

is a significant positive relationship between event atmosphere and brand awareness (H7a), event atmosphere and brand association (H7b), event atmosphere and perceived quality (H7c), and event atmosphere and spectator brand loyalty (H7d).

3. METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using structured questionnaires for data collection. The research strategy comprised an interviewer-administered survey valued for its effectiveness in managing large sample sizes, facilitating structured responses to questions, and enabling advanced statistical analysis techniques (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

3.1 MEASUREMENT INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION

The survey measured (1) demographic characteristics and support types, (2) team-related predictors: team success and competence (four items) and star players (five items) based on earlier research (Biscaia et al., 2013; Gladden and Funk, 2001), (3) organisational related predictors: tradition and reputation (four items) and atmosphere (five items) also based on prior research (Ross et al., 2006; Kogoya et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2013), and (4) spectator-based brand equity: brand awareness (four items), brand association (four items), perceived quality (five items), and brand loyalty (five items) based on earlier research (Gladden & Funk, 2001; Jalilvand et al., 2011; Pifer et al., 2015). All items for the team-related, organisation-related, and spectator-based brand equity factors were assessed via a five-point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Before formal distribution of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with 40 respondents to assess internal consistency and reliability and to identify potentially unclear items or logistical issues. The pilot process enhanced the quality and accuracy of the subsequent data collection.

To ensure compliance and integrity, permission was obtained from the College Sports Executive Committee who authorised data collection at their events across South Africa. Furthermore, ethical clearance was obtained from the respective institutional review boards.

Data collection took place before and after collegial games (football, netball, and rugby). Trained fieldworkers approached potential respondents and invited them to participate voluntarily in the survey.

3.2 ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The study has received ethical clearance (Approval number FCRE2023/FR/03/002-MS) prior to the commencement of data collection. All respondents were fully informed about the study requirements and their rights.

3.3 SAMPLING PROCEDURES

Using the expertise of the research team to determine the suitability of the chosen criteria as a basis for selecting codes, the first phase involved a judgmental sampling strategy. Sports codes considered to be mainstream sports for Tier 2 level collegiate athletes and based on the literature review and current trends in the sports industry, were selected (Kubayi et al., 2017). The three sports codes selected were rugby, football and netball. Although this method allowed the research team to target the chosen sports codes, it did not allow for representation of the other seven sports codes competing at the Tier 2 level, which are athletics and hockey.

At the second phase of the study, a non-probability convenience sampling strategy was employed. Participants who appeared accessible and willing to complete the survey while attending collegial men's and women's football, rugby and netball were included.

A convenience sampling approach was used as it enhanced the efficiency of the sampling effort by decreasing the time and resources spent collecting data from spectators at collegial competitions in football, netball and rugby (Babin & Zikmund, 2016; Hair Jr et al., 2019).

There were 662 participants surveyed, which provided a sample size sufficient to meet and exceed the minimum requirements for structural equation modelling (SEM) and hypothesis testing (Hair Jr et al., 2019). The sample size was therefore large enough to provide reliable results and sufficient statistical rigour. Moreover, the sample sizes used in previous studies for examining constructs similar to those in this study were less than or equal to the number of participants in this study (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Naik & Gupta, 2012; Khodadai et al., 2014; Charumbira, 2018; Nazari, 2018; Wang & Tang, 2018; Hungenberg & Mayer Jr, 2019). Hence, the findings in this study can be considered credible and valid.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The recommended procedures for cleaning and coding data (Burns et al., 2017) were followed before performing the analysis. Additionally, IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29.0 was used to calculate descriptive statistics and report one-tailed p-values for all results.

Potential bias can arise when a single survey respondent is both the source of the independent variable(s) and the source of the dependent variable(s) contained within a single instrument (i.e., Common Method Bias [CMB]) (Eichhorn, 2014). Therefore, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to assess whether Common (2) Method Bias (CMB) existed within the dataset (Eichhorn, 2014; Saxena et al., 2022).

Following the Common Method Bias (CMB) assessment, a two-phased systematic approach to Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesised relationships as suggested by Hair Jr et al. (2014), Al-Emran et al. (2019) and Samani (2016). Phase I of PLS-SEM focused on the evaluation of the measurement model (also known as the outer model) to examine indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Reliability and Convergent Validity were evaluated through the use of Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. Discriminant validity was assessed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). Phase II of PLS-SEM focused on the evaluation of the structural model (also known as the inner model) and the relationships between latent constructs. A variance inflation factor (VIF) was utilised to determine collinearity issues in the model and then bootstrapped with 5,000 resamples to provide estimates of the significance of path coefficients and indirect effects. Additionally, effect size (f^2) and the coefficient of determination (R^2) were established to assess the ability of the model to explain the variables in the model.

5. R MODELS

5.1 SAMPLE

The sample comprised 662 respondents, including 366 men (55.3%), 277 women (41.8%), and 19 participants (2.9%) who preferred not to disclose their gender. Regarding age, the majority were young adults aged 18 to 27 years ($n = 570$, 86.1%), with only 12.2% ($n = 81$) aged 28 to 37 years. The rest were 38 years and older.

5.2 ASSESSMENT OF COMMON METHOD BIAS

The EFA results confirmed that common method bias was not regarded significant. The single-factor solution accounted for only 39.0% of the variance, which is below the recommended threshold of 50% (Eichhorn, 2014; Saxena et al., 2022). Therefore, the validity of the research findings is modestly influenced by potential bias.

5.3 Measurement models

Before assessing the structural model, the reliability and validity of the instrument were measured using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) = .70 for α and CR and AVE = .50 for adequate results. Those items not loading higher than .60 were investigated further to ascertain whether to keep or delete. Two items from two different constructs manifested an unsatisfactory loading following further investigations, and these were deleted. This deletion process had no adverse effect on the minimum number of items per construct.

The Cronbach's alpha for the respective constructs varied from .795 (star players) to .881 (event atmosphere), thereby confirming internal consistency since all values were above the minimum accepted threshold of .70. The CR values varied from .863 (star players) to .913 (event atmosphere), thus establishing internal consistency reliability (Eichhorn, 2014). The AVEs varied from .557 (brand loyalty) to .686 (team competence and success), all of which were above the recommended minimum of .50. These findings confirm that the constructs showed an acceptable degree of convergent validity. The overall conclusion was that there exists sufficient statistical evidence to support the reliability, internal consistency and convergent validity of the measurement model. The discriminant validity of the constructs was measured by the Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, where all the values fell below the recommended .85 figure. To further support the fact that there were no collinearity problems, VIF manifested values well below the recommended cut-off point of 5. These results demonstrated that the measurement model met the requirements of reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity.

TABLE 1: RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY WITH DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Construct	Cronbach's alpha (α)	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Mean	Standard deviation
Team Success & Competence (TSC)	0.85	0.90	0.69	4.10	0.89
Star Players (STP)	0.80	0.86	0.62	3.91	0.95
Reputation and Tradition (RTV)	0.81	0.88	0.64	4.06	0.88
Atmosphere (ATM)	0.88	0.91	0.68	4.12	0.86
Brand awareness (BAW)	0.83	0.89	0.67	4.07	0.94
Brand association (BAS)	0.86	0.90	0.64	4.07	0.87
Perceived quality (PQL)	0.80	0.87	0.63	4.07	0.88
Brand loyalty (LOY)	0.80	0.86	0.56	3.98	1.00

**All standardised factor loadings were significant at the 99% level of confidence

In terms of descriptive statistics, team-related antecedents were rated moderately positive. Team success and competence (M = 4.10; SD = 0.89) indicated that respondents identified team antecedents as relatively competent, but not outstanding. Star players (M = 3.91; SD = 0.95) rated lowest of all, suggesting that perceptions of players' individual contributions to the team's brand seemed insignificant.

Organisation-related antecedents recorded slightly higher mean scores. Reputation and tradition (M = 4.06; SD = 0.88) was rated positive, indicating that respect for the club's heritage prevailed, while event atmosphere

($M = 4.12$; $SD = 0.86$) showed the highest mean overall, indicating that the appeal of match-day experience and social environment is well regarded. Spectator-based brand equity dimensions registered consistent results. Brand awareness ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 0.94$), brand association ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 0.87$), and perceived quality ($M = 4.07$; $SD = 0.88$) indicated a relatively balanced view of the brand's visibility, meaning, and value. These mid-range means suggest that while spectators are aware and approve of the brand, their emotional attachment is limited. In general, the findings show moderate but stable evaluations throughout all antecedents, with organisational and spectator-related factors performing slightly better than team-related antecedents in general.

5.4 STRUCTURAL MODEL

Collinearity was assessed using VIF values for all paths. All values were below the cut-off of 5, indicating no multicollinearity or common method bias.

5.4.1 Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and explanatory power

The R^2 values were evaluated to determine the model's explanatory power. The results ranged between 0.436 and 0.743, indicating moderate to substantial predictive accuracy (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: R^2 -VALUES

Independent	Dependent	R^2 -value	Explanatory power
STP	TSC	0.743	Substantial
STP & TSC	RTV	0.621	Substantial
STP & TSC	ATM	0.508	Moderate
STP, TSC, RTV & ATM	BAW	0.436	Moderate
STP, TSC, RTV & ATM	BAS	0.625	Substantial
STP, TSC, RTV & ATM	PQL	0.683	Substantial
STP, TSC, RTV & ATM	LOY	0.528	Moderate

Star players were the only predictor of team success and competence, explaining 74.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.743$), a substantial level of explanatory power. Star players and team success in relation to competence predicted reputation and tradition and event atmosphere, with R^2 values of 0.621 and 0.508, respectively, indicating moderate to substantial explanatory power.

For the four dependent constructs dealing with aspects of brand equity, four predictor variables were specified. Across these four constructs, the model predicted perceived quality ($R^2 = 0.683$) and brand association ($R^2 = 0.625$), both of which reflected substantial explanatory power. The model was less effective in explaining the variation in brand loyalty ($R^2 = 0.528$) and brand awareness (BAW) ($R^2 = 0.436$), both with moderate levels of explanatory power.

5.4.2 Structural paths

Path significance was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples. Standardised path coefficients (β) were calculated for all hypothesised relationships (see Table 3). The outcomes of the hypotheses (H) tested with the PLS-SEM are explained.

TABLE 3: SIGNIFICANCE OF PATH COEFFICIENTS AND TESTING OF HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses	Path	β value	P value (1-tailed)	Decision on hypotheses	Effect size (f^2)	
H1	STP → TSC	0.862	<0.001	Supported	2.897	Large
H2	STP → RTV	0.610	<0.001	Supported	0.252	Medium
H3	STP → ATM	0.441	0.002	Supported	0.101	Small
H4	TSC → RTV	0.199	0.119	Not supported	0.027	
H5	TSC → ATM	0.297	0.027	Supported	0.046	Small
H6a	RTV → BAW	0.456	<0.001	Supported	0.110	Small
H6b	RTV → BAS	0.460	<0.001	Supported	0.169	Medium
H6c	RTV → PQL	0.555	<0.001	Supported	0.291	Medium
H6d	RTV → LOY	0.589	<0.001	Supported	0.220	Medium
H7a	ATM → BAW	0.230	0.019	Supported	0.028	Small
H7b	ATM → BAS	0.365	<0.001	Supported	0.106	Small
H7c	ATM → PQL	0.304	0.002	Supported	0.087	Small
H7d	ATM → LOY	0.159	0.090	Not supported	0.016	

Team-related antecedents

All five hypothesised relationships were found to be positively related to team-related antecedents as defined by the brand equity models. A significant positive relationship was established for H1, demonstrating that star players are a key driver of both particular team success and overall team success ($\beta = .862$; $p < .001$; $f^2 = 2.897$). The substantial effect size clearly indicates the role that star players play in determining how well a team performs and ultimately succeeds. A significant positive relationship was also shown for H2, demonstrating that star players have a moderate effect on a team's reputation and tradition (.610; $p < .001$, $f^2 = .252$). Star players contribute to enhancing a team's reputation and upholding its traditions through consistent performance and increased exposure.

Although it had a relatively small effect size, H3 proved a positive relationship between star players and event atmosphere ($\beta = .441$; $p < .002$, $f^2 = .101$). While star players increase event excitement and atmosphere, the impact of which is somewhat limited.

No support was provided for H4; therefore, no relationship was found to exist between team success and a team's reputation and tradition ($\beta = .199$; $p < .119$; $f^2 = .027$).

Lastly, a small positive relationship was found for H5, which indicates that winning teams create an enjoyable and engaging spectator experience ($\beta = .297$; $p < .027$; $f^2 = .046$).

Organisation-related antecedents

Reputation and tradition were significantly related to most of the dimensions of brand equity. H6a ($\beta = 0.456$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.110$) showed a small to medium relationship between reputation and tradition and brand awareness, indicating that positive heritage and past results provide improved spectator recognition of the team brand. H6b

($\beta = 0.660$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.169$) revealed a dimensional relationship with brand association, H6c ($\beta = 0.555$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.291$), perceived quality, and H6d ($\beta = 0.589$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.220$) brand loyalty. Thus, the results confirm that reputation and tradition enhance positive brand association, improve perceptions of quality, and increase spectator loyalty toward collegiate sports teams.

There were several other significant findings concerning event atmosphere. H7a ($\beta = 0.230$; $p < 0.019$; $f^2 = 0.028$) revealed a significant positive relationship between event atmosphere and brand awareness, suggesting that an energetic, involving atmosphere enhances spectators' awareness of team brands. H7b ($\beta = 0.365$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.106$) confirmed a positive relationship between event atmosphere and brand association, suggesting that spectators experience increased emotional and cognitive associations as a result of the vibrant match environment.

H7c ($\beta = 0.304$; $p < 0.002$; $f^2 = 0.087$) exhibited a significant relationship between event atmosphere and perceived quality, concluding that well-run and entertaining sporting environments improve spectator perceptions of the quality of events and services. However, the overall effects were small. Nevertheless, there was no support for H7d ($\beta = 0.159$; $p < 0.090$; $f^2 = 0.016$), indicating that event atmosphere does not show a significant relationship with brand loyalty.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 TEAM-RELATED ANTECEDENTS

The results provided support for four out of the five predicted relationships regarding team-related antecedents and brand equity (H1, H2, H3 and H5). Thus, the critical role of star players, coaches, and team success is confirmed in establishing spectators' positive perceptions of a team. H1 was confirmed as star players were found to have a significant effect on team success, which is in line with prior studies that substantiate that high-profile, skilled athletes improve performance as well as competitive results (Park et al., 2019; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2018). Aligned with Kaynak et al. (2008) and Christian et al. (2022) team success enhances fans' buying intentions, while Fan et al. et al. (2020) noted that visible talent also serves as an attraction for sponsors. This suggests that the reputation of star players plays a vital role from both performance and marketing perspectives.

Star players significantly influence event atmosphere and reputation, as indicated by H2 and H3. Earlier literature maintains that an increase in sustainable team success generated from top talent enhances brand power (Brunello et al., 2018; Baena, 2019; Aboagye & Opoku, 2022). Star players establish team prestige, tradition, and status (Chiu et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2021; Kucharska et al., 2020). These stars create emotional experiences, including spectator fun (Namethe et al., 2020; Tarighi et al., 2021). Overall, star players positively affect the brand's equity through performance, symbolic representation, and positive experiences.

H4 was not supported, revealing that team success does not significantly predict reputation and tradition in the context of collegiate sports. Findings suggest that institutional reputation is more likely to be shaped by historical legacy and culture than by short-term sport success.

H5 was supported, confirming that team success significantly enhances event atmosphere. These findings align with studies verifying that successful teams ensure enjoyable and engaging fan experiences (Foroughi et al. 2014; Barnes et al. 2022;). The relatively small effect size, however, indicates that success, while somewhat contributing to atmosphere, is not the only explanatory factor, as event design, fan rituals, and institutional culture could also influence atmosphere. Collectively, the results indicated that team-related antecedents are non-negligible as critical drivers of spectator-based brand equity. The impact of these team-related antecedents is appreciated through tangible

performance and emotional resonance created during live events. These aspects reinforce a team's long-term reputation and increase the perceived depth of teams' connections with their fans.

6.2 ORGANISATION-RELATED ANTECEDENTS

Organisational antecedents, including reputation, tradition and event atmosphere, have an effect on spectator-based brand equity. Results for H6a-H6d support the notion that there is a positive relationship between reputation/tradition and brand awareness/association/perceived quality/loyalty. These results are in line with previous research, which demonstrate that an institution's legacy and historical continuity can serve as trust cues to strengthen both the cognitive and emotional bonds between supporters and the teams they support (Theurer et al., 2018; Stavros & Smith, 2020; Suchao-In et al., 2021). Fan loyalty in this study is based on the symbolic and cultural value of heritage and recent team performance success (Gul, 2014; Rak, 2013; Walsh et al., 2015). Overall, the findings have revealed that a fan's emotional attachment to a team's history and tradition contributes positively to tangible brand equity outcomes.

The results of H7a-H7c also support the notion that event atmosphere increases brand awareness, association, and perceived quality. These findings are consistent with earlier studies that show that event excitement, sensory stimulation, and crowd attendance positively influence spectator experience (Charumbira, 2018; Hungenberg & Mayer Jr., 2019; Keller et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2023;). Furthermore, the conclusions support the view that experiential aspects, in terms of sound, energy and ritual, can be converted into measurable and meaningful benefits for the brand. There is no support for H7d, which indicates that event atmosphere has no significant influence on brand loyalty. Therefore, even if spectators may enjoy the excitement of the live event, sustained loyalty is due to a higher long-term emotional identification with the institution rather than the match-day environment. Therefore, the antecedent organisational variables have two functions: the support of fan identity and enhancing spectator experience. These results imply that sport organisations should balance the competing demands of usefulness of heritage with innovation in sporting event experiences to maintain brand loyalty and brand equity.

7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The research findings have important implications for the way in which sport organisations operate and manage their teams. The two key areas directly associated with team-related and organisational antecedents of brand equity are identified as:

Talent identification and development: Sport organisations should attempt to collaborate with regional colleges, high schools and similar institutions to locate talented people and provide those individuals with individualised support and competitive incentives to maintain and develop them.

Fan engagement with star players: Sport organisations should utilise their star players as brand ambassadors by including them in their traditions and community-based outreach efforts. These organisations can create fan engagement opportunities by allowing fans to interact with their players after the game; this will promote fans' emotional ties to the organisation.

Brand equity, organisational success, heritage: Sport organisations should celebrate their past achievements using social media, alumni functions and recognition ceremonies to expand upon pre-existing community-based relationships and institutional pride. In addition, by identifying the accomplishments of both current and former athletes, they will foster inspiration in future generations via legacy workshops or mentorship programs.

Reputation and tradition: Sport organisations should consider their reputation and tradition as strategic assets. Utilising social media and digital communication tools to share their players' experiences and to provide fans with behind-the-scenes access to their organisation may create an emotional tie between the fans and the organisation. Sport organisations may also benefit from having their star players serve as social media influencers to recruit new players and expand their recruitment opportunities while enhancing the legitimacy of their events.

Atmosphere and fan experience: By developing a dynamic and interactive collegiate sports app, fans will be able to engage in real-time and enhance the excitement of participating in collegiate sports. Fans may enjoy entertainment before, during and after the game (e.g., local musicians), which can heighten the energy and enjoyment of the event. A sport organisation's mascot can contribute to energise the crowd and to sustain enthusiasm and team spirit for the duration of the event.

Venue quality and safety: Sport organisations may benefit from forming partnerships with local businesses to obtain sponsorship agreements and to become involved in community-based initiatives to expand their reach beyond the collegiate level and enhance their community standing. Having clearly visible and reliable safety measures available at the venue will provide confidence to prospective visitors, parents and students and will result in higher attendance and participation. The ultimate reason for combining quality of venues, amenities, star players, tradition and atmosphere for sustained brand equity is that each of these is critical in creating an enjoyable and engaging experience.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research was designed to offer a more complete and integrated view of spectator-based brand equity in collegial sports and thus contribute to the general discussion on brand management in sport organisations and institutions. Therefore, the findings are context-specific and not generalisable to those spectator perceptions obtained during the off-season, when the dynamics of spectator involvement may be different.

The conceptualised framework used in this study examined the impact of organisational antecedents as defined from Gladden et al.'s (1998) model and brand equity dimensions of brand recognition, brand associations, quality perceptions and loyalty to the brand as defined by Aaker (1991). Given the focus of this study it did not consider broader environmental factors influencing brand equity. Also, while the modified measurement items from the validated scales facilitated data collection, this study was limited to the sports codes specified in the methodology, namely: men's and women's soccer, rugby and netball. Future research in the field of collegiate sports brand equity can extend this work to other sporting codes in order to ascertain whether similar relationships exist across codes. The continuous expansion of social media marketing will transform all areas of sport communications and spectator involvement. Future research might examine what response the use of social media marketing can have on the participation and loyalty of players and teams and of collegiate sports followers. Evaluating how various other institutions of higher education in developing and developed countries perceive brand equity might also assist in learning valuable lessons. Finally, a longitudinal study could assist in understanding the manner in which brand equity is perceived. This study provides the opportunity for other studies to evaluate their results against the research findings, as can the results from other less popular sports codes be done. Research could also be applied to codes of evolving stature to determine how the meaning and understanding of brand equity may be comprehended in varied competitive environments.

9. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to investigate how team-related antecedents and organisational antecedents affect the dimensions of spectator-based brand equity in collegiate sports. Results clearly indicate that both team- and organisational-related antecedents are essential for creating brand equity; however, each has different strengths and scopes. Among team-related antecedents, the single most influential factor is the presence of star players, who strongly affect the team's ability to win and influence the organisation's reputation, tradition, and event atmosphere. Thus, sports teams can build a stronger institutional identity by recruiting and promoting successful, high-profile athletes, which enhances both the organisation's public image and spectator experiences at events. Fans' access to players showed only a modest influence on the event atmosphere and had no significant impact on either reputation or tradition. Therefore, collegiate sport brands derive a rich sense of heritage from their institutional identity, rather than the outcome of a particular season or tournament. Organisational antecedents indicate that reputation and tradition have the greatest overall influence across all four dimensions of brand equity. These results support the notion that a credible and consistent institutional identity will foster trust and attachment among fans, thereby promoting ongoing fan engagement. While the event atmosphere showed an increase in all three other dimensions of brand equity, it did not establish a significant increase in loyalty. The inference is that, although event atmosphere enhances and provides a richer fan experience, long-term loyalty is determined by the depth of the fans' emotional connection to the team and organisation.

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