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Lings, Ian and Owen, Kate (2007) *Buying a sponsor's brand : the role of affective commitment to the sponsored team*. In: Proceedings of Academy of Marketing Conference 2007, 3-6th July 2007, Royal Holloway Conference Centre, Kingston University, Surrey.

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**BUYING A SPONSOR'S BRAND: THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT TO  
THE SPONSORED TEAM**

**Ian N Lings\***

School of Marketing  
University of Technology, Sydney  
PO Box 123  
Broadway  
NSW 2007  
Australia

**Kate M Owen**

School of Marketing  
University of Technology, Sydney  
PO Box 123  
Broadway  
NSW 2007  
Australia

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\* Corresponding author: Tel: +61 (0)2 9514 3258; Fax: +61 (0)2 9514 3535; email: [ian.lings@uts.edu.au](mailto:ian.lings@uts.edu.au)

# BUYING A SPONSOR'S BRAND: THE ROLE OF AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT TO THE SPONSORED TEAM

## ABSTRACT

*Sponsorship is increasingly important in a firm's communication mix. Research to date has focused on the impact of sponsorship on brand awareness and its subsequent consequences for image congruency and consumer attitudes towards sponsors' brands. A lesser studied area is the effect of sponsorship on consumers' purchase intentions and behaviours. We argue that existing models of sponsorship driven purchase behaviour fail to account for affective commitment, which mediates relationship between affiliation with the team and social identification with the team. We propose a modified framework describing the effect of sponsorship on purchase intentions in the context of low and high performing sports teams. The framework is tested using structural equations modelling; employing PLS estimation and data collected via online survey of AFL chat room participants. Results confirm the role of affective commitment in sport sponsorship purchase intentions and indicate that team success has a significant influence on fans' purchase behaviours.*

**Keywords:** Consumer Behaviour, Sponsorship, sports marketing, structural equations modelling, PLS analysis.

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**Ian Lings** graduated from Nottingham Trent with a first in Applied Chemistry. After working for Shell for several years, he continued his education and studied first for an MBA and later for a PhD at Aston University. His research interests lie in the domain of services marketing and management; specifically strategies for managing service employees and service delivery processes. In 2004 he joined the team at the UTS School of Marketing in Sydney, where he is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing.

**Kate Owen** is a lecturer in marketing at the University of Technology, Sydney and was previously a research fellow at University of Sydney. She has researched consumer choice behaviour in the areas of health, food environment, and retail. Her research focuses on consumer choice behaviour and its influences and she is a member of the Centre for the Study of Choice which specializes in the development and application of stated preference and discrete choice modelling.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sponsorship has become an increasingly important element of a firm's communication mix, with many corporations actively pursuing sponsorship as a communication strategy in an attempt to avoid the clutter associated with more traditional marketing communications (Meenaghan 1996). Consequently, over the past decade investment in sponsorship has grown, with world-wide estimates putting sponsorship expenditure at \$28B, or 8% of global advertising. (Finance Week, 22 Nov. 2004, p53)

Concurrent with this rapid growth of sponsorship expenditure has been a growing literature examining sponsorship effectiveness. Most research to date has focused on the impact of sponsorship on brand awareness, and its subsequent consequences for image congruency and consumer attitudes towards sponsors' brands (Speed and Thompson 2000, Bennett 1999; Nicholls, Roslow and Dubliss 1999; Gwinner and Eaton 1999). Amongst others, these effects have been examined in the context of sports marketing (Gwinner and Swanson 2003, Speed and Thompson 2000), and arts and charity marketing (Cornwell and Coote 2005).

A lesser studied area has been the effect of sponsorship on the purchase intentions and behaviours of consumers. Yet, for most sponsors the ultimate objective of sponsorship is to improve the performance of their bottom lines through increased sales (Meenaghan 1996). Among those that have examined purchase intentions, the primary area of interest has been the influence of consumers' identification with a team or event on their intentions to purchase the sponsor's products (see for example, Madrigal 2001, and Speed and Thompson 2000). Cornwell and Coote (2005) examined the role of consumers' social identification on their intentions to purchase sponsors' brands in the context of a charity organisation. They report that consumers' identification with the team or event being sponsored is an important antecedent to their purchase intentions; confirming previous findings of Madrigal (2001).

Despite findings that consumers' social identification with the team (or event) is a key determinant of sponsorship success, there has been relatively little exploration of the antecedents to social identification in the sponsorship literature. Most studies have utilised some measure of affiliation with the team (or event) and its perceived prestige or esteem. For example, Cornwell and Coote (2005), and Gwinner and Swanson (2003) used these as independent antecedents to identification with the team (or event). In other words, if the individual perceives the team (or event) to be prestigious, and they have a long standing participation with them, they will identify strongly with the team or event. Fisher, (1998) also examined the role of prestige in creating social identity but found less support for its direct impact on social identification. Fisher's findings suggest that only when the individual believes that they share common characteristics with the group will they identify with that group, irrespective of how prestigious they perceive the group to be.

While there is little doubt that individuals form strong, enduring associations with their teams (Madrigal 2000), for many supporters, the extent to which social identity motivates behaviour is likely to depend on its salience at a given point in time. Haslam, Powell, and Turner (2000) point to the fact that individuals occupy many self-categories, including themselves as an individual, and that, for many, their salience is contextual. Past studies of purchase intentions have focused on supporters within a single team context, which precludes examination of contextual effects.

In this paper we argue that existing conceptual and operational models of sponsorship and purchase intentions have omitted a key intermediary variable, affective commitment, in the relationship between individual affiliation with the team and their social identification with the team. We propose a modified framework, synthesising existing models of sponsorship effectiveness and the findings of studies in the social psychology literature. Using data from a

sporting context, we test this new framework. To further identify the effect of salience on social identification and sponsorship purchase behaviour, we examine the effect of sponsorship on purchase intentions in the context of low and high performing teams.

### ***Social Identity and its Antecedents***

Social identity theory proposes that individuals identify themselves to varying degrees with different social groups, and in so doing they adopt the norms and values of the group. At the extreme a group can subsume an individual's identity, and the individual takes his/her cues from group behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs. In effect, the individual's self-identity becomes defined by the group and they experience the group's successes and failures as their own. English football fans' connection with their team (social identification) has been described in this manner (Madrigal 1995).

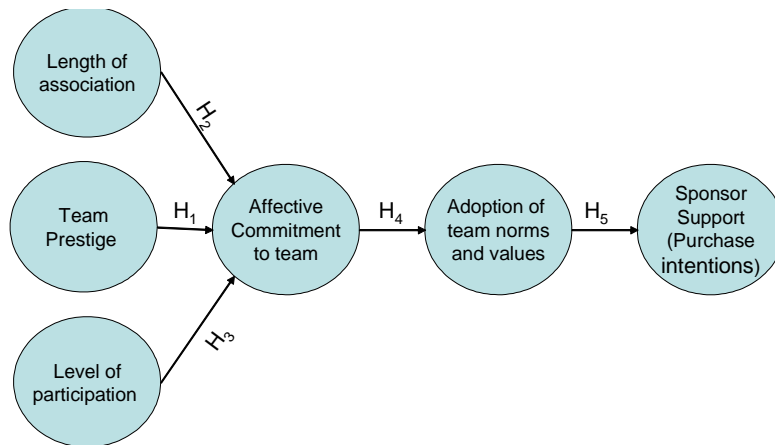
Cornwell and Coote (2005) and Gwinner and Swanson (2003) followed Bhattacharya Rao, and Glynn (1995) and Mael and Ashforth (1992) in conceptualising social identification as a cognitive and evaluative process resulting in an individual perceiving a sense of oneness with the group. As outlined earlier, Cornwell and Coote (2005) identified 'prestige' as antecedent to social identification, illustrating the evaluative nature of the social identification process. They assert that the prestige of the group, the length of association with the group, and the level of participation with the group influence the degree to which individuals adopt the norms and values of the group. Fisher (1998) and Madrigal (2001) similarly operationalised social identification as a cognitive awareness of ones group membership. However, Fisher's findings point to the need for individuals to internalise their feelings about the group prior to developing a sense of group identification. In his study of university sports teams, the effect of team attractiveness (prestige) on team identification was only observed when fans' reported similarity between the team and themselves.

Outside of the sponsorship literature, Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999) take a slightly different view of social identification. Writing in the social psychology literature, Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999) identify three components of social identification: cognitive (identification with the group), evaluative (group esteem) and emotional (affective commitment). The “cognitive” and “evaluative” components correspond with “recognition of membership of the group” and “perceptions of the prestige of the group” in the models currently utilised in sponsorship research. However, the ‘affective’ component of social identification has not been fully explored within sponsorship research.

Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999) argue that the affective component has the strongest influence on how an individual will identify with a group. They point to evidence of high social identity in the absence of group self-esteem and argue that while increases in prestige might increase affective commitment, the converse is not necessarily the case. These means that perceived threats to a group’s esteem might negatively influence an individual’s evaluation of a group, but leave their affective attachments unchanged. In a similar vein, writing in the management literature, Allen and Meyer (1990) highlight the importance of experience driving affective commitment, and this, in turn, driving identification with an organisation and motivation to perform in the organisation’s interest. Current conceptualisations in the sponsorship literature do not include this intermediate role of affective commitment.

Following Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999) and Allen and Meyer (1990), we propose a modified framework to explain of the role of social identification in determining consumers’ purchase intentions. We include the mediating role of affective commitment in the relationship between the consumer’s evaluations of the prestige of the team, and their affiliation, and the social identification that they express with that team, see Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]



**Figure 1: A model of team identification and intention to purchase a sponsor's products**

Existing sponsorship literature suggests that individuals' affiliation and evaluations of a sports team (or event) have a direct impact on identification with the team. The length of an individual's association with the team, their perceptions of the esteem or prestige of the team, and the frequency with which they participate with the team, increase the degree to which the individual identifies with the team, and adopts the norms and values of the fan base (see for example, Cornwell and Coote, 2005). However, Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999) suggest that such affiliation and evaluative processes give rise to an emotional attachment. It is this emotion which drives identification with the team rather than the cognitions and evaluations themselves. The logic underpinning this argument is that an individual is unlikely to adopt norms and values of the group (social identification) without first developing a positive emotional connection to the group. Consequently, we propose a framework in which affective commitment is antecedent to team identification; and mediates the relationships between length of association, level of participation and perceptions of prestige and team identification. This gives rise to the following hypotheses.

H<sub>1</sub>: The greater the perceived prestige of the team the greater the affective commitment



to the team.

H<sub>2</sub>: Length of association with the team will be positively related to affective commitment to the team.

H<sub>3</sub>: The more intense the participation with the team the greater the affective commitment to the team.

H<sub>4</sub>: The more affectively committed to a team an individual is, the more they will identify with that team and adopt its norms and values.

Since social identity is used in defining the self; its salience (dominance) provides the motivation to behave according to group norms and to support group needs. Madrigal (2001) suggests that fans who identify strongly with their team are more likely to support merchandising, and he reports some support for this relationship. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) and Cornwell and Coote (2005) similarly report evidence to support the relationship between consumers' identification with a sponsored team and their intention to purchase sponsors products. Gwinner and Swanson (2003) also argued that purchase intentions are linked to fans' perceptions of sponsors as part of the 'in-group'. Since sponsors are sanctioned by the team, and support the team in some way, fans feel a sense of obligation to the sponsor. In line with these findings we expect that the level at which the supporter identifies with the team will influence their general intention to purchase the sponsor's products.

H<sub>5</sub>: the greater the identification with the team the greater the intention to purchase sponsors' products

### ***The Impact of Team Performance***

Implicit in many studies of social identification is the idea that an individual's social identification with a group is static (i.e. "high identifier" or "low identifier"). Cornwell and Coote (2005) discussed the possible attenuation of social identification where individuals are

a member of several similar groups. However, they viewed this as a fixed rather than variable relationship. Haslam, Powell, and Turner (2000) emphasise that individuals occupy many self-categories at any one time, and argue that the extent to which an individual will be willing to define themselves by any one of these at a given time depends on the interaction between the individual's existing participation with, and regard for, the group and its perceived normative fit. Thus, in the sporting context, social identity is likely to be more salient when a team is performing well than when its performance is average or poor. As a consequence, we would expect to see affective commitment have a larger impact on social identification and, in turn, social identification have a larger impact on purchase intentions for fans of high performing teams compared to those of less well performing teams. This reflects the fact that if the team is doing well, fans are likely to more readily make the transition from having positive feelings towards the team to adopting norms and values associated with being a fan; and these norms and values are likely to manifest a higher degree of purchase intention towards sponsors products as this is a public display of support and identification with the successful team.

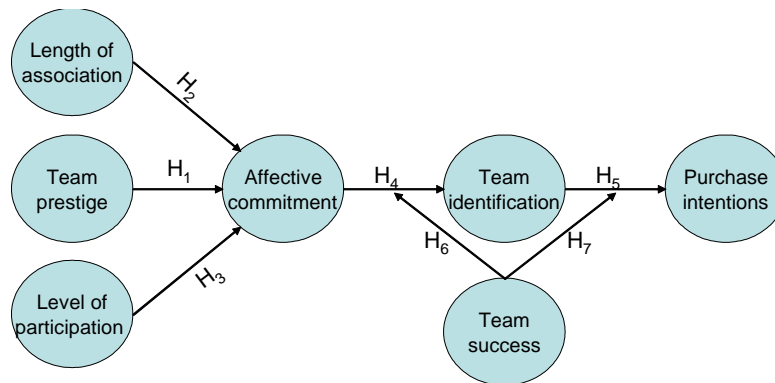
We therefore hypothesise:

H6: Team success positively moderates the relationship between affective commitment and team identification.

H7 Team success positively moderates the relationship between team identification and intention to purchase sponsors' products.

The inclusion of these two hypotheses to examine the impact of team success on sponsorship effectiveness gives rise to a second model of sponsorship shown in Figure 2.

**[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]**



**Figure 2: The role of team success in sponsorship effectiveness**

## **METHOD**

In order to test the models presented in Figures 1 and 2, we collected data from sports fans involved in the Australian Football League. The League is followed annually by an estimated 2.5 million and is on par with European soccer and National Baseball League in the United States. AFL fans vary in age, gender and socioeconomic status and may be expected to have been fans for varying degrees of time, and with various degrees of intensity. We therefore consider AFL fans an appropriate sample to test these models.

The data were collected from an online survey through a major AFL chat site that attracts AFL enthusiasts. This site covers all teams within the League and has in excess of 20,000 registered members. The survey was conducted a month after the end of the season and resulted in 250 complete responses representing fans from all of the 16 teams involved in the AFL. Respondents were predominantly male (76 per cent) with the majority of the sample indicating that they belonged to either the 18-28 (38 per cent) or 29-38 (25 per cent) age categories.

### ***Measures***

Level of participation was measured using a single item to establish the degree of engagement

the individual has with AFL (Please indicate how often you attend games involving your favourite AFL team), response options were: all games and functions, every game, most games, once a month, once a year, every game on TV). Tenure was also measured directly using a single item (For how many years have you supported your team?). Affective commitment was measured using an adaptation of the scale developed by Allen & Meyer (1990). The four items were (My AFL team has a great deal of personal meaning for me, I do not feel like 'part of the family' when watching my AFL team, I feel a strong sense of belonging to my AFL team, I do not feel 'emotionally attached' to my AFL team). Team identification and perceived team prestige were adapted from the measures used by Cornwell and Coote (2005) that, in turn, were based on Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn (1995) and Mael and Ashforth (1992). Gwinner and Swanson (2003) used similar modifications of these scales in the context of a university sporting event. These and other multi-item measures were all measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Several approaches were undertaken to establish the validity of the scales used in this study, in particular it was important to establish the convergent validity of the scale items and the ability of these items to discriminate between the constructs of interest in this study. Tests to establish convergent and discriminant validity were consequently undertaken. These are presented next along with further evidence to support the validity of the scales used.

Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that variance extracted is an appropriate, and stringent, test of the internal stability of a scale and the convergent validity of its items. Anderson and Gerbing (1988) offer an alternative heuristic; that significant t-values for the item loadings onto the construct of interest support the convergent validity of scale items.

Both assessments of convergent validity were undertaken. All items were found to load significantly onto the constructs that they were used to measure (t value for all items > 6.04).

All scales also met the more stringent assessment recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981), and the variance extracted for all scales exceeds their recommended minimum of 50% (purchase intention VE =0.76; team identification VE=0.78; team prestige VE=0.60, affective commitment VE=0.64).

### ***Discriminant Validity***

Evidence that the scales discriminate between the constructs that they purport to measure is provided by low to moderate correlations among measures (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). The inter-factor correlations ( $\phi$ ), squares of the inter-factor correlations ( $\phi^2$ ), and average variances extracted are reported in Table 1 below. Additional evidence of discriminant validity is provided if the average variance explained by a construct's items is greater than the construct's shared variance with every other construct (i.e. AVE > the square of the inter-factor correlations between any two constructs ( $\phi^2$ ), Fornell and Larcker 1981). Analysis of the data provides strong evidence of discriminant validity, with the average variance of each construct being greater than its shared variance with any other construct. It is therefore reasonable to assume all of the scales display discriminant validity.

**[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

	AVE	Inter-factor correlations( $\phi$ ) [Square of inter-factor correlations( $\phi^2$ )]		
		Team prestige	Affective commitment	Team identification
Team prestige	0.60			
Affective commitment	0.64	$\phi=0.351$ ( $\phi^2=0.123$ )		
Team identification	0.78	$\phi= 0.251$ ( $\phi^2=0.063$ )	$\phi=0.607$ ( $\phi^2=0.369$ )	
Purchase Intentions	0.76	$\phi=0.317$ ( $\phi^2=100$ )	$\phi=0.337$ ( $\phi^2=0.113$ )	$\phi=0.369$ ( $\phi^2=$ ) 0.136

**Table 1: Tests for discriminant validity**

### ***Composite Reliability***

Having established that each of the scales measuring various constructs of interest do indeed

discriminate between these constructs, the next stage in the analysis was to examine composite reliabilities of each of the scales (Gerbing and Anderson 1988; Hair *et al.* 1998, p. 611). These all exceed the recommended standards of Bagozzi, Yi and Phillips (1991) and Hair *et al.* (1998), providing evidence of the internal consistency of the construct indicators. (Purchase intention CR=0.93; team identification CR=0.91; team prestige CR=0.81; affective commitment CR=0.88). This suggests that the scale items do indeed measure the latent constructs that they purport to.

### ***Method Biases***

The final empirical assessment of the scales was to investigate the presence of systematic measurement errors (bias). The potential for acquiescence bias was minimised by including both positively and negatively worded questions as recommended by Baumgartner and Steenkamp (2001). A further post-hoc test for common method bias, a Harman's (1967) one-factor test, was performed. All of the self-report items were entered into a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation. According to this technique, if a single-factor emerges from the factor analysis, or one-factor accounts for more than 50% of the variance in the variables, common method variance is present (Mattila and Enz 2002). Our analysis revealed a four-factor structure with no general factor present (the first factor accounted for 20% of the variance). Although this test does not rule out the presence of common method bias, combined with the measures taken in the questionnaire design to minimize acquiescence bias, it does provide support for the absence of such a general bias in the findings (Mattila and Enz 2002).

### ***Analysis of conceptual model***

Having established that the measures used in this study display adequate psychometric properties, and appear to be free of systematic bias, the next stage in the research was to test

the effects in the hypothesised conceptual model presented in Figure 1 above.

The data were analysed using structural equations modelling, employing partial least squares estimation, using SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende and Will 2005). Partial least squares estimation has several important benefits over the maximum likelihood estimation method (Chin, 1998; Fornell and Bookstein, 1982; Hulland, 1999; Wold 1985). PLS path modelling is component based approach to structural equations modelling, as opposed to covariance based (as in LISREL). Consequently, PLS analysis does not require multivariate normal data, it places minimal requirements on measurement levels and is more suitable for small sample sizes. Moreover PLS path modelling is considered more appropriate for complex models and, most importantly in this research, can more easily accommodate formative indicators (Chin, 1998; Hulland, 1999; MacCallum and Browne 1993).

In order to test the mediating effect of affective commitment on the relationship between organisational prestige, length of association, level of participation and team identification, these relationships were modelled as partially mediated by affective commitment.

Analysis reveals support for hypotheses 1-4, indicating that the impact of all three commonly cited antecedents to team identification is mediated by affective commitment. The variance accounted for in the mediating influence of affective commitment on the relationship between team prestige and team identification is 79% ( $z=0.487$ ), for the relationship between length of association and team identification, the variance accounted for by the mediating impact of affective commitment is 89% ( $z=4.16$ ) and for the relationship between level of participation, variance accounted for by the mediating role of affective commitment is 93% ( $z=0.333$ ).

Consistent with the conceptual thinking of Allen and Meyer (1990) and Ellemers, Kortekaas and Ouwerkerk (1999), our results support a model where team prestige, length of association

and level of participation do not have a direct impact on team identification, rather we find that affective commitment mediates these relationships.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

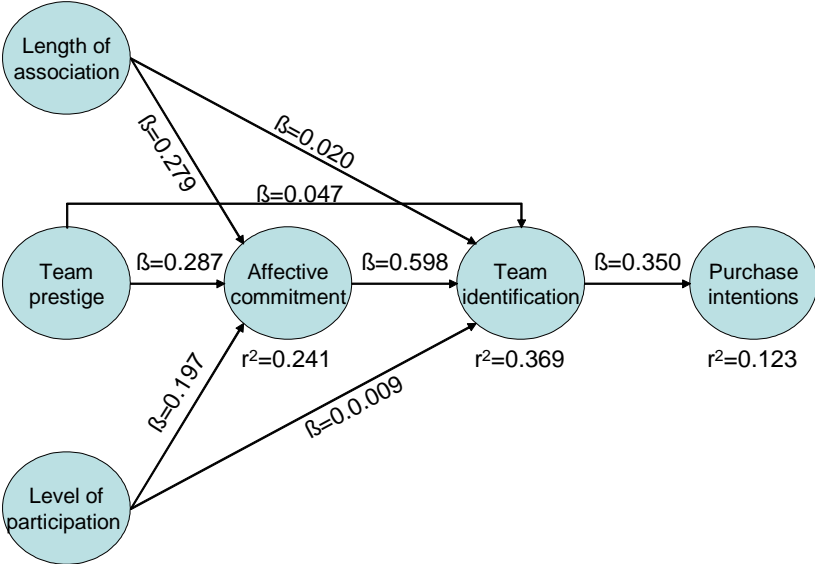
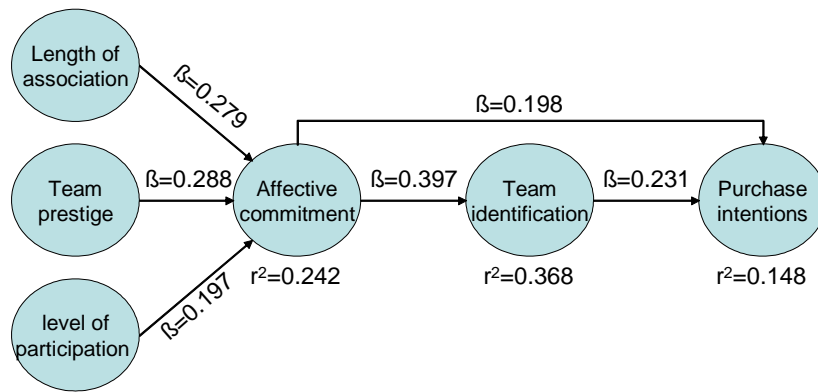


Figure 3: Test of the mediating effect of Affective Commitment

The next stage of the analysis was to ensure that there was no direct effect of affective commitment on purchase intention, and that this relationship operated through team identification as hypothesised in H5. To test for the direct effect between affective commitment on purchase intention the data were modelled with both this direct effect and a mediated effect (see figure 4 below). Analysis shows that the mediating effect of team identification is significant ( $z=0.333$ ) and explains 32% of the variance on the data. Consequently, we conclude that this model reflects more accurately the roles of both affective commitment and team identification in determining the purchase intentions of teams’ fans.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]





**Figure 4: Test of the mediating effect of team identification**

In evaluating the adequacy of this structural model two main criteria are used; path coefficients and the  $R^2$  of the latent endogenous variables. Chin (1998) suggests that path coefficients should exceed 0.1 - 0.2. In this model we see that all path coefficients exceed the lower 0.1 level and the majority exceed the higher 0.2 level, suggesting that the model adequately fits the data. A further test of model fit is provided by the  $R^2$  for the latent endogenous variables. Chin (1998) suggests that  $R^2$  of  $\sim 0.66$  indicates substantial model fit,  $R^2 \sim 0.35$  moderate and  $R^2 \sim 0.17$  weak model fit. Using these criteria it appears that this model fits the data weakly to moderately well. However, in this case it would not be expected that team identification would predict a large proportion of purchase intention towards sponsored brands as the essential requirements of consumers' needs and their ability to purchase have also to be met. Sponsorship programmes would not address these issues. We suggest therefore that despite a low  $R^2$  for purchase intentions, the impact of sponsorship on the purchase intentions of fans is significant, although small.

### ***Winners versus Losers – The Impact of Team Performance.***

Having established that our model adequately represents the relationships in the data, we then tested for contextual effects (Haslam, Powell and Turner 2000) on the salience of team identification, and subsequently on sponsorship purchase intentions. The two football teams that were engaged in the final were chosen as those for which this effect would be most

salient, and those at the bottom of the league for which it would be least salient. The model was first reanalysed using data collected from fans of the two teams in the finals. N=62

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

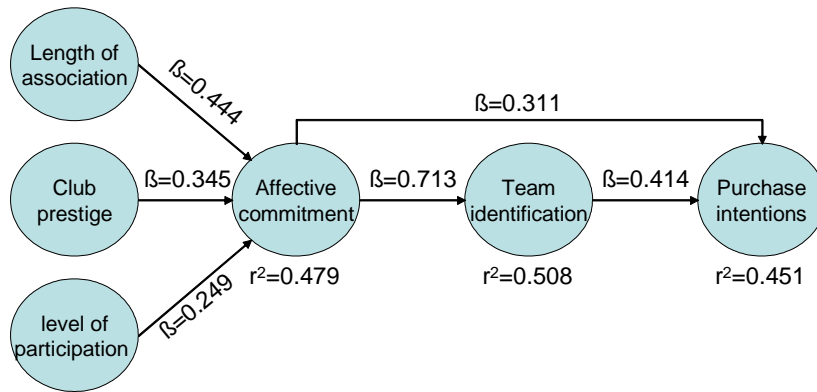


Figure 5: Empirical model for AFL finalists

The next stage was to compare the results of this model with those obtained by looking at the worst performing teams. Three teams from the bottom of the league were chosen and their fans' responses (N=88) analysed to examine the moderating effect of team performance.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

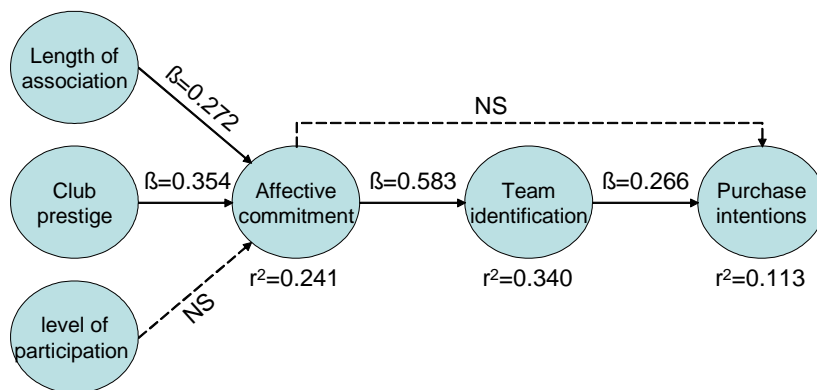


Figure 6: Empirical model for non finalists

As can be seen by comparing figures 5 and 6, for fans associated with winning teams, team identification becomes significantly more salient and has a substantially higher impact on purchase intentions; this supports what we know anecdotally.

We find that in both winning and losing contexts, fans maintain an affective commitment to their team, and at least part of this affective commitment results in identification with their team. However, in the case of the non-winning teams (the majority) team identification has a minimal impact on purchase intentions, and consequently provides small direct sales benefits to the team sponsors. In the context of winning teams, affective commitment to the team is shown to have both a direct and indirect impact on the intentions to purchase sponsors' brands; resulting in more direct sales benefits to sponsors.

One may presume Figure 6 represents the normal, baseline state for most fan/team/sponsor contexts. In this context some fans will be enduring 'die hard' supporters, who are highly identified and likely to support sponsors' products, whilst the majority of fans are less engaged. In Figure 5, the winning context, success may act as a catalyst for this otherwise less engaged, fan base.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we have presented a model of fan support and purchase intentions in relation to sponsor's products that explicitly incorporates affective commitment and team performance. We have argued that these extensions are necessary in order to represent two central and related elements; team identification and its translation to purchase intentions. Team identification, as operationalised by Gwinner and Swanson (2003) and Cornwell and Coote (2005), is a state where the fan's identity mirrors its team's, and where other identities are subsumed. For the majority of fans this state is highly contextual and most likely to manifest when passions are ignited through common challenge; particularly when the stakes are high such as in the league finals. However, outside such contexts, fans' emotional investment is less focused. The majority of fans retain their affiliation with the team but their other identities become equally, or more salient. This is analogous to a family situation whose

members will band together as a single identity when under threat, but revert to individuals co-existing, but often with distinct identities associated with external affiliations, when not under threat. Our presentation of high and low performance teams illustrates that when a fan's team is a finalist, their likelihood of identifying with the team and engaging in activities such as sponsorship related purchasing, is enhanced. Moreover, this can occur even without the fan developing the symbiotic affiliation implied by team identification; as indicated by the significant affiliation-purchase intention path. Among the low performance teams, intention to purchase is only significant when mediated by team identification.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

Our model of sponsorship driven purchase intentions is based on a single point in time and includes a number of clubs. A longitudinal study of fan support across a range of clubs and over a season would be a more robust test of the model.

The measure of prestige we adopted followed Cornwall and Coote (2005) where prestige is considered to have a direct effect on team identification. In our model we have argued that prestige operates through affective commitment since an individual may agree that a team has prestige in their community but may not be closely involved with the community of the team. It is this involvement which enhances the likelihood of identifying with the team. In adopting this approach we may be excluding the purely egoistic fan, who has little interest in social affiliation with the team. It would be interesting to determine whether this is the case and how relevant such an individual is in the sponsorship support equation.

Finally, it would be interesting in future research to use revealed behaviour to measure the impact of sponsorship, rather than stated intentions as in this, and other studies. Although intentions are an important predictor of purchase behaviours, a number of factors may cause an individual to report behaviour without manifesting the intended behaviours. Sponsors are

ultimately interested in purchase behaviour, and future studies that can capture this directly will address many of the criticisms of attitudinal research in this area.

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