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Measuring variables of social identification affecting brand equity using the social identity-brand equity model: A case study of Thai professional football clubs

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Abstract

The formation of sport team brand equity was studied by testing the social identity-brand equity (SIBE) model in the context of fans of Thai professional football clubs. The model proposes the marketplace characteristics used to enhance one's social identity, which is presumed to have a positive influence on team brand equity. Professional football teams in Thailand were the focus because of the increasing numbers of football fans, more money circulating in the market, and the high competitive advantage of teams. A paper-based survey was administered to 755 football fans of four professional football teams in the Thai Premier League. The questionnaire consisted of separate parts covering demographic data and market constructs using 5-point scales. A structural equation model was applied to test the research hypotheses. The results were gathered through confirmatory factor analysis which was adjusted into five dimensions: ritual and tradition, team management, experience, coach and manager, and facilities and venue. In addition, a standard multiple regression analysis revealed the relationships among dimensions. The prediction of brand equity by direct and indirect effects was tested. The findings suggested managerial implications; for example, the need for activity creation and for events involving fans to build a strong fan identity, and enhancement of the levels of team brand equity for Thai professional football clubs.

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Introduction

Thai football clubs changed to professional clubs in 1996 and this was succeeded by another great change in 2008 when the Asia Football Confederation (AFC) forced the organization to become a legal entity as the Thai Premier League. At first, due to poor team performance, there were insufficient support from fans. There was no connection nor even a place to meet fans. However, almost all of the Thai professional football teams have now achieved their potential and developed strategies for tapping the connection between fans and teams. Many clubs have attempted to use marketing tools in different ways. Some

have minimized the negative impacts, but some have received the opposite feedback.

Consequently, the present study applied and extended the concept of brand equity by testing the Social Identification and Brand Equity (SIBE) model and its adaptation via a survey of Thai professional football fans. The study aimed: (1) to assess a number of marketplace factors which have potential to affect social identity and brand equity, (2) to examine the relationships between those factors and brand equity by exploring direct and indirect effects, and (3) to provide opportunities to develop a managerial standpoint for team management and fan communities among those joining sport events in the Thai Premier League. This study will benefit football team management in the efficient employment of their resources with regard to fan club members.

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Literature Review

Brand Equity and Sport Team Branding

Keller (1993) defined the concept of brand equity and the association of brand aspects and customers when the latter are aware of brand perspectives. Among those brand-related research papers, the empirical models suggested by Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (1993) are important references for a marketing-related theme, combining access to the brand equity concept (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Brand equity is a term used to define the relationship between customers and brands in the marketing literature (Wood, 2000). From Kotler (1991), a brand can be described by its name, sign, term, symbol, design, or combination of them that can identify the products and/or services, and distinguish itself from others. Keller (1993) supported this concept, maintaining that brand knowledge is important for customers when they think about which brand comes to mind.

The attention of the literature on sport brand equity has been increasing in the past decade. Most researchers generally looked for a single dimension of brand equity which was derived from specific models that did not consider the different nature of services in professional sport types (Ross, 2006). The purpose of most of those studies was to generate a sport team response from their fans by using strong strategies with their fans (Couvelaere & Richelieu, 2005; Kunkel, Doyle, & Funk, 2014; Patric, Hwang, Lim, & Pederson, 2015; Walsh, Chien, & Ross, 2012). However, in order to improve a team's ability to satisfy higher quality experiences, together with the increasing numbers of fans of Thai professional football clubs, this study was designed to investigate team brand equity perceptions among fans by using the SIBE model as a basis, and the predictive role of brand equity dimensions from those fan groups.

Social Identification Brand Equity Model (SIBE model)

Underwood, Bond and Baer (2001) proposed the conceptual model of Social Identification and Brand Equity (SIBE) according to the significance of branding, especially in service marketing in the twenty-first century. Berry (1999) considered that robust service branding is created by making an emotional association with the targeted audience and is influenced by market characteristics (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Following the original proposition of the model by Underwood et al. (2001), a visual presentation of SIBE model is shown in Figure 1.

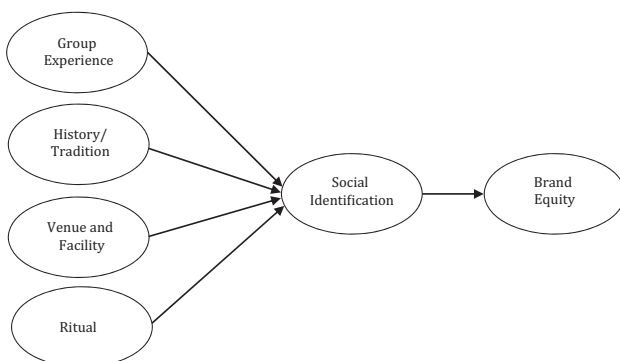


Figure 1 Original Social Identification-Brand Equity model for service branding
Source: Underwood et al. (2001)

Many studies have applied the SIBE model to different interesting topics, for instance, Boyle and Magnusson (2007) tested the model with fans of university men's basketball teams. The comparative study was designed across three groups of their fans: current students, alumni, and the general public. The study's results can be implemented in a department that is in charge of marketing collegiate athletic programs by using the relationship between social identity and brand equity of the fans and the sport team to find opportunities to create marketing communications for lesser-attended matches in sports programs.

The SIBE model has been used to examine market characteristics in U.S. National Basketball Association (NBA) fans. The results showed that more team fans identified themselves through four marketplace characteristics: group experience, history/tradition, venue, and ritual, and the more the team is combined with such an identity, the more it shaped the emotional connection between fans and the team and in predicting the team's brand equity (Watkins, 2014).

H1: Social identification will have a positive and significant effect on brand equity.

Following the original model proposition by Underwood et al. (2001), this paper explored social identification influenced and strengthened by the four characteristics of the service marketplace: group experience, history/tradition, venue (physical facility), and ritual.

Group experience is inherently characterized by the sense of belonging of group members which can extend to a large community (Underwood et al., 2001). Social groups are shaped by a common association with team members. With reference to sport fans, it refers to companionship, relationships, and social connections (Underwood et al., 2001).

H2: Fans' experience has a positive and significant effect on social identification.

H3: Fans' experience has a positive and significant effect on brand equity.

The success of many brands, teams, or events is integrated from a *history or tradition* which are formed as the core offering of their brand service, such as the US Open Tennis, the Golf PGA Tour, NBA, or the UEFA European Championship. The history of groups or teams suggests the promise of group members or fans continuing open support for the groups or teams (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007; Underwood et al., 2001). The achievements of many groups or teams have not only been composited by the history/tradition, but the attachment of group members or fans to the group is developed by the history components (Richelieu & Pons, 2009).

H4: A team's history and tradition have a positive and significant effect on social identification.

H5: A team's history and tradition have a positive and significant effect on brand equity.

Venue and physical facilities can leverage a group or team's identification which is another point that many researchers have been interested in because they show a visual representation of specific brands, honestly leading to awareness and identity of service offerings (Underwood et al., 2001). Underwood et al. 2001 also mentioned that the venue is a linkage between the past and the present. To illustrate, Reysen, Snider and Branscombe (2012) cited a case of fans' reaction to the renaming of a historic stadium.

H6: A team's venue and facilities have a positive and significant effect on social identification.

H7: A team's venue and facilities have a positive and significant effect on brand equity.

Ritual represents human behavior patterns that are social in nature and give rise to an emotional connection of group members with a team and experiences shared with other members that enhance social identification (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). Underwood et al. (2001) mentioned that the greater the elaboration of events that occurs, the more importance that is attributed to the event (compared to other day-to-day activities) such as weddings or funerals.

H8: A team's rituals have a positive and significant effect on social identification.

H9: A team's rituals have a positive and significant effect on brand equity.

Methodology

Data Collection and Sample

This study was conducted with four professional football teams in Thailand. They were selected carefully to ensure that the teams represented large markets with high degrees of success and with different lengths of time in the league. The selected teams had been in the top-3 in the Thai Premier League Program for the last 10 years: Buriram United, SCG Muangthong United, Chonburi Football Club, and BEC-Tero Sasana. Data for this study were gathered through a paper-based survey placed in the target stadiums in Buriram, Nonthaburi, Chonburi, and Bangkok. With the support of the Institute of Physical Education, Chonburi Campus, staff members were divided into groups and they distributed the questionnaires to the targeted fans of each football team. Data collection took place from October through December 2015. The respondents completed a 10-minute survey on their favorite team. The survey asked about their personal information, individual opinions and suggestions regarding their favorable football team and included measures for (a) involved experience with the team, (b) team's history and tradition, (c) team's facilities and venues, (d) team's rituals and activities, (e) social identification, and (f) brand equity.

From the 800 questionnaires distributed (200 fans per team), 755 were returned for a response rate of 94.38 percent. The return rate for BEC-Tero Sasana was 100 percent (200 completed questionnaires were collected.), followed by Chonburi Football Club with 192 returns, Buriram United with 187 returns and SCG MuangThong United with 176 returns. The mean age of all respondents was 27 years ($SD = 8.963$), with a reported age range between 8 and 58 years. Male respondents accounted for 62.8 percent of completed questionnaires ($n = 474$) and females accounted for 37.2 percent of completed questionnaires ($n = 281$). The respondents were asked about the numbers of companions (including the respondent) attending favorite football games. Normally, the respondents went to a match with 2 or 3 other people (37.9%, ($n = 286$), followed by with 4 or more (36.8% $n = 278$); however, some respondents chose to attend games alone (4.5%, $n = 34$).

Measurement

The survey consisted of items to assess social identification and brand equity. The survey of market-characteristic items evaluated 12 items of group experience, 10 items of team history and tradition, 5 items of team venue and facilities and 5 items of team rituals and activities, together with 6 items of social identification and 5 items of brand equity with responses based on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored by 'Completely Disagree' (1), 'Neither Disagree nor Agree' (3), and 'Completely Agree With the Statements' (5).

The pretest of the proposed market constructs of social identification and brand equity scales, as assessed using 30 respondents, had Cronbach's alpha values of reliability from the 43 items was 0.967, which exceeded the threshold of 0.70 and was considered acceptable (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Model Fit Measurement

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied to the preliminary analysis of the SIBE model scales for sport spectators. Six poor-performing items were removed from the original 32 items. The 26 remaining items were reanalyzed following regrouping and renamed in five constructs—rituals and tradition, team management, involved experiences, coach and manager, and facilities and venues.

Based on the SIBE model, the construct of history and tradition was divided into new factors of *Team Management* and *Coach and Manager*. For example, under the item of team history and tradition, mentioned was made of the team's record of winning the competition and success. It was considered more appropriate to name this dimension *Team Management* (how the team was managed). However, some questions under the construct of team history and tradition asked about the coach and team manager which referred directly to the person who was leading the team at that time and who had influenced the team's performance. These four questions were renamed in another group called Coach and Manager.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) conducted in AMOS revealed the assessment of the psychometric properties of the measures for football club members for the four teams. The model fit summary of the measurement model presented an acceptable fit to the data [$\chi^2(n = 755) = 1564.466$, ($p < .001$) $\chi^2/df = 2.638$, NFI = .938, CFI = .961, RMSEA = 0.047]. An acceptable model fit is indicated by a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) value of .80 or greater (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and a smaller RMSEA value indicates a better model fit, and is acceptable at 0.06 or less (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2009; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Table 1 presents the assessment of factor loading and reliability of individual construct. The result of the table shows that some constructs are combined, while some from the original model have been eliminated. Each composite reliability from each construct is greater than .7.

Table 1 Principle component analysis factor loading and composite reliability (re-constructed variables)

Construct and item (new)	Standardized loading	Composite reliability
Ritual and tradition		
1. As a fan, it means a lot to me.	0.722	.920
2. This team gives sincerity to fans.	0.667	
3. I think this team's fans devote themselves to the team.	0.650	
4. I feel I am a part of team, when I join the team's activities.	0.596	
5. When I join the team's activities, it shows my identity as a team fan.	0.553	
6. I have a good memory of the game, especially when attend the stadium.	0.486	
Team Management		
1. This team has a unique identity along its journey in the past.	0.656	.926
2. This team has a longer history than other teams.	0.619	
3. This team has a good history of success.	0.614	
4. This team has won the competition.	0.562	
5. This team has high-performance players.	0.540	
6. I enjoy every game I attend and I am a part of the fans.	0.491	
7. In general, this team has potential in the league.	0.484	
Experience		
1. The logo of the team is unique.	0.809	.899
2. I like the team's logo.	0.744	
3. The sport wear of the team is attractive.	0.611	
4. I am normally following the team I like.	0.535	
5. It is clear that team's fans have a high loyalty to the team.	0.459	
6. I think this team influences the people living in that area.	0.405	
Coach and manager		
1. I like the team manager.	0.724	.906
2. I like the team coach.	0.680	
3. I think coach is an important part of team improvement.	0.673	
4. I think the manager is an important part of team improvement.	0.672	
Venue and facilities		
1. Team's stadium and other decoration are aesthetic.	0.792	.901
2. Team's stadium is unique.	0.736	
3. Team's stadium is a part of attracting fans to watch the game.	0.699	
Social identification		
1. It's very important to me that my team wins.	0.809	.925
2. I see myself strongly as a fan of the team.	0.791	
3. My friends would say I am a fan of the team.	0.750	
4. I often display the teams' logo at home or at work.	0.725	
5. I fit in with other fans of the team.	0.660	
6. I follow the team closely by way of any of the following: newspapers, radio, the Internet, or TV.	0.651	
Brand equity		
1. Attending a team game is worth the time and money to do so.	0.821	.920
2. The team would be my first choice.	0.795	
3. The team is competitive with other teams in the Thai Premier League.	0.761	
4. I consider myself to be loyal to the team.	0.749	
5. I believe that overall it is a high quality football team	0.706	

After the first-order modified measurement model had been conducted and the observed variables revised, Pearson's correlation was used to assess the relationship among the model variables. All correlations between the proposed dimensions were found to be positively significant at the .01 level (two-tailed). Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the renewed observed variables from the model.

Table 2 Correlation coefficients for (new) observed variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
1 Ritual and tradition				
2 Team management	.862**			
3 Experience	.809**	.885**		
4 Coach and manager	.741**	.780**	.724**	
5 Venue and facilities	.750**	.742**	.681**	.763**

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed).

The results of the SEM are presented in Table 3 and Figure 2 which display individual marketplace characteristics. H1 was confirmed as social (fan) identification ($\beta = 0.722$, $p < .05$) was found to have the strongest, positive influence on brand equity.

Hypothesis Testing

It was not possible to confirm whether or not H4, H5, H8, and H9 were acceptable because, as mentioned, six items were deleted from the original set and the remaining ones were regrouped into five new market constructs (rituals and tradition, team management, involved experiences, coach and manager, and facilities and venues), as presented in Figure 2.

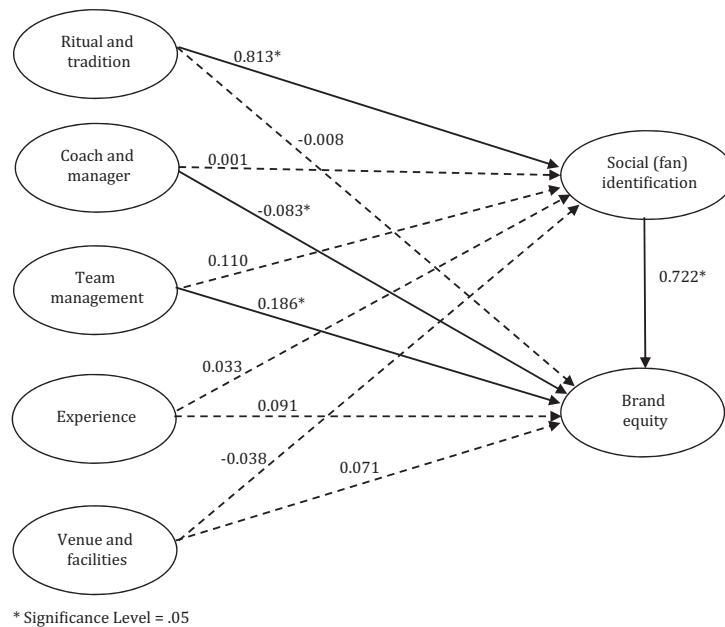
Assessment of (new) Observed Variables through Renewed Model (Based on SIBE Model)

Figure 2 suggests that ritual and tradition ($\beta = 0.813$, $p < .05$) had the strongest positive influence on social (fan) identification. Team management also had the strongest positive effect on brand equity ($\beta = 0.186$, $p < .05$), while coach and manager and team management had a positive effect on fan identification ($\beta = 0.001$, and 0.110 , respectively). Conversely coach and manager ($\beta = -0.083$, $p < .05$) and ritual and tradition ($\beta = -0.008$) had a negative influence on brand equity in the renewed model.

Table 3 Predicting fan identification and brand equity

Predictor	Social identification			Brand equity			Results on brand equity
	B	SE B	Standardized coefficient	B	SE B	Standardized coefficient	
Ritual and tradition	0.753	0.065	0.813*	-0.008	0.081	-0.008	Indirect
Coach and manager	0.001	0.037	0.001	-0.071	0.035	-0.083	Direct
Experience	0.035	0.071	0.033	0.100	0.066	0.091	Direct
Venue and facilities	-0.028	0.032	-0.038	0.053	0.030	0.071	Direct
Team Management	0.109	0.082	0.110	0.187	0.076	0.186	Direct
Social (fan) identification	-	-	-	0.739	0.075	0.722*	Direct

Notes: *Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)

**Figure 2** Standardized total effects where a solid line is significant and a dotted line is not significant

Discussion

This study suggests that *ritual and tradition* is the most effective factor affecting team brand equity passed on through fan identification. This result points to the indirect effect of ritual and tradition through brand equity by passing the mediator as fan identification (as an indirect effect) which is significant in the formation of team identity and brand equity. By monitoring modified factors and from the questions provided in the questionnaire, it was apparent that the fans were participating in activities and events and were proud of being team fans themselves. From a practical standpoint, it is necessary for football team management to make more of an effort to enhance ritual and tradition aspects with fans to increase fan identification with a sports team by understanding the synergistic relationship among team fans through team activities and events. Wann and Branscombe (1992) mentioned the emotional responses to sport sections which was distinguished based on the level of fan identification with their favorable teams. This can leverage strong team brand equity. Providing fans' with meet-and-greet events with football players and coaches can allow fans to socialize with not the only players, but also other fans, as can setting up party sessions when celebrating football competition seasons,

win or lose. This promotes fan participation, dedication, and synergy.

The current study also examined other significant relationships and impacts among variables toward team brand equity and found that although *coach and manager* and *team management* variables were not mentioned as significant factors in many studies, they were relevant for professional football fan teams and directly influence team brand equity. Thai fans are active in contributing their comments and opinions of coaches, managers and how their team has been managed. It can be seen from the comments from social media or other sport website chatting rooms that there are many opinions, especially when the manager or coach of the team has been changed and on how it has affected team success. Various comments appearing on social media sites somewhat shape other fans' viewpoints. Porter and Kramer (2011) reported that the team management of existing team-fan values can be powerful in indicating markets and/or social harms of sport events that possibly create costs to team organization. In addition, it can be related to the effect of the credibility of a sports article (Sadri, 2014) from different media, particularly on a social media site. Sadri's study (2014) summarized that high-identified team fans found the article to be importantly more credible than fans with low identities.

Therefore, it is beneficial to team management who are in charge of monitoring sport-media sections and want to maintain team fans who visit the website or the team's Facebook page.

The approach toward each fan group affects social identification, especially such as fan experiences altered from the Underwood et al. (2001) model. From this study, the impact of team experience did not provide any significant effect on team identification and brand equity. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires at the match in the stadium. The comparative study by Boyle and Magnusson (2007) was conducted among three groups of fans (current students, alumni, and the general public) of a university men's basketball team using SIBE model as the conceptual framework. They distinguished the influence between fan identification with a salient, social cohort and the local community in general. By looking thoroughly, current students have a high level of connection between community and team. Comparing this study, considering the fan respondents who were from the area where their team was located, it would be their first and most important connection to society at large, and as a result the link between team and fans is more easily established (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007). This links and refers to the above-mentioned *ritual and tradition*, where the management team has to organize what activities and event sessions should be prepared and supported the team.

Conclusion

The current study helps to improve research on sports branding in Thai professional football clubs by giving support to the SIBE model. Applying this model provides two contributions to sport branding research by recognizing the antecedents of fan identification and predicting sport brand equity using modified factors based on the SIBE model. This paper supports emphasizing fan ritual and tradition as a part of the group as an antecedent of social (fan) identification. Additionally, the constructs of coach and manager, team management, and social (fan) identification were found to be important predictors of team brand equity. The proposed, renewed model and recommendations for the future research provide copious opportunities to advance our knowledge of sports team fans and to strengthen sport teams.

Recommendation

Limitations may influence the results of this study. First, the specification of the study and criteria for participating in the survey proved to be challenging. Out of 18 Thai Premier League football teams, only the top-4 teams were selected for the research, which limited the number of people who could respond to the study. Care in maintaining the balance between larger and small market teams is necessary. Second, for each selected fan team, there was a small sample. An additional limitation of this study was the disproportionate numbers of each team fans. According to sources such as Facebook, although selected teams have their own accounts to show the numbers of followers who like the page, this information cannot inform how many fans there are. This

might suggest disproportionate numbers and so limit the generalizability of the findings.

Further study could develop fan community identification to advance sports marketing by investigating the effect of self-team connection (team brand equity) and communal fan connection (fan identification) with the extra role of fan behavior; for example, fan loyalty program participation, including fan community-related consequences such as fan community engagement, customized products, fan responsibility, and word-of-mouth among fans.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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